

# WAR IN THE DEPTHS

NEWLY SUMMONED DEMONESS

ERIOS909

ARC Copy

Copyright © 2024 by Erios909

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

# CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| 1. Blurb                                     | 1   |
| 2. Chapter 1 - Stirrings                     | 3   |
| 3. Chapter 2 - Artificery and Plots          | 11  |
| 4. Chapter 3 - The City Guard                | 18  |
| 5. Chapter 4 - The Magister of the Guard     | 27  |
| 6. Chapter 5 - Through a Storm               | 38  |
| 7. Chapter 6 - Into the Depths               | 46  |
| 8. Chapter 7 - Shadow of the Past            | 54  |
| 9. Chapter 8 - Sewer Clash                   | 63  |
| 10. Chapter 9 - City Works and Deep Thoughts | 71  |
| 11. Chapter 10 - Golden Dreams               | 81  |
| 12. Chapter 11 - Gears and Gratitude         | 91  |
| 13. Chapter 12 - Shock and Magazine          | 103 |
| 14. Chapter 13 - Firepower Trials            | 113 |
| 15. Chapter 14 - Trust                       | 123 |
| 16. Chapter 15 - Guidance                    | 130 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 17. Chapter 16 - Plans                              | 137 |
| 18. Chapter 17 - Approaching Resonance              | 145 |
| 19. Chapter 18 - Approaching Resonance (Continued)  | 152 |
| 20. Chapter 19 - Approaching Resonance (Finale)     | 160 |
| 21. Chapter 20 - Forged Purpose                     | 167 |
| 22. Chapter 21 - Forged Purpose (Finale)            | 174 |
| 23. Chapter 22 - Solitude, Blueprints, and Thoughts | 181 |
| 24. Chapter 23 - Shattered Serenity                 | 190 |
| 25. Chapter 24 - Unseen Tethers                     | 195 |
| 26. Chapter 25 - Raid Awry                          | 204 |
| 27. Chapter 26 - Raid Awry (Continued)              | 212 |
| 28. Chapter 27 - Shackles and Shadows               | 222 |
| 29. Chapter 28 - Threads of Truth                   | 229 |
| 30. Chapter 29 - Dubious Missions                   | 237 |
| 31. Chapter 30 - Infiltrations                      | 245 |
| 32. Chapter 31 - Descent                            | 251 |
| 33. Chapter 32 - The Fortress                       | 259 |
| 34. Chapter 33 - Outrage (Pt. 1)                    | 265 |
| 35. Chapter 34 - Outrage (Pt. 2)                    | 272 |
| 36. Chapter 35 - Outrage (Finale)                   | 279 |
| 37. Chapter 36 - Civil War (Pt. 1)                  | 286 |
| 38. Chapter 37 - Civil War (Pt. 2)                  | 292 |
| 39. Chapter 38 - Civil War (Pt. 3)                  | 298 |
| 40. Chapter 39 - Civil War (Finale)                 | 304 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 41. Chapter 40 - Divine Simulacrum            | 310 |
| 42. Chapter 41 - A Seraph                     | 317 |
| 43. Chapter 42 - Searching for Her            | 324 |
| 44. Chapter 43 - Wartorn                      | 330 |
| 45. Chapter 44 - At the Watch                 | 338 |
| 46. Chapter 45 - Return                       | 345 |
| 47. Chapter 46 - Roadbumps                    | 351 |
| 48. Chapter 47 - Salt                         | 358 |
| 49. Chapter 48 - Ambushes                     | 364 |
| 50. Chapter 49 - Escape Again                 | 373 |
| 51. Chapter 50 - Respite (Part 1)             | 381 |
| 52. Chapter 51 - Respite (Part 2)             | 389 |
| 53. Chapter 52 - Respite (Finale)             | 396 |
| 54. Chapter 53 - Armory                       | 404 |
| 55. Chapter 54 - Frontline                    | 413 |
| 56. Chapter 55 - Scouting                     | 424 |
| 57. Chapter 56 - Artificing and Reports       | 432 |
| 58. Chapter 57 - Armaments and Corned Powder  | 443 |
| 59. Chapter 58 - Sudden Strikes and Reunions  | 450 |
| 60. Chapter 59 - Ancient Reverberations       | 458 |
| 61. Chapter 60 - Machine Guns and Confessions | 465 |
| 62. Chapter 61 - Troubles and Secrets         | 471 |
| 63. Chapter 62 - Odds and Bombs               | 477 |
| 64. Chapter 63 - Dropping It                  | 482 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| 65. Chapter 64 - Strategic Weapons                         | 487 |
| 66. Chapter 65 - An Old Guard                              | 494 |
| 67. Chapter 66 - Concepts and Crumbings                    | 499 |
| 68. Chapter 67 - Conviction of Steel                       | 507 |
| 69. Chapter 68 - Breakout                                  | 516 |
| 70. Chapter 69 - The Rearguard                             | 521 |
| 71. Chapter 70 - The Magister of the Guard, Again (Part 1) | 528 |
| 72. Chapter 71 - The Magister of the Guard, Again (Part 2) | 533 |
| 73. Chapter 72 - To Finish a Retreat                       | 540 |
| 74. Chapter 73 - Guttering Flames                          | 546 |
| 75. Chapter 74 - Lulls and Beats                           | 552 |
| 76. Chapter 75 - Sewers, Eugh                              | 560 |
| 77. Chapter 76 - Ranolf's Legacy                           | 565 |
| 78. Chapter 77 - Demons and Traps                          | 571 |
| 79. Chapter 78 - Counters                                  | 576 |
| 80. Chapter 79 - Mending and Cracks                        | 582 |
| 81. Chapter 80 - Contemplations and Lines                  | 587 |
| 82. Chapter 81 - Ethical Cross                             | 595 |
| 83. Chapter 83 - Demi                                      | 600 |
| 84. Chapter 84 - Silence, mortal!                          | 606 |
| 85. Chapter 85 - Righteous Trash Disposal                  | 614 |
| 86. Chapter 86 - Redoubt                                   | 620 |
| 87. Chapter 87 - Priestess                                 | 625 |
| 88. Chapter 88 - Sometimes you need help                   | 634 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| 89. Chapter 89 - Showdown, Revelations   | 639 |
| 90. Chapter 90 - Hopes and Fears         | 647 |
| 91. Chapter 91 - Traversal               | 656 |
| 92. Chapter 92 - Parties                 | 662 |
| 93. Chapter 93 - Invaders                | 668 |
| 94. Chapter 94 - Endings, and Beginnings | 674 |





# BLURB

**E**lania has grown accustomed to life in the Underground City State of Neftasu, sharing a home with Yolani inside the refurbished Aetherhart's Artifice, a shop her friend inherited from her father.

But not all is as calm as appears on the surface. Events inside and out of the city have pushed the Magistracy, the city's council of powerful wizards, to enact a sweeping set of reforms. Some of which the duo is directly responsible for.

Not all are pleased by the changes, and the iron fist of the Magistracy and the City Guard is heavy.

The dark cult that summoned Elania to Eladu still runs free, and the Lightbringer order has been roused by the loss of one of their divine artifacts.

Yolani has had time to come to terms with her father's death but finds that her love for artifice can't replace the hole in her heart. Yet maybe there is someone for her that shall help mend it.

With unrest, rogue governmental agencies, and the threat of a looming crusade on the horizon hanging over them, there is only one way Elania and Yolani will manage to navigate the perils swirling around them.

By relying on each other...

...and pressing against boundaries of **[Power]** and Artifice never intended for the hands of mortals.

# CHAPTER I - STIRRINGS

The light of Neftasu's light stones crept through the gentle filter of the window curtains, casting a soft glow that danced across the gently swirling dust motes floating in the air. Elania stirred, the warm sheets a comfortable embrace against the cavernous city's ever-present chill. For a moment, she hovered between sleep and wakefulness, a peaceful contentment filling her.

The clatter of ceramic downstairs nudged her fully conscious as the scent of Geru bean brew wafted up and into Aetherhart Artifice's upstairs bedroom. Yolani's room. Elania sat up and stretched, just as she had every day for the last few months since they had finally restored the shop to its former shape.

As she rolled off the wrong side of the bed, a standing mirror greeted her with a vision of her sleep-rumpled self. Two golden irises stared back at her. She wasn't sure that she could ever get used to the shimmering celestial energy floating inside of them.

Flexing her fingers, she ran them through her now vibrant red hair that hinted that her **[Power]** pool was well and truly topped off.

That only made sense because Yolani had made her eat two dozen chickens the day before so she could charge the shop's mana crystals and routine tools.

She lingered on her reflection, contemplating the journey that had led her to the quiet moment of solitude and silent introspection. There were no answers waiting in the glass, only the image of someone still learning the breadth of her own transformation.

Elania let out a heavy sigh. Being summoned from her dorm room and thrust into a conspiracy was bad enough. The fact that the system considered her a 'lesser demon' and that most people had a very poor view of demons in general wasn't great. But her trip into the Celestial Engine had been the icing on the cake of what-the-fuck.

Even if the aftereffects had mitigated a lot of the blanket racism and animosity she faced. Certainly, the Magisters had gone out of their way to help Yolani and her fix the shop. Even if she couldn't remember anything and only had what Yolani had recounted to her to go by.

At least she had been smart enough to demand they support Yolani, as well as clean up the problems in the city. Even if the shop-support had its limits. Most of the work had been left up to the two of them.

It wasn't that bad. Fixing up the shop, bringing in supplies, replacing broken items, going on adventures for rare unavailable components—all of it was a massive improvement over her early days in Eladu, when she had been alone and facing racist asshole monks and rangers and crazy Mushroomums and wild beasts.

Although their most recent trip to secure the reagents for the shop wards had been a bit over the top.

If she ever had to face another Hornar spider again, she was going to make sure she brought something larger than her **[Vorpal Dagger]**.

The stone floor was cool under her bare feet as she pulled on her trousers and an olive-green tunic. Socks went on before she slipped

her feet into a pair of leather soled shop-slippers. Wearing something that reminded her of sandals with socks on was almost a cardinal sin, but not, apparently, in Neftasu.

Which made sense because the underground city was about as far as you could get from a sunny beach vacation.

Dressed, she headed over to the window and peeked out at the street. Artificer Row had slowly shifted since her arrival. Business has seen a large uptick since the mana shard shortage had been resolved, and the city's new reforms had been good for business as well. There had been a lot of demand for work tools and the like.

She took a final, steadying breath before heading down the stairs. There was work to be done, a shop to finish restoring, a friend to enjoy the day with, and a city teetering on the brink of change. And somewhere within her, there was a flicker of hope that maybe she'd be able to figure out more about her new existence.

There had been little information available on her encounter with the Celestial Engine, simply because such things were kept secret outside of the Magistracy archives... and they hadn't really been permitted to look through them.

Demonology tomes were more common, and Yolani had helped her purchase a half dozen treatises on the subject, but nothing had hinted on a way to return to Earth. The stupid joke offered to her by some less than friendly characters—that if she wanted to leave Eladu, she should kill herself—was still the best lead she had.

There was no way she'd leave Yolani on her own without making sure the girl was back on her feet, anyway.

The steps were creaky, as they had been since the attack. The smell of fresh bread melded with the aroma of the Geru brew. She found Yolani, her raven-black hair tied back, and her emerald-green eyes focused on a workbench item tinkering away.

She noticed Elania immediately. “Morning. Slept well, I hope?”

“Better after you stopped snoring,” Elania responded, a smile creeping onto her face.

“There’s breakfast and something to drink,” Yolani replied, ignoring the remark. Instead, her focus remained on the item she was working on. Some kind of brooch with a mana crystal embedded in its center.

Elania picked her way around the labyrinth of ordered chaos towards the kitchen. The mess had been the first thing that had returned after they had cleaned out all the debris left from the City Guard ransacking the place.

And blasting in the storefront with a fucking magical cannon.

Light filled the room from newly fitted artifice lanterns, giving off a familiar hue of light that would have been acceptable in a lot of workshops back on earth. Not that she had much experience running around workshops—she had been a college student. The lanterns just gave off a light that was much brighter than a regular flame.

The bread had been kept warm in a box, and the Geru brew was made on an artifice machine that looks suspiciously like a coffee maker. Living with an artificer certainly was almost a necessity for a girl used to modern Earth amenities. They’d even repaired the shower-thing, which was fully capable of spewing hot water.

Luxurious, wonderful hot water.

Elania sat down nearby and munched on her bread. It was fluffy. She didn’t really need any food to sustain her anymore, since her body metabolized **[Power]** instead, but eating was a distinct, very human activity that made her happy.

As long as it was tasty. The bread thankfully passed that requirement. Geru brew was more suspect, but caffeine still worked on her and waking up to it was a nice luxury.

“We have a fair bit to tackle today,” Yolani began while still focusing on working the brooch. “I’m confident we’ll have the main protective wards up by nightfall if we start early.”

“Ohh. Did the spider horns come back polished finally?” Elania asked excitedly. She almost choked on the bread. Not as dangerous as it sounded since metabolizing [**Power**] also removed the requirement for oxygen.

Yolani shot her an unhappy look, anyway.

Fair enough. Spewing crumbs all over the workshop wasn’t a great idea, and eating outside the kitchen was already pressing against the other girl’s boundaries. Still, they had mostly managed to compromise enough to make great roommates. House-mates? Shop-mates.

“Sorry,” Elania croaked as she recovered.

Yolani turned back to her work. “Finn and Mira sent the crate of them this morning. You missed Henri coming up and doing the porter’s job for them.”

Elania tilted her head. “I doubt he was bothered. He was probably happy to have time to see you. He likes you, ya know.”

Yolani frowned. “I know.”

Maybe that wasn’t the best thing to bring up.

“What are you working on, anyway?” Elania asked, trying to change the subject.

“Smoothbore shock crystal,” Yolani replied.

Elania raised an eyebrow. “Uhh. For the guns the City Guard uses?”

Yolani nodded and pointed to the wall. Elania’s eyes widened slightly as she took in the new arrival: a dozen of the large musket-like weapons in a neat row.

“While you were sleeping in all morning, I accepted a contract with the guard to fix up some of their weapons. Pay is a gold each, but

I'm going to need your help with the charging," Yolani said, a smile slipping onto her face.

Elania's gaze slid across the shop, taking in all the gadgets and artifice equipment. "Sure thing. Actually, I wanted to talk to you about the guns and things. You know Earth didn't have any magic, but we had really advanced guns. So, I wanted to know if you wanted to try to—"

The shop's front door slid open, and the customer bell rang loudly. Both of them turned to greet the new arrival.

"Delivery for Yolani Aetherhart," the man announced, tipping his cap slightly. His eyes flickered to Elania with a mixture of curiosity. "It needs unloading."

Yolani started to get up, but Elania gently touched the other girl's shoulder. "I've got this. You finish the gun shock-thing crystal."

She followed the porter outside and stared at the contents of the wagon. It was filled with a dozen long rectangular boxes. More muskets? The value of the contract seemed to balloon in her mind, but was transporting so many weapons...

"Is moving these around like this really safe? I know the City Guard has stepped up patrols, but still..." Elania commented.

The porter shrugged. "I don't think they are loaded. I'm sure the sensitive parts came separate, like usual. They're just metal rods without the artifice work."

Oh. Well, that made some sense. Elania hauled the first crate out easily. She'd have carried two at a time, but they were large enough to be awkward to carry. When she came out for the second crate, there were two young boys standing nearby, watching.

For the third, there was also a group of two men.

The fourth added a man and woman.



All of them were staring at her or quietly talking about her. Discomfort filled her immediately, but Elania ignored them and worked hard to ferry in the crates. It was just about impossible to go anywhere in the city without someone staring at ‘the gold-eyed demon’ now.

She supposed it was an improvement over the outright fear and hostility that had greeted her when she’d arrived in Neftasu. Still, it was disquieting to be the subject of such scrutiny.

Especially just outside her home.

Something must have tipped off Yolani, who appeared in the shop’s doorway as Elania fetched the last crate.

“Enough gawking,” Yolani shouted, her tone brooking no argument. “Get out of here! We have work to do, and unless you are customers, you probably should get on with your day!”

The crowd dispersed, albeit reluctantly, and Elania offered Yolani a smile as they returned inside. The porter had his cargo slip signed and then bid them farewell. Her friend flipped the open-closed sign and locked the front door with a click, shutting out the world outside.

“Ready for some teamwork?” Yolani asked with a playful grin.

Elania nodded and smiled. “Always.”

Yolani led them to the workbench she had been working at. “I was fixing up the ones that were already charged, but we have to go through most of them.”

“Go through... for the muskets?” Elania asked, slightly confused.

“Yeah,” Yolani answered, pulling out a large bag of the brooches that Elania hadn’t seen yet. There were dozens and dozens of the things. Instead of the lit-up mana crystal in the center, the stones were a dull gray.

Elania’s jaw slackened, and a flat, unhappy look appeared on her face. “Are they contained, or need shielding?”

“They’re old and need shielding. Otherwise, we’ll have to replace the crystals in all of them, and that would probably kill most of the profit,” Yolani explained.

Elania let out a sigh but scooped up a few of the brooches to examine them. Contained crystals were mostly intact and didn’t have trouble being emptied or filled. But Yolani had showed her that most gadgets required shaping of the crystal to modify its discharge properties for whatever application it was being used for.

That meant if she just tried to fill it without ‘shielding’ the crystal first, they were likely to explode. Or melt. Or other bad things.

Yolani took one of the brooches and centered it in a little metal holder, then pulled out two thin metal needle-like tools and flipped down her one-eye magnifier. “Ready?”

Elania grunted as she straightened herself and nodded. “Sure.”

There were a lot of the things so they might as well get started.

# CHAPTER 2

## - ARTIFICERY

## AND PLOTS

The two needles pressed into the sides of the crystal, and Elania felt a familiar pop fill her ears. The boundary for the mana crystal had been broken, releasing the last vestiges of **[Power]** residue from the item.

Taking a deep breath, Elania flipped a mental switch on her **[System]** to activate her aura.

### **[Demonic Aura (Activated)]**

It spread out to fill the room, but Elania tugged it back to not roam so far. There was no need to scare the neighbors.

Yolani flinched anyway, but somehow managed to keep her hands still enough to keep the crystal's mana barrier neutralized. Elania hurried and focused her attention on that, closing her eyes and then placing a single finger on it.

Amazingly, she could feel the difference between the shock brooch's crystal and a regular one in her mind. It was misshapen and

designed to release a large amount of power in a very short duration and then cut off until triggered again.

Normally, it couldn't accept being recharged, because anything you put in would trigger it and discharge it all at once. It remained inert as Yolani held the two neutralizing pins to it, and it only took a second for Elania to fill all the reservoirs and then nod.

"Done," she said.

The pins were removed, and the shock crystal for the musket looked good as new. It went into a new pile for the recharged and repaired crystals.

Yolani reached down to place another crystal on the holder, but Elania couldn't miss the suppressed shiver from the other girl.

"Does it still bother you?" Elania asked.

Green eyes looked up in surprise. "Does what bother me?"

"The aura? I had an idea about that last night," Elania mumbled.

Yolani blinked. "I know it's not on purpose, it just makes my hair stand up on end. It's not a problem."

Elania closed her eyes. Aura wasn't something she used that often, although it was very useful. Like for feeling things that were far away, or for making other people uncomfortable. Thrust enough **[Power]** into it, and she could even create physical effects in things.

Or as demonstrated, feel the inside of a mana crystal or shard and guide her **[Power]** into where it didn't want to flow easily.

But it was part of her, in a weird sort of fundamental way... and she didn't want to make Yolani uncomfortable. Actually, it was the exact opposite. She wanted Yolani to like her...because...

Well, she liked Yolani. A lot.

With that thought in mind, she tried to picture her aura cloud snuggling up around the other girl like a warm hug. Sort of like when

Yolani would have a restless night and end up cuddled up against her while sleeping. Just in reverse.

When Elania opened her eyes, Yolani's cheeks were red.

"What are you doing?" the other girl mumbled in embarrassment.

"Trying to make you more comfortable."

Yolani's cheeks turned an even deeper shade of red. "I...I don't think this is an improvement. Can't we settle with 'non-distracting' or something neutral?"

Elania swallowed and did her best to pull in her aura until it just covered the worktable top and herself. That was a bit challenging, but like most things, it would help her get better at controlling it, probably.

"Sorry," Elania mumbled back.

Yolani loosened her shirt collar and readied the next stone.

Together, they set to work in an industrial fashion, quietly recharging each item one after another. Neutralizing pins were carefully placed, **[Power]** delicately flowed, and each item was marked by a little pop in Elania's ears.

A few required extra repairs, and Yolani somehow held the pins in place with one hand while bringing in other tools with the other. Delicate and tiny runes that were only able to be seen under a magnifying glass were etched on the crystal or the brooch itself, depending on whatever was needed.

It was a bit too complex for Elania, even if she had started to pick up the basics.

By the time they had finished, the afternoon was over and it was early evening. That was a lot of time to spend on one project, but if they had been paid a large gold per artificed firearm, and each one of the shock crystals counted for one... then they had just made a tidy profit. Especially if the payment had been accounting for the cost of new crystals and they hadn't needed any...

Yolani leaned back and let out a sigh as she stretched, arching her back and raising her arms up in the air. “What things did you have in mind about the firearms, anyway?”

Elania perked up. It wasn't often she got to share or show off something artifcey to Yolani, and maybe it would impress her?

“Well, for one thing, they are breechloading,” Elania replied. She hurried over to the wall and got one of the guns and brought it over. It wasn't like she was super familiar with firearms back home.

Actually, she and her mother had avoided them completely for the most part. But her father has insisted she learn the very basics and safety in case she ever had a need for it.

The Neftasu rifles reminded her of the old 310 shotgun her dad had her practice with at one time. She demonstrated for Yolani. “See, you open it here, and load the shell, then they fire. It's slow.”

Yolani frowned. “I don't understand. That's an improvement from before. It's much faster than loading from the barrel.”

“Right, but imagine if you didn't have to reload after every shot,” Elania continued, her words punctuated with excitement. “Instead, there could be a magazine, and it would automatically push the next projectile into the firing mechanism and reset the trigger.”

Yolani's eyes lit up, the spark of ingenuity shimmering in her eyes. “That would increase the firing rate significantly,” she mused, taking the rifle and scrutinizing it. “Though it would require a complete overhaul of the internal mechanisms and an additional stable source of power.”

Elania nodded, a grin spreading across her face as she watched Yolani's gears turn—both figuratively and literally.

A heavy knock at the door drew their attention, the sound abrupt. With furrowed brows and a shared glance of confusion, Elania stood up first. They'd already closed for the day, and neither of them was

expecting anyone to visit. Her mind was already cycling through the list of potential visitors—city guards, overeager customers, Magistray officials, or maybe someone they knew needed help.

Nothing prepared her for the middle-aged man enshrouded in a black robe. The outfit was a vivid echo from her arrival in Eladu when she had been summoned by the Cult of the Black Candle's leader, False Magister Relain.

Or the bishop, as the cult had named him.

The man's eyes, barely visible beneath the hood, locked with hers, and without a word, he thrust a small ornate box into her arms. His voice was a chilling whisper. "The candle still burns, although our leader has fallen. We still believe in you, Dark Queen."

Flashbacks of her summoning rattled her composure, the raw memories wrenching her breath as a moment of panic filled her. Before she could muster a response or wrap her head around the message, the black-robed figure turned on his heel and hurried off into the evening dusk of Neftasu's dimming light stones.

Yolani appeared behind her, hand on her shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"I...I don't know," Elania admitted.

Yolani peered at the box, then at the retreating form of the man. Somehow, the other girl had already fetched her combat wand. There was a very serious look on her face. "What is that? Who was it? Should I subdue him and call the guard?"

Elania shook her head. "I don't know. I think he was with the cult Relain controlled. He had the same type of outfit."

Yolani gave a hostile glance at the disappearing man's back before pulling Elania back inside and shutting the door and locking it. "Let's inspect the box."

They took it to the table, and Yolani played her wand over the thing. It was an ornate looking container, made of real polished wood that gave off a lustrous sheen. A sturdy steel clasp held it shut, but it wasn't locked.

"No traps detected," Yolani said. "Let's open it?"

Elania placed herself between Yolani and the box. "Let me. If it's a bomb or something, I'm better protected."

Yolani raised an eyebrow. "A bomb?"

Swallowing, Elania nodded and closed her eyes, folding her **[Power]** into a barrier around the box, just in case. It didn't surprise her that Yolani didn't have the concept of terrorist IEDs, but then, other than watching the news...

She hissed and opened the box in frustration. Both of them had their breath caught at the sight of the contents. Nestled within the velvet lining lay half a dozen large mana shards, their cores pulsating with a vibrant white light that signified a full charge.

Even with the mana shard shortage ended and prices back to normal, it represented a small fortune... or a few thousand chickens.

Or a few weeks hunting in the depths, but Elania didn't really want to consider something like that again. While she'd enjoyed adventuring somewhat, it was always dangerous...

She had no idea what she'd do without Yolani, and no matter how they did it, the young woman wasn't as sturdy or safe in combat.

Although, who really was? Losing a limb wasn't much of a problem when you could force it to regrow in real-time like some crazy anime villain.

"We should tell Magister Bannon when we meet with him tomorrow," Yolani said quietly.

Elania nodded. "I hope this doesn't muck things up."



“At the very least, they should see about hunting Relain’s lackeys down,” Yolani said.

Elania couldn’t help but agree, but the ambiguity of the gesture gnawed at her. One thing was for sure, though: she wasn’t going to let fear dictate her actions. They had faced worse before.

“We need to be cautious,” Elania voiced her thoughts. “It’s not just about the shards or the value they represent. It’s what accepting them implies. We don’t want to align with the Cult.”

Yolani put her wand away. “Agreed. I wish we could just keep a low profile and not have to worry about these stupid things... and people. I’ll make Magister Bannon understand that.”

Elania secured the box with a thoughtful click, her fingers lingering on the smooth wood. If the cultists believed in her, it was because of what they thought she represented—a symbol of their own making.

But Elania knew who she was, and she was not going to be defined by the expectations of others.

# CHAPTER 3

## - THE CITY

### GUARD

**B**y the time Elania was awake and ready, morning was mostly over. Even with Yolani's help waking up early. The streets were already bustling with the sounds of moving goods, and customers and inhabitants of Artificer Row waved and greeted them as they passed by.

Elania pulled her green cloak a little tighter and considered pulling up her hood. It wasn't the same one that she'd taken from Marcus after she'd killed him. That piece of cloth had been destroyed in the battle at the Magistracy. Why she'd felt compelled to replace it with one of the same color, she wasn't sure. Maybe that was just because it complemented her red hair?

The row's security gate was as well guarded as ever, a half dozen Ironfist mercenaries standing by the cargo entrance while a smaller squad manned the smaller gate. A steady stream of traffic made their

way in and out, keeping the guard's attention, but as Elania and Yolani neared, the leader waved to them.

Sergeant Harlock looked as well as he ever had, and his armor had a newly polished shine to it. That was probably because the man had made a lot of gold working with them. He'd even gone with them on the Hornar spider expedition.

And one thing Elania had definitely learned was that artifice paid very well and meant that Yolani could throw a lot of coin at some problems. They certainly didn't lack for any necessities.

His weathered face broke into a rare, if somewhat gruff, smile upon seeing them. "Good morning, you two. Going out to face the dragons?" Harlock asked as they came to a stop.

"Something like that," Elania replied with a light chuckle. "We have a meeting with Magister Bannock."

Yolani nodded. "We need a wagon to take us to the City Guard Headquarters. Could you get us one?"

He turned to one of the mercenaries watching the gate. "Lucas! Girls need a ride. Go fetch one, please."

"Sure thing." The middle-aged man gave them a thumb up and headed out. Elania smiled. The man was one of the people who had helped them as well.

They made small talk for a few minutes until an artifice powered wagon arrived, driven by a chauffeur. Yolani passed him a small gold coin. That was one tenth of a large gold, which was Neftasu's largest coin denomination.

It was an exorbitant fee for a ride across the city. A **[Ralfot]** carriage would have got them there almost as fast and still spared them a walk at a fraction of the cost.

But Elania enjoyed riding in the artifice wagon. It was pretty close to an old-timey automobile. Except it was made out of cloth. She was

pretty sure that cars weren't supposed to be made out of fabric. Maybe she was wrong.

They waved to Harlock as they got on board. "Thanks for the help," Elania said.

Harlock nodded. "Well, keep your eyes sharp. The city's been a kettle about to boil over these days."

The artifice wagon was hardly a smooth ride, but the magic propulsion was relatively silent. Like an electric car.

As they rode out of the artisan district, Elania couldn't help but admire the vibrant tableau of activity that passed by. Tailor shops displayed their wares in windows full of fabric and clothes, forges belched plumes of smoke, and the clang of hammers on anvils was a symphony of productivity. The throngs of people outmatched the number on the more private Artificer Row.

They left it behind all too quickly, passing into the central district of Neftasu. The transition was swift and marked a heavy shift in atmosphere; the industrious hum gave way to a thrumming tension of humanity that prickled the air.

The throngs of people thickened until their driver was forced to turn and take a different route. Yolani, who had been uncharacteristically quiet on the ride, pointed toward the central square. "There is some kind of demonstration going on."

Elania tilted her head and leaned over to look out the other girl's side of the wagon. "Any idea about what?"

"What else other than the reforms?" Yolani asked.

Elania grunted. Well, she was probably right. Things had not been going entirely well since the 'event' where she had somehow put a geas on all the magisters to clean up the city on pain of... having their souls ripped out or something.

Her memory of being in the Celestial Engine and what came after had never recovered, but Yolani had filled her in on the specifics. Apparently, she'd turned into some angel type badass and laid down the law. Which was the main reason they had received so much assistance with the law and materials for rebuilding Aetherhart's Artifice.

That was handy, because they'd ended up killing some people, and while Neftasu and Eladu were very much what Elania would call on a wild west type of law, people still went to jail for murdering each other.

At least when it could be proven. Which, even with magical artifice stuff like truth stones, wasn't always possible.

Between the buildings, she spotted a wooden stage at the center of the square as they passed another street. A figure was standing on top of it, passionately shouting to the crowd. From the resounding response, they were eating it up. She focused and pushed a little **[Power]** into her ears to help her make it out.

"...and we will not be ignored until our demands are heard! The Magisters must answer for their negligence!"

Riiight. Yolani had hit the nail dead center.

"Let's not linger," Elania murmured, and Yolani nodded in agreement.

The other girl reached up and slid open the compartment door to the front. "Keep us out of the crowd."

The driver glanced back and then nodded. "Sure thing, lass! Was already looking for a way 'round them. Bunch of troublemakers, if you ask me!"

"Why are they protesting?" Elania asked.

The undercurrent of roused voices meant the man had to nearly shout. "Bread shortage! The noble who owned the mill had his goods confiscated, and his trading partners cut off the supply of cave-wheat.

It hasn't run for two days and the people from the Merc Dist' are furious!"

As they rolled through the gate to the conclave district and toward the city guard's fortress, the shouts and chants faded into the background. They probably should have just taken the long way around instead of cutting through the city's center.

It wasn't long, though, before they arrived at the guard district. It was one of the small, specialized districts that was essentially an enclave inside the city. The walls and gate were imposing, and the driver had to show a special pass to the guards standing at the entrance. Even with that, they were inspected with a meticulousness that bordered on invasive.

Everything was in order and above-board, so they were finally allowed to pass as the gate sergeant waved them on with a curt nod.

It was a straight shot to the front of the headquarters, its imposing structure making her feel suddenly small. The citadel dominated the area, an odd mix of what she'd consider a medieval castle and oversized office building. Countless windows on the upper floors spilled out artificial light, adding to the resemblance.

Elania took a deep breath as she stepped down from the wagon, steeling herself for the encounter with Magister Bannon. The Guard Magister was probably the least offensive magister from the group, but that didn't mean she liked him. He was stern and martial, and in her opinion, his failures in allowing the guard to fall to corruption hit way too close to home.

Yolani stepped out behind her, and Elania took her hand and helped her down. The driver waved and headed back out to find more clients.

"Are you ready?" Elania asked.

Yolani nodded. “No Henri, so we’ll have to go through the normal gate.”

“Yay, airport security,” Elania mumbled.

“What’s an airport?” Yolani asked.

“It’s a place where people get on airplanes. They search everyone who wants to travel. Unless you are important,” Elania said.

Yolani’s eyes widened slightly. “The flying things?”

Elania nodded, but the conversation was cut short as they reached the entrance. A dozen guards stood idly by along the outer wall and inside the gate there were another half-dozen men that all looked a bit too bored.

Bored guards were bad news.

The man up front gave them a lecherous grin that gave her the creeps. “Two for additional screening. Riles, get over here!”

Yolani frowned and stepped forward. “We’re here to see the—”

“Sure you are. Screening is required at random to make sure nothing dangerous gets in,” the guard said, cutting her off.

Elania grimaced. It was going to be one of those days, apparently. Did the man even have **[Identify]**? Why would they have a guard without it doing screening?

Riles was a much less imposing figure, almost scrawny even in the heavy plated trench-coat armor the guard preferred. “Giggs, are...are you sure? That one—”

Giggs glared and snapped, “Shut up, Riles! In here you two, now.”

Elania and Yolani exchanged a resigned look, but complied.

They all shuffled into a small side room. Giggs didn’t waste any time, and they relinquished their belongings so Riles could begin to go through them on a table.

“You’ll need to be searched before you can go any further,” the large guard announced, his voice gruff and devoid of politeness. Elania

suppressed her growing agitation. Barely. Hadn't these assholes ever heard of same gender pat-down requirements?

Giggs gave her a look that just solidified her rapidly falling opinion of the man before his eyes settled on Yolani. "Spread your arms and legs and hold still," he ordered.

A grimace spread over Yolani's face as he began to pat her down. Pat was the wrong word. The man was literally rubbing his hands all over her!

When his hand went between her legs, she protested. "Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

Giggs laughed and then reached up and cupped a breast and squeezed. "Got to make sure you're not carrying anything dangerous, might need to do an intern—"

In a flash of motion, Elania's hand clamped down on his wrist and pulled his arm back. "Stop touching her. We're going to report you to your superior."

Gigg's face contorted in anger. "You're going to regret that," he stated. His other arm came up and his fist swung toward Elania's head. There was a heavy thud of flesh, but it came from the comical bounce of his hand recoiling as if he had struck solid steel.

Elania's patience evaporated. The little rational part of her mind told her to restrain him and wait for someone to come and arrest him. The other part, the one now taking control, said he'd get a slap on the wrist and have a chance to do this again to someone else.

Plus, he'd touched Yolani.

She meant to throw him through the wall, but his arm ripped out of its socket and flesh tore with a sickening rip as blood exploded from the sudden hole at his shoulder. There was a scream from Riles, maybe, but she didn't care.



Correcting her earlier mistake, she kneeed him in the midsection and sent him crashing through the masonry and back into the entryway's corridor.

Yolani stared with disbelief as Riles fumbled for his weapon. Shouts and yelling erupted and someone called for a medic, but Elania doubted Giggs was going to need any assistance. Men with muskets readied stormed into the room and leveled them at her and Yolani.

Before anyone could say anything, one ran up and tried grabbing her wrist, and she twisted the grip and threw him to the floor.

Gently.

Things were getting out of hand. Elania reached out to grab Yolani's hand to shield her, then drew a pulse of **[Power]** and shoved it into her **[Demonic Aura]** and activated it. It spread out like a golden sphere of light motes, barely visible in the air as a shimmer.

"Kneel," Elania intoned, the order dripping with authority as it resonated through the air.

The guards crumpled onto their knees, weapons clattering to the stone floor.

More guards poured in from other areas, taking in the sight with confusion and alarm. Shouts continued to fill the air from afar. Yolani squeezed her hand tightly and hissed at her. "Elania!"

Well, this was a right mess.

Elania prepared herself to bring up a shield, then cleared her voice and spoke loudly enough to be heard over the shouting. "The man tried to molest my friend."

There was a flicker of understanding from some of the men, others didn't seem to hear or care. That made her feel annoyed, so she tried again. "The bastard tried to rape us!"

That might have been a slight exaggeration, although she felt it was quite close to the mark of what the man intended. She shouted it so

loud no one could fail to hear. There was a visible relaxation from just about everyone as they processed what happened and realized she wasn't a crazy demon on a rampage.

Women weren't treated poorly in Neftasu. She had found they were respected simply because of so many tasks they could carry out and do as well as a man. Even if Yolani was one of the rare exceptions to artifice work, that was mostly by choice for them. There weren't any laws restricting women from certain jobs other than they needed to meet the requirements for the work.

That didn't mean there weren't used and abused in places like the Mercenary District, but in the upper areas of society they were protected. At least in public.

A squad of men centered around a captain with a tall hat emerged from down the hall. The man had a burly frame, and she recognized him as Captain Harrik. Lieutenant Gaston, Henri's uncle, followed right beside him.

She could feel the relief radiate from Yolani, and a hopeful spark ignited inside Elania as well. Maybe things could be salvaged. Her eyes drifted to the hole in the wall and to the medics tending to the broken corpse half buried in brick. Maybe.

"Stand down! What's going on?" Captain Harrik bellowed loudly. Several sergeants ran over and began to speak to him as the two officers approached.

# CHAPTER 4 - THE MAGISTER OF THE GUARD

E lania seized the back of Riles' shirt as the man tried to sneak away from behind. The arrayed guards tensed as she positioned the man between the raised muskets and Yolani. With the Captain's arrival she released her aura, and a line of visible inhales and gasps came as the guards nearest to her could breathe again.

"That man," she gestured to the bloody lump on the other side of the wall, "violated my friend's dignity. This is not the conduct the City Guard is supposed to uphold."

Harrik's response was devoid of sympathy, his stance rigid as he addressed her. "You overstepped your bounds, demon."

The title, meant as a slur, sparked a fire in her eyes. She leaned forward, her voice low and laced with threat. "Then perhaps I should teach you what happens when you overstep yours."

Gaston coughed and stepped forward, placing himself between the two of them, holding up his hands. “Stand down. Everyone! Stand down. Let us address this properly. No need for further hostilities.”

There was a tense moment of standoff as silence took hold of the hall, interrupted by the loud ding of the arriving elevator at the back of the lobby. Magister Bannon stepped out, his blue robes held close to his body while his rapier’s sword belt hung at an angle at his hip. He immediately surveyed the scene and approached with a raised brow, his gaze landing on Elania and Yolani amidst the recovering circle of guards.

“What is the meaning of this disruption? Miss Aetherhart, Miss Elania, you’re early for our meeting.” Magister Bannon’s voice was steady, and his tone demanded an explanation.

Elania’s posture remained firm, but she gave a respectful nod to the Magister. Yolani spoke up for them. “Magister, one of your men tried to accost me during the screening process. Elania... dealt with them.”

The Magister’s gaze locked on to Captain Harrik. “Why were you screening them at all? I sent word for them to be brought up to me as soon as they arrived.”

Captain Harrik’s stern demeanor faltered under Bannon’s scrutiny. It was clear that the arrival of the magister had shifted the power dynamics considerably.

Harrik’s response was immediate, his tone shedding any prior aggression. “It appears there has been a misunderstanding, sir. I assure you, we will investigate thoroughly.”

Lieutenant Gaston stepped forward, gesturing to Riles. “Take that one to a holding cell for questioning,” he said, turning toward the two girls. His gaze fell on Yolani. “I apologize for their conduct. I’ll let Henri know what went on and have him come meet you on your way out.”

Yolani nodded, and Elania visibly relaxed as the guards surrounding them dispersed and started to go about clean-up operations. Riles wasn't cuffed, but the two guards that escorted him didn't give him any chance to go elsewhere. She wondered what kind of interrogation they would use on him.

Magister Bannon gestured towards the elevator, an invitation for them to follow him. "Let's continue this discussion in my office."

The ride up the headquarters' main elevator was tense, the silence filled with the hum of the artificed machinery as they ascended to the Magister's floor. His office was a spacious room that exuded authority, with shelves lined with leather-bound books and walls decorated with tapestries with the city guard's insignia and colors.

He wasted no time addressing the heart of the matter as Elania and Yolani sat down in two comfortable chairs in front of his desk.

"There has been unrest and trouble following the reforms. We scarcely need to add a rampaging demon to the mix," he stated, turning and standing to face the window with his hands clasped behind his back rather than sit down. "And while I understand your grievances, causing a commotion in the headquarters only adds to the chaos."

Elania bristled. "If you don't want trouble, then perhaps the City Guard shouldn't employ thugs who believe it's acceptable to sexually assault someone during a search," she shot back, her tone sharp.

Bannon turned to face her, his expression unreadable. "I did not say you were in the wrong to rebuke the man. I assure you it's not my policy for such things to be allowed. As much as it pains me to admit it, it is one of the things that I have been attempting to correct since the events of that night."

Yolani cleared her voice. "I am sure you're doing your best, magister. It's not a straightforward thing to conduct such large changes so quickly."

Bannon's eyes didn't tread away from Elania, but he sat down and sighed, rubbing the dull runic tattoo that was now embedded on his forehead. "I know what you are capable of more than most. I know you could have restrained the man without killing him and then we could have dealt with things without such a scene."

He paused and looked between the two of them before continuing. "A trial could have been held and with both of you fully capable of utilizing a truth stone, it would have been a simple case. Now this incident will have to be shoved aside and murder of a guard won't be good for morale. Regardless of his activities."

A little voice whispered on Elania's shoulder that he was right. Murder. She'd killed him. Maybe it was second degree murder, because she'd been enraged. Maybe she would have been able to raise a defense saying it was protecting Yolani from assault, but...

She had killed the man.

And she felt nothing.

No, that was inaccurate. She felt things, but most of it was worry about what issues it would cause for Yolani and her in the future.

There was no remorse, no guilty feeling for killing someone. She had no idea if he had a family who would miss him or anything.

That was wrong. She knew it was wrong. But she didn't feel anything.

What had happened to her?

"I admit I could have dealt with him less...decisively. It was impulsive... but... at the same time I reserve the right to defend myself or Yolani whenever, and however needed," Elania said.

Bannon nodded. "Understood. Do keep it in mind, however. What you did, and my summary judgement to not hold you accountable for it via a trial, is exactly one of the things that the guard reforms are

trying to do away with. No one should be above the law, and everyone deserves justice.”

“Speaking of the reforms, we passed by a demonstration on the way here. The central square was awash with protestors,” Yolani added.

Bannon sighed again. “Magister Roland has taken many nobles to heel and chastised them severely. In this case, one of the owners of a mill and bread facility that feeds the Mercenary District was dealt with. His business partners pulled out, and the grain stopped suddenly.”

He held his hands out. “Suddenly there is a bread shortage in the district, and thus, unrest.”

“Can’t something be done?” Elania asked.

“I understand Magister Astolf is securing the supply to resume operations, but... the mob burned down and wrecked the machinery before it could arrive,” Bannon added.

“What about other sources of food? I don’t think I saw any shortage in the Artisan District.”

Bannon grunted. “I understand, but the supplies are limited. We could very well cause shortages in the other districts if we aren’t careful.”

“So the poor get the shaft, like always,” Elania muttered.

There was a moment of silence as the conversation died off until Yolani finally pulled out the chest that they had received the day prior. “There’s a matter we must address. Someone we believe to be a Black Candle cultist delivered these to us at the shop yesterday.”

She opened the ornate box to reveal the mana shards inside.

Magister Bannon’s composed façade tensed, his eyes narrowing as he took in the items that represented a small fortune. “We’ve seen evidence of the cult remaining after Relain’s death,” he admitted, his voice low. “They’ve been especially involved with the protestors. I’ve

had several teams attempt to infiltrate them and learn more, but so far, they've somehow avoided our net."

"Can't you just arrest them when they are spotted?" Elania asked.

Bannon shook his head. "We tried that at first. They have some type of spell on them that wipes their memories when captured and in...duress. I've actually instructed Harrik's division to investigate. I thought you might be aware, considering your ties to Lieutenant Gaston."

"More his nephew than the man himself, but no. We've not been privy to any investigations," Yolani answered.

The magister grunted and nodded. "Gods know there should be at least one department that can keep its mouth shut instead of blabbering everything to everyone."

"The point of bringing this to you was we wanted you to know we aren't involved with them. Yolani and I just want to be left alone in peace," Elania said. Yolani looked at her and nodded confirmation.

The man's gaze shifted to Elania, a hint of understanding flickering in his eyes. "The Magisters and I have no intention of renegeing on our support for the rebuilding of Miss Aetherhart's shop," he assured them. "We will not trouble you without cause."

He glanced at the mana shards. "You might as well keep them for the trouble."

"That's excellent. And thank you for the consideration, Magister," Elania replied. She reached out to close and take the box, but the man reached out and placed his hand ovetop of hers on the box's lid.

"However," Bannon continued, "Magister Keswick is facing challenges with the Celestial Engine and has expressed interest in your particular... expertise."



Beside her, Yolani tensed up. “We agreed to regular meetings, considering the circumstances, but aiding the City Works with the Celestial Engine is way beyond the scope of what we agreed upon.”

Bannon released Elania’s hand and sat back in his chair. “Regardless of our agreement, the need for your assistance is there. You’ve charged us with repairing the city, and you quite possibly have an important role to play with that.”

Elania reclaimed the mana shard box. “Fine. I don’t mind... seeing if I can help. I don’t know how, though. And I am not agreeing to do anything that could cause harm to myself. Last time I nearly died.”

Bannon nodded. “A sensible and legitimate position. I will convey the sentiment to Magister Keswick. Expect a messenger from her in the coming days.”

Elania rose from her seat, her eyes meeting Bannon’s evenly. “Are we done here? And are these monthly check-ins really necessary anymore?”

“Given today’s incident, I would say it’s imperative we maintain regular contact,” Bannon replied with firmness. “For the foreseeable future, yes.”

Yolani stood up as well, shooting Elania a worried look before turning back toward Bannon. “What of the guards who helped Artificer Ranolf and my uncle Hector?”

Bannon shook his head, the motion dismissive. “It seems to have been an isolated incident. I haven’t been able to find any evidence of a larger conspiracy.”

Elania shook her head. “Like the guards who beat the terrified woman in front of her kid when I first arrived in the city and tried to pin it on me? Or today’s incident with the search?”

The magister exhaled deeply, a sigh that seemed to carry the weight of the organization on his shoulders with it. “The guard is not without

its faults, but as I told you, I am implementing measures to transform it into a more professional force while rooting out the corruption that has been plaguing it.”

Elania crossed her arms. “I’m not seeing much progress.”

Bannon grunted and looked exhausted.

“—But I believe you are trying. I am pretty sure you’d fall over dead or something with your soul sucked out into the Celestial Engine if you weren’t,” Elania added.

The man visibly paled before recovering. “Thank you for your understanding. If changing things overnight was easier, it would have already been done. It could take decades to affect all the changes required to restore the original vision of the city.”

Yolani bowed slightly. “Thank you for your efforts, magister. If we need your assistance or can help in some way, please feel free to send a message and we’ll do our best.”

Elania shot her a glance, but the Magister spoke first as he stood up.

“Be vigilant for Magister Keswick’s messenger,” he reminded them, “as that is the most obvious issue you can help deal with.”

Elania and Yolani exchanged a glance and a further farewell with the magister before they made their way out of the office. They stepped back on the elevator alone and began the descent.

“Are you okay?” Yolani asked as soon as the door was shut.

“What do you mean?” Elania asked, slightly more sharply than she meant to.

Yolani frowned and put her hand on Elania’s shoulder. “About the guard earlier. You killed him.”

Elania tensed up. “He touched you.”

“Thank you. For defending me. I’m just worried about you,” Yolani replied.

A lump formed in her throat, but Elania swallowed it away. "I'll... I'll be okay. The important thing is that he won't do that to anyone else, and that you aren't hurt."

"We handled that well, all things considered," Elania said, her voice a subdued murmur as they stepped into the lobby.

Yolani nodded, a small quiver in her lips betraying her unease. "I just want to get back home. Maybe we will stay closed tomorrow, too."

Elania reached up and squeezed the other girl's hand on her shoulder. "We'll get through things. Together."

A smile appeared on Yolani's face before she nodded. The elevator arrived at the lobby, opening up to let the indistinct murmur of the building fill the box. They stepped out. Several guards tensed upon seeing them, while others went about their business, completely oblivious to the pair.

A masonry team was already at work cleaning up the mess, and there was no resistance as they headed straight for the exit.

A young man peeled off from a wall and intercepted them. It was Henri.

"Are you alright?" he asked immediately.

Yolani nodded. "I'm fine. But I'd like to get out of here."

Henri nodded. "I'll get a wagon and head back with you."

"No, that's alright, we'll be fine," Yolani added quickly.

Elania frowned, taking in the tenseness in Yolani as she pulled away from him.

Henri was her childhood friend, but she'd also seen how things were awkward between them. Yolani had told her about how he had feelings for her. Ones that she said confused her and that she wasn't really sure she reciprocated.

She'd advised the other girl to just tell him, but she was afraid that they wouldn't be friends anymore.

It was a bit of drama that followed them around all the time, simply because Henri was assigned by Lieutenant Gaston to monitor them and to be the guard's interface with the Ironfist Mercenary company. That meant trips every day to Artificer Row, where they were hired to guard the shops and area.

Talk about a headache on top of everything else.

She couldn't quite condemn or dislike him, though. When shit hit the fan, he had saved Yolani's life by defending her from one of the corrupt guards that her uncle Hector had sourced.

But when he started to protest, she shut him down. "Thank you, Henri. But we'll be fine on our own."

He frowned at her. "There's a big thing going on. I really should go with you."

Elania shook her head, and Yolani followed suit.

"We'll... we will see you later." Yolani added before leading the way out of the corridor to the exit.

Elania had to speed up her step as she followed. Yolani led right out of the compound and out the main gate.

Henri trailed them. "I really think I should come along," he insisted. "If you aren't going to take a wagon, it's going to be dangerous!"

Elania glanced at Yolani, noting the subtle tension in her friend's shoulders. "We appreciate your concern, Henri," Elania said with measured calmness, "But we need some space. It's been a stressful day so far."

Henri's frown deepened, his eyes darting between the two of them. "I understand, but I'm telling you it's dangerous right now."

Yolani finally stopped and turned toward him, her voice firm. "It's been a long day, Henri. We'll manage. You have your duties."

The tension seemed to crest as Henri opened his mouth, possibly to argue further, but instead his shoulders slumped, and he let out

a resigned sigh. "Alright, but please be careful. Take the long route around central."

Yolani grabbed Elania's shoulder and tugged her on. The walk was hurried and frantic, and directly toward the central square. Elania bit her lip and felt worried. Even if she didn't want to talk to him, she was pretty sure his warning had been legitimate.

When they passed through to the central district, the loud rumble of the demonstration could be felt just as much as heard. She was about to pull Yolani to a stop and insist they try another way or get a carriage when they turned a corner and ran smack dab into a mob.

The throng of protestors was a sea of discontent, waves of anger crashing against the sides of the buildings on the street. Signs and banners rose and fell like crests, the voices of mixed humanity merged into a cacophony of demands and grievances.

Yolani's hand slipped around Elania's arm. "Do we go around?" Yolani asked, her voice tinged with apprehension as they paused.

Suddenly, the group of protesters turned in their direction.

"No question, let's get out of here," Elania replied, shouting to be heard over the noise of the crowd.

The two of them turned, only to freeze.

A wall of guards had formed up behind them, covering the entire street in a wall of tower shields and cudgels. Rocks and other debris flew at the guards.

The response was immediate: the shield wall pushed forward.

And they were right in the middle of the two groups.

# CHAPTER 5 - THROUGH A STORM

The clash of the guard slamming into the mass of protestors erupted into a brutal cacophony of metal, flesh, and bone. Elania didn't need to pulse her **[Power]** for enough strength to shove her way through the crowd while Yolani's grip tightened on her arm.

The screams behind them rose in volume as the mob began to turn away from the guard's iron-clad formation. The beaten and dead were a scattered mess as the contact line pushed forward, and a smaller force of men dragged them out and away for first-aid or covered them with cloth.

Elania felt her stomach turn. They'd been prepared for the result. Henri had known something was up. Had the magister—

A sharp elbow struck her in the side painfully, but bounced off. She shoved the large man who'd been pushed himself back the way he had come from and pushed through. People were getting hurt just trying

to get away, and she had to avoid stomping on someone that had fallen in the stampede.

She reached down and snagged the man's arm and lifted them back up into the press.

Yolani stuck to her like glue while shouting something at her, but the sound was lost in the crowd.

The narrow street opened up into a wider area and she realized they'd entered the main square. The guards stopped following and locked down the street. All around them, the press of people continued to grow, and she realized that they'd been driven into the area on purpose.

Small detachments of guards along the smaller streets blocked the pathways, while a larger group was passing through people down the main avenue, where Elania suspected they were being directed to return to their homes.

But there were so many people that it would take forever to filter out the innocent from the troublemakers. If it was even possible at all.

In the meantime, on the other side of the square, people were becoming even more agitated, and the scaffolding that had been used for the speeches was smoking; someone had set it aflame.

A sharp panic filled her as she looked upwards but realized that they were fine. The city cavern wasn't really full of glow-moss, the massive dangling artificed light stones casting their light down to illuminate the chaotic scene.

Yolani's voice was a thin thread in the storm as they came to a relative stop with the crowd. "Elania, we have to get out of this!"

Annoyance flared through her. That much was obvious! "I know, just stay close!" Elania shouted back, her heart racing as she pointed them toward the main avenue and potential exit.

That escape died as a mob of combative protestors surged forward to attack the guards, allowing people through. Yolani bumped into her back as she came to a halt.

The “What?” died on Yolani’s lips as Elania flipped around and began to push them back the way they had come.

Elania shook her head and continued to shout at people to let them through. The pocket they had been part of was becoming more and more dense and, multiple times, shoving someone who crushed into her or Yolani became necessary.

Finally, she spotted an area that looked promising: a smaller avenue that didn’t seem to have much activity. The area in front of it was one of the rare empty pockets in the square, and a small trickle of people was running for it.

Elania pointed and Yolani nodded, their words lost to the thrum of the crowd and the violence erupting everywhere.

As they broke out the rear of the crowd, there was a breath of relief. They both stopped and caught their breath as others broke away and joined the slowly growing trickle of escaping people. Her heart nearly stopped when she spotted more guards at the end of the street, blocking the path.

Confusion filled her as she spotted some black-robed people guiding people down a ramp and out of view. Black Candle cultists? They weren’t really doing anything cultist-y though. She steadied her breath and quelled her spike of fear. Whether they were part of the cult or not, they didn’t really have any reason to be after her and Yolani now, not in the middle of this.

Wherever the people were going, the guards didn’t seem interested in stopping them. Just beating the crap of anyone that got closer to their blockade. Was their intention to filter through the entire crowd



and capture anyone they deemed troublesome, while allowing the innocents out?

There were literally too many people for that to be effective. At least, it seemed like that.

Yolani's gaze found hers, a concerned look on her face. Elania shrugged back. "Let's look?"

"Might as well look!" Yolani shouted back.

They passed a few of the robbed figures without comment. Elania peered down the ramp and came to a halt. A fleeing person ran right past her and Yolani without hesitating.

It was an entry door that she recognized well: it was one of the heavy metal sewer access doors. It had been jammed open by a bar of metal stuck in the hinges. The smell wafted up at them and her stomach did a twist.

"We can't go down there," Elania said, her voice a strained whisper as she turned to Yolani.

Yolani's face was pale, her eyes wide as she scanned the options before them. "I don't like it either, but do you see another way out?"

Elania's mind raced through the memories of their last foray into the sewers. It had been a nightmare of filth, danger, and... nastiness. It didn't help that she'd been in her **[Darkwalker]** form for the most of it. She'd sworn never to return, but now...

Looking back at the square, the violence seemed to be reaching a fever pitch. Elania took Yolani's hand. They scurried down into the filth, with the rest of the people escaping the riot.

The stench hit first, a sickening miasma of waste and decay. The stones were slick with moisture and grime, but it wasn't exactly dark: her **[Darkvision]** made sure of that.

Elania raised her hand and pulsed a bit of **[Power]** into her palm to create a light anyway.

A simple gesture and the orb floated up above her head. That was one thing that Yolani had helped her practice, and she was grateful that she'd taken the time to learn to manipulate the low level of energy away from her body—stably.

There had been plenty of times she'd forced energy externally in a demonstrably unstable way, usually in combat with lethal or violent results.

The noise from the riot muffled almost immediately as soon as they were through the heavy door's threshold.

Yolani shot her an appreciative glance. "Thanks. The light wand would work, but saving power on the crystal is probably more efficient."

They joined a thin stream of humanity. Dim sticks placed periodically provided light for the rest of them, but a small huddle of people slowly coalesced around Elania's raised hand. People who had possibly come back to guide the rest were stationed at intersections and urged them forward to safety.

A prickle of unhappiness hit her. "We could have just climbed up a building!" Elania hissed.

Yolani shot her a frown, then shook her head. "Too late for that now, but you're right. I wasn't thinking."

One of the guides was wearing a black robe and alarm bells suddenly started going off in Elania's head. It was suspicious as hell that people were being directed by people she could only regard as Cultists. All of them showing up at once during the riot made little sense.

Unless they were involved in starting it?

"I don't like this," Elania whispered to her friend.

Yolani nodded and loosened a wand on her belt. That was smart, and Elania mentally prepared herself for some kind of fight.

When the sewer way opened up into one of the larger causeways, they both stopped in their tracks. Hundreds of people were milling about, some injured were being tended to by people in black robes. Dozens of the cultists mingled talking with people, and others led groups away down the main line.

One cultist stepped forward to address the small crowd that had formed around Elania's light.

"If you are injured, please cross to the other side and a healer will tend to you! If you just want to get out of here, please move to the side and wait in a group! A guide will be here soon to take you up to a safe exit point near the center of the Mercenary District!"

Hesitation gripped Elania as she stood in the sewer's dimness, the dreary environment punctuated by the echoes of retreating footsteps and the slowly running water. The stench of refuse was a stark contrast to the seemingly altruistic acts being carried out by the black-robed figures she had no intention of trusting.

Yolani's grip on her wand was a mirror to Elania's own unease. The sewers weren't known to be a safe or pleasant place, and Elania's eyes widened when she spotted a few tin metal shacks making up a sewer shanty in the distance. They were at a junction that was like the one where Tessa had butchered the unfortunate inhabitants from the mercenary district.

If not the same one, she couldn't be sure that someone hadn't just set the buildings up again after the demoness had flattened it and ate everyone.

"They're helping," Yolani murmured, her voice tinged with uncertainty. "What's their angle?"

Elania shook her head, her thoughts mirroring Yolani's skepticism. "I don't trust this. Not one bit."

Yolani pointed across the waterway to where a cultist was using some type of magic to heal someone's broken leg. "That's a holy-healing spell. I know that one requires a high karma. We should be careful."

It was a pretty broken system, in Elania's opinion, that high or low karma was an indicator that a person was bad.

Positive karma still meant you had to *kill someone* with negative karma. Even if the 'karma slave-pens' were banned in Neftasu, that didn't mean people didn't farm it for some of their skill requirements.

It brought her adventure to reach the city with the 'holy' monks in a new light. They probably executed people to get their karma high enough to use them.

A guide arrived and began to lead the crowd that had followed them down the sewer avenue. Elania shared a look with Yolani. "Should we go with them?"

Yolani bit her lip and looked between the cultists across the water and the retreating group, gauging things before answering. "I think we should find out more."

Their deliberation was cut short by a pair of cultists approaching them. Elania's entire body tensed up into a coil waiting to spring, but all she saw was concern etched into the man and woman's faces.

"Are you hurt? Do you need assistance?" the man asked, glancing between Elania and Yolani.

Elania straightened her stance, her eyes shimmering with a golden hue. "What are you doing here? Why are you helping these people?" she demanded.

The cultists shared a confused look, clearly taken aback by her accusatory tone. "We're just here to help," the woman replied, her tone genuine. "There's no ulterior motive."

Elania and Yolani shared a loaded glance, and Elania fought with her incredulity. "Are you part of the Black Candle?"

A smile appeared on the man's face. "So you've heard of us. You can understand why we want to help everyone. It's part of our mission."

The possibility that the cultists were simply aiding those in need wasn't completely insane. Maybe they were trying to gain favor with the common people to gain power somehow? Whatever it was, she wasn't buying the 'no motive' business.

Another brief, wordless communication ran between her and Yolani. The other girl nodding slightly.

With a deep breath, Elania faced the cultists once more, her resolve hardening. "Take us to your leader," she commanded. "We want answers."

A flicker of anger ran across the man's face. "Who are you to demand—"

The woman put her hand on his shoulder, and he went silent. She smiled at Elania and Yolani, the friendly expression never wavering. "Of course. We can take you to the master. He's here right now."

"Ralei, we can't just—"

"Shush, Fink. We can. We are here to help people after all, and I'm sure Darius wouldn't mind talking to them," she continued.

He gave her a sour look but didn't seem ready to argue any further. "Come. It's not far," he said.

Elania let Yolani take the rear, while she tightened the grip on her **[Power]**, ready for whatever awaited them in the murk.

# CHAPTER 6

## - INTO THE DEPTHS

The murmurs of the injured and the gentle incantations of healing spells formed a muted backdrop as Elania and Yolani followed the two cultists through the makeshift shantytown that had sprung up into the sewers.

Everywhere they looked, there were signs of the Black Candle's presence, from block-robed figures tending to the wounded, to candles and evidence of recent habitation nestled discreetly against the walls and metal huts.

Yolani cleared her throat, drawing the cultists' attention. "How did you know people would need help?" she asked, her voice carrying a mix of suspicion and curiosity.

Ralei didn't miss a beat as she continued to guide them and fink onward through the sewer muck. "We've been watching the demonstrations grow more heated by the day," she explained. At the intersection, she paused, the warm glow from a nearby torch casting dancing

shadows on her face. “The unrest was palpable, and we feared the worst.”

Elania grunted. That sounded nice, but the explanation didn’t really cut it for her. “It’s convenient that you were here, ready and waiting. Almost as if you had something to do with rousing the unrest in the first place.”

Fink’s reaction was immediate, his face contorting in anger. “We are here to help the people of Neftasu, nor hurt them,” he snapped back, his hands clenching into fists before Ralei placed a calming hand on his shoulder.

The conversation was cut short as they arrived at their destination, a ramshackle building that clung to the sewer wall like a barnacle, its door hanging open. Inside, several men huddled around a table strewn with maps and scrolls, their conversation halting abruptly as the newcomers were noticed. All eyes turned towards them, a tension filling the air.

Ralei stepped forward. “Darius, these women have questions,” she said, gesturing toward Elania and Yolani.

The man in the center of the group opposite of the table stood up, his piercing gaze locking onto Elania. Of the group, he was the only one not wearing a black robe, instead he was clad in a leather doublet with a sword belt that held a thin metal sword at his hip.

“You brought her here,” he said, his voice smooth and deep, tinged with an accusation as his gaze flickered to Ralei.

“Of course, they seem to be agitated by the circumstances,” Ralei replied easily.

Elania looked between them. Was the woman daft? He was clearly not happy.

“We don’t need more interactions with demons. She’s the one our beloved Bishop summoned,” Darius said.

The entire group of cultists fixated on her, half of them recoiling in horror, some with awe, but mostly... fear. She stiffened as her senses went on high alert.

Fink looked like he was about to attack or run away. “D...demon? Her eyes aren’t blue or red!”

Darius shook his head with a look of disgust on his face. “I know you’re an idiot, Fink,” he said before glancing at Ralei, “but I expected more of you, Relai. You have **[Identify]** at least.”

The woman looked at her, a frown crossing her lips. “It does say **[Lesser Demon]**... but she doesn’t seem like...?”

“She fell in the Celestial Engine, that’s why her eyes are divine golds,” Darius said.

A frown appeared on Elania’s face. “You know a lot about something that the Magisters kept hidden from the public. We aren’t here for pleasantries, either. We want to know what you people are doing in the sewers and why you’ve taken it upon yourselves to ‘assist’ the citizens.”

“The city above is fractured,” Darius finally spoke, his tone measured. “Those with power vie for control, leaving the weak to suffer. We provide aid where the Magisters and their guards fail to. People remember who helped them when they were at their lowest.”

Elania frowned; she hadn’t expected him to admit to anything so... pragmatic. She exchanged a fleeting look with Yolani before looking back to Darius.

“Treating gratitude as currency doesn’t inspire trust in you. Your leader wasn’t a very good man,” Elania accused.

She watched the tension appear on Darius’ face at the mention of the false Magister. “Relain’s methods didn’t represent the Black Candle, although his intentions were in the right place.”



“Intentions? I distinctly recall my arrival. War with the Overworld? Seriously, what is your angle?” Elania demanded.

Darius raised his chin. “I intend to save this city. From the elements tearing it apart from within, and from those who seek its ruin from above.”

“That sounds great, but how about some specifics? Otherwise, that’s just a load of bullshit,” Elania said harshly. The entire gathering tensed up at her tone, and even Yolani shot her a worried glance. It didn’t change anything, though.

“The Lightbringer order has been infiltrating Neftasu’s high-society and nobility for years. In the last few months, those efforts have sprawled into blatantly sowing discontent and preparing the groundwork for an invasion. The Archdiocese of Tiara is only too happy to assist them. They’ve always had a need for an external threat, and Neftasu makes a perfect antagonist for them.”

Elania blinked. She’d heard of the Lightbringer Order. Paladin Anton had made sure of that. But Archdiocese of Tiara? Her limited knowledge of geography was biting her in the ass. Just learning about the various districts of the city had been a pain. Weren’t they buried a million miles underground? “I don’t know much about the overworld,” Elania admitted. “So, this Tiara is the cause of it all?”

Darius shook his head. “The Empire’s apathy has waxed and waned for decades, but their fascination with artifice and the demonic has evaporated with the new emperor. Before their protection was an ironclad guarantee that the city would be left alone.”

He took a breath and continued, “Now all their attention is to the east—on Contia, where they continue to wage war with the city-state. This has bankrupted them, and Neftasu is a place of riches. It’s likely any move made on the city will be done with the Empire’s blessing only via an extravagant share of the spoils.”

“You’re saying there’s danger of an invasion? The Magisters don’t seem to be aware of any such thing, and they’ve been doing their best to reform things,” Elania countered.

Darius bit back a flash of anger before relaxing and then laughing. “Ah, yes. The Magisters. They are the ones who have caused all of this in the first place. With hundreds of years of rule, they have decided—or been forced—to attempt to clean up the rot at the last hour.”

He paused and shook his head. “Well, it’s too late. Before there was an uneasy peace because it was too difficult to reach Neftasu. Whatever events caused the shakeup, the Lightbringer’s spies have descended in force, and the preparation for invasion has already begun.”

Yolani finally spoke up. “Forgive me for being skeptical, but why wouldn’t the Magisters know about such a thing if it is already going on?”

Darius’s eyes held a spark of frustration. “The Magisters are ensnared in webs of their own making, blinded by their own bubbles and internal politics to see the storm gathering beyond their borders.”

Elania grunted. That... didn’t seem impossible, actually. Especially considering the earlier meeting with Bannon. There was still one major thing she wanted to address, though.

“Why did you send me a box of mana shards yesterday?” Her question was pointed.

The frown on Darius’s face deepened. “We did not send any such thing,” he stated bluntly. “We lost all the mana shards gathered for the bishop when the Lightbringer destroyed our base.”

Yolani interjected, pulling out the box of shards from her bag. “A cultist claiming to be from the Black Candle delivered them to our shop. We have the box to prove it.”

It clicked open and the sparkling treasures inside filled the shanty building with a brighter light, casting the occupants in stark relief against the shadows.

There was a moment of silence, and then raised voices raised a commotion in the distance. Shouts echoed behind them, and a cultist burst into the meeting area, the man breathless and wide-eyed. “The Guard! They’re coming down into the sewers after the people who escape!”

Darius’s reaction was immediate, his voice cutting through the panicked murmurs around the table. “Time to pack up. Gather everything and get ready to move.”

Elania exchanged another glance with Yolani. It was a pain in the ass that they couldn’t talk freely. Should they wait for the guard? Hold the cultists here? All of that seemed ridiculous.

“We don’t want anything to do you with your revolution, or whatever it is,” Elania stated firmly and loud enough to draw back Darius’ attention. Yolani nodded slightly, siding with her decision.

Darius shot her a look that was both dismissive and relieved. “Just because the previous leader thought you were some savior, doesn’t mean you’re anything special,” he retorted. He turned to Ralei and Fink and waved them over. “Get them out of here,” he instructed.

He turned away and began to focus on directing the evacuation, paying the two of them no more mind.

Elania’s eye twitched. She wanted to hiss at him. Yolani’s hand on her shoulder was enough to calm her down, and the four of them headed out.

Ralei looked at her. “It’s our purpose to help the people.”

“Relain and his cultists caused the mana shard crisis, and for Elania being summoned. Forgive us if we are skeptical of your purpose,” Yolani replied.

“Let’s just hurry. There’s only so many ways out that won’t lead to somewhere watched,” Fink answered.

Elania bit her lip as the two cultists led them through the maze of tunnels, an unwelcome reminder of her early days in Neftasu. She couldn’t shake the memory of disdain that had laced Darius’s words, and it felt like they had been left with more questions than answers.

She didn’t think the Guard would hurt her or Yolani, but the prospect of having to return to the Headquarters and answer just what they had been doing talking to the cultists felt like enough of a reason to get out before they were found.

The prepared torches ran out, and Elania sparked her light ball again for the others. The murk seemed to close in as the tunnels became more narrow away from the primary avenues. That was mostly a good sign she thought—that meant they were getting further away from the central square.

Ralei slowed down to a halt as they rounded a corner. “There should be guide torches here.”

Fink grunted. “Maybe they went out? Rivet was watching this section and taking those who needed to get to the Artisan district...”

The hairs on the back of Elania’s neck suddenly stood up. Her **[Darkwalker]** instincts began to scream at her all at once, and she looped an arm around Yolani and jumped away from where they had been standing.

The other girl’s yelp came in reply a second before a metal shriek and then a wet gurgle and thud erupted. Elania caught herself on the balls of her feet, while Yolani scampered to regain her footing as a splash in the watery muck sent filth flinging everywhere.

Two red eyes filled the darkness, standing over the two headless bodies of Ralei and Fink.

“I ate all of them. Teeheehee.”

**[Filth Eater - Lesser Demon - Level 558]**

# CHAPTER 7 - SHADOW OF THE PAST

A low hiss of delight slithered out of the shadow, the teeth of a monster coming into clearer view. The red eyes belonged to a demon they both believed to be dead, the same Tessa who had once served under Magister Relain.

Elania's light orb winked out as the other demon's aura flickered into existence, coating the area in a sense of dread. It wasn't strong enough to affect her directly, but her own aura snapped into existence almost instinctively.

## **[Demonic Aura (Activated)]**

As soon as it was in place, Elania spread it wide enough to cover Yolani, too.

"You smell different," Tessa accused, licking one of her long fingers. The digit lengthened rapidly, turning into a terrifying length of clawed bone before the rest of her fingers followed suit. "I finally got to choose my own perks. Teehee. No more master."

Yolani straightened up, wand in hand, little crystals on her outfit and accessories flaring to life as she readied herself for combat.

Elania glanced at her long enough to get a confirming nod before focusing on the demoness in front of them fully, keeping her stance loose and ready. “Leave us alone, Tessa.”

“I’ve been ever so lonely,” Tessa lamented, her tone dripping with mock sorrow. “What took you so long to visit me?”

Releasing a surge of **[Power]** into her **[Demonic Aura]**, Elania forced it through the thinner aura Tessa was projecting.

The demoness hissed at her. “You feel wrong. Not like me. Not like the others. What did they do to you?”

“I’m nothing like you. If you want to fight again, this time we will take you down. I don’t need a holy sword to do that anymore,” Elania warned.

Tessa’s form shifted in the dim light, becoming a blur of movement as she launched herself at a wall, landing feet first on it to spring toward Yolani.

Elania acted on instinct, her body coiling and then springing sideways to meet the attack head-on. She was faster.

Tessa’s clawed hands swiped inward toward Elania’s face, but she slipped inside the attack as they flashed towards one another. Elania’s hand caught the other demon on the forehead. The wave of momentum cracked in the air as her forearm absorbed and brought Tessa to a halt mid-air.

Then she slammed her face first into the muck.

A slash raked her leg and Tessa rolled away and sprang back out of reach, her face and teeth a mangled mess. A flare of red light surged from her skin and then the wounds began to mend themselves as fast as the claw marks on Elania’s side did.

“She has **[Regeneration]** now,” Yolani shouted.

Elania blinked in shock. So far, she'd never encountered anything that healed just like her. Her first perk had been a blessing, even if it didn't nullify the pain.

That was fine. Pain was survivable, and she had built a tolerance to it; death was more permanent.

The glee and sudden eruption of laughter from Tessa was nearly horrifying. She seemed to enjoy the pain and damage.

"If I eat your toy, will it fix your eyes?" Tessa asked cheerfully. "I'll free you and we can be friends!"

Tessa lunged again, her mouth opened wide to reveal her rows of triangular teeth. This time, she was prepared for the attack. Instead of meeting it with a normal punch, Elania focused her **[Power]** into her fist and threw it with a punch.

The bolt of power surged forward like a bullet, heat energy searing the air as it flew. Tessa managed to roll around it, but her outfit combusted as it only missed by inches. The now burning demon crashed into her and they went rolling in the muck.

Claws flew, but the raking injuries paled compared to the loud thuds of Elania's kicks and punches. A solid connection from her knee sent Tessa flying into the sewer's ceiling with a brick shattering crack. Spiderwebs formed as the construction protested and dust and crumbling rock fell to join the nasty muck below.

Tessa's shriek hinted she wasn't dead. Elania pulled another bolt of power to throw into her while she was embedded in the roof. The strike missed as Tessa pushed off and jumped away just in time.

Straight for Yolani.

A surge of panic filled Elania as she realized the other demon's trajectory. Pivoting, she turned and jumped to try to intercept, but she was out of position.



Tessa reached claw-range and raised her arm to swipe at the artificer girl.

“No!” Elania shouted.

There was a giggling glee as the claws came down.

Right up until the point they snagged in the air on an invisible obstruction. Tessa’s claws flexed backwards from the strength of her blow on the solid wall of air.

Yolani, who had been still and quiet, raised her wand that she’d kept lowered. The mana crystal embedded in its tip had been emitting a steady glow the entire time.

“You shouldn’t give an artificer a lot of build-up time then crash into her wards,” Yolani said, staring into Tessa’s eyes with an icy disdain.

“Wind Threads—Encasement.” The words were spoken calmly, but the effects were anything but.

Tessa shrieked while kicking and slashing like a rabid animal. Glowing lines filled the tunnel to wrap themselves around the resisting demon, pulling her slowly to the wall before wrapping her in a cocoon. With the leverage of the wall available, the demoness kicked off, propelling herself halfway back toward Yolani with a screech.

The magical threads stretched, but then rubber banded Tessa back. A second kick off only gained her half the distance of the first, and a third barely moved her a few feet before clamping her to the stone. Feet and claws stuck out, writhing as they tried to work themselves free.

A sudden surge in Tessa’s aura preceded a red glow around her skin. Elania could feel the power spiking—it was something she was used to doing herself. Coat the body in enough power and you could disrupt magic or melt stone if you weren’t worried about some self-destruction.

Jumping up beside the trapped demon, Elania focused a large chunk of **[Power]** and slammed it into Tessa's stomach.

The wisps of artifice magic tickled her hand as it cut through them, as soon as her knuckles met flesh she released the charge, blowing out Tessa's stomach and cratering the sewer tunnel's wall.

Blood spewed from her mouth all over Elania's face and clothes, but it burned away into energy motes as the other demon's essence collided with her own. The building power dissipated immediately, and the hostile aura winked out.

"How much **[Power]** did you burn?" Yolani asked pointedly, staring at Elania.

**[Power: 1205/1503]**

Elania laughed weakly. "Uhm. About three-hundred."

Yolani grunted and shook her head. "We need to do more efficiency drills."

Tessa's middle began to put itself back together, and when her lungs finally knitted back together, she let out a snarl, but her fight against the bindings was weak. Yolani held up a stick that glowed orange when she pointed it at the demon. "Her **[Power]** level is below 20% so I don't think her capacity is nearly as high as yours."

"What...what are we going to do with her? We can't just let her roam around the sewers eating people," Elania said. A thread of panic ran through her as she considered just... making the problem disappear. Worse, there was a hungry feeling that she recognized from her **[Darkwalker]** affinity...

Tessa would make a good snack. She shoved it down hard before looking to Yolani for guidance.

Why did they have to end up in the fucking sewer again?

“The binding won’t last long,” Yolani said. A frown crossed her face, and she seemed just as at a loss for what to do. “I don’t have anything good for binding or knocking her out.”

“I won’t be a slave! I won’t! Won’t!” Tessa screeched loudly, her words turning into a cacophony.

Elania glared at her. The desire to slap the other demon silent pricked a guilty feeling in her chest. What horrors had she experienced that could have been her own if things had panned out differently? She cleared her throat.

“Tessa. Could you please stop screaming so we can talk?” Elania asked as politely as possible, considering the circumstances.

The demoness went silent immediately, staring at her with two large terrified red eyes.

“We don’t want to make you a slave,” Yolani added.

Tessa’s eyes jerked at the artificer, and then she started screaming again.

Elania and Yolani exchanged a fraught glance. They needed to handle the demoness somehow without resorting to something they’d regret later. But they couldn’t just let the danger go, either. No matter how they cut it, they needed help.

Before they could figure it out, the atmosphere shifted, and Tessa went silent again.

A strange aura flared, washing over Elania and sending a shiver through her spine. It was a pressure she had felt before—something tinged with holy magic. It left an unpleasant taste in her mouth, like a dirty, thinner version of the Celestial Engine’s energy.

Golden motes of light began to fill the tunnel, coalescing in the air. A chanted hum filled the air and then all the energy collapsed inwards with an inexorable force—straight towards her. Instinctively, Elania

channeled her **[Power]** into her hands and held them out to form a bubble around her, shaping it with her **[Demonic Aura]**.

She was just in time as the golden energy tried to squeeze her shell like the fist of an angry god.

It didn't seem to affect Yolani, and she reacted immediately. Pulling out an orb, she tapped it with her wand before drawing several symbols in the air that shimmered in a blue-green hue. Blue motes began to form in the air, and once there were enough of them, they formed a bubble.

The gold motes crushing Elania suddenly evaporated and began to reform outside the blue orb surrounding them. The pressure disappeared, and she dissolved the aura guided shield around her to save on **[Power]**.

“What was that?” Elania asked. Something about the energy had felt familiar, and not in a good way.

Yolani was digging in her bag for something as she answered. “Bad news. Conclave.”

That was all the other girl needed to say. The word was like a punch to the gut. Conclave.

Joren. Taniel. The Monks. Their journey to Neftasu together...Marcus. Not good memories.

That was why the energy trying to crush her had been familiar; it was the same holy magic that Taniel and Joren had used when they had fought together against the **[Rockbear]** and **[Alpha Ralfot]**.

As if summoned by her thoughts, a figure stepped out from behind a corner, his presence and form unmistakable in the sewer's dim light. Taniel, who had never failed to make his disdain for her known, led a cadre of four other monks toward them. Their eyes were fixed on her and Tessa, expressions unreadable as they advanced with measured steps.

**[Martial Monk - Human - Lvl 166]**

The other four were lower leveled, and two were classed as **[Spiritual Monk]** like Joren had been. The levels were less worrying than the fact there were five of them.

“Taniel. What’s the meaning of this?” Elania’s voice was a low growl, her golden eyes narrowing as she regarded the approaching threat. “You attacked us.”

“We sensed a surge of demonic energy,” Taniel replied, his tone neither accusing nor forgiving. “We’ve been hunting the thing slaughtering people in the districts.”

“Seems you’ve been doing a piss-poor job considering this one’s been out for months,” Elania shot back acidly.

Taniel’s gaze slid to Tessa, who had gone silent, hanging from the cocoon of magic threads. “And what do you know about it?”

“She was False Magister Relain’s demon,” Yolani interjected. “She attacked us while we were escaping from the riot in the square.”

“So, you had something to do with that as well?” Taniel asked. The other monks took up formation beside him, all of them coming to a stop at the edge of the sparkling blue barrier.

Yolani’s grip tightened on her wand, her eyes darting between Elania and the monks. “We were meeting with Magister Bannon and were accosted on the way home. We have nothing to do with her or the riot.”

Taniel snorted. “Artificer, we have no quarrel with you. Leave here and we’ll take care of the demons.”

Elania felt a slight surge of panic that quickly disappeared as Yolani squared her shoulders.

“You can have Tessa, but Elania has done nothing wrong and is contracted to me and important to the Magistry. You can’t have her,” Yolani declared.

Taniel’s eyes locked onto hers. “There are five of us and two of you.”

The four monks behind him suddenly raised their hands and began chanting over some beads.

Elania reacted instantly as Yolani suddenly turned toward her and threw her a rock.

Catching it seemed like the smart thing to do, even though she had no idea what it was until she looked at it in her hand. Warmth filled her palm in a steady, familiar spread. It was one of the mana shards!

A grin spread on her face as she pointed the stone directly at Taniel. “Your army is too small, asshole.”

# CHAPTER 8 - SEWER CLASH

The mana shard pulsed with a vibrant energy in Elania's palm, a warm glow that awaited her control and offered her a large amount of power. She took a full pull on it, recharging her personal reserves to maximum.

A grim look appeared on the monks as they advanced, their staves alive with a silver gleam that sparkled in the mystical light provided by Yolani's aura suppression ward and the mana shard's light. Concentrating on the stone, she pulled the energy out and shaped it with her will.

An ethereal fire flared around her hand, resembling the flickering memory of Eziel, the once holy sword that had been devoured by the Celestial Engine.

The energetic flickers of the divine flames radiated light and power. It filled the air around her, and Elania could feel and taste the difference of the energy. If the monk's holy spells were slightly off, cold, and dirty, this was pure, unadulterated warmth.

Taniel did not care or show any signs of hesitation, leading the charge, his face a mask of determination. His two brethren closed the distance with him, their staves held out before them.

Elania's eyes flickered to Yolani, seeking confirmation. "Fight?"

Yolani's was set firm, an unwavering gaze meeting Elania. "When did we ever back down before?"

Elania nodded. That was true, although she wished people would just... leave them the fuck alone?

The two prayer monks in the back began to chant into prayer beads clutched in their hands. A golden glow appeared around them, forming into two large golden bells. The first one finished his words and the magical construction flashed forward like a missile, slamming into Yolani's blue artifice field. The blue magic flickered under the pressure.

Then Taniel reached the field and slammed his silver staff into the shimmering energy. The air seemed to crack as blue lines formed, then shattered in the air.

The icky aura feeling pressed down on Elania again. She reacted instinctively by drawing deeply on the mana shard, funneling the raw **[Power]** into her **[Demonic Aura]**, pushing it outward into an enormous bubble. She made sure it spread wide enough to cover Yolani as well. The other girl shot her an appreciative glance, but there was no time to talk.

Taniel took a swipe at her aura with his staff, but it passed through without disrupting it, being more flexible and organic compared to the solid artifice ward. The prayer monk's sweat dripped down his face as he redoubled his effort only to find that it applied more pressure, but little else.

A second dharma bell formed around the other prayer monk, crashing forward like a raging bull. It didn't clash with Elania's aura



like it had the artifice barrier, and the speed of the rush only gave her a second to raise her mana shard sword and swing downward in a heavy arc.

The sudden flood of **[Power]** rushing through her hand sent her heart pounding in her chest. Her golden blade left a crescent-shaped arc flinging itself toward the incoming bell. The collision sent out a shockwave, obliterating the bell and carving a deep gouge through the sewer's floor and ceiling. Murky water fell into the hole immediately, only to explode outward in a foul steam, clouding everyone's view and filling the air with a stench.

Elania wrinkled her nose. She didn't need sight or smell to sense her enemies anymore. She could feel them through her **[Mana Manipulation]**. Their essence stood out and called to her, a beacon in the haze. She lunged through the steam, taking advantage of the cloud, beelining straight for Taniel.

Before she could swing, his staff lashed out for her head, but she parried it, the clash of their weapons sending a spray of silver and gold-colored sparks flaring through the mist.

She counterattacked immediately, her blade slashing in a diagonal strike. He ducked under it, but the energy wave that erupted from the unmet slash hissed through the air and slammed into the monk behind him. The man barely interposed his staff, and the force of the impact sent him careening into the wall with a bone-jarring thud.

A third holy bell sliced through the steam without warning, straight for Yolani. But her friend was ready; a blue spiderweb field snapped into existence, meeting the bell in a cacophony of energy. The two constructions canceled each other out in a brilliant flash lit up the gloomy fog filling the sewer.

Yolani's reply was ready a second later, green bolts forming in the air around her wand before erupting forward in a continuous volley

like a machine gun. The prayer monks were forced to dodge and break up their casting, while Taniel raised his staff and spun it in the air, deflecting the projectiles in a chaotic rain that sent them hurdling randomly through the air.

Several slammed into the ceiling, causing dangerous looking plumes of dirt and rock to fall, while others streaked down the sewer into the darkness to terminate in the wall or floor.

The single martial monk supporting Taniel caught a bolt in the face. He was sent reeling backwards, colliding with one of the prayer monks. The aura pressure Elania felt reduced in half instantly. That was good, because holding it back with her own aura had been draining a lot of power.

Seizing the moment, she renewed her assault, golden energy sword flaring with power as she pulled over half the remaining energy from the mana shard. He moved to block, his staff positioned to block the downward chop squarely. But she focused on the impact, willing the blade to flow around the staff and phase right through the weapon.

The blade connected with his chest, but the outcome was not as she expected. His robe flared with a brilliant blue light as the golden energy seared it. Her **[Power]** dissipated as it flowed around him harmlessly. Several of his golden bracelets and trinkets suddenly flared with light and dissolved into the air like mist.

She blinked in shock at the failure to hurt him.

His counterattack came swift and hard. His staff came down and struck her shoulder with a bone-jarring impact, followed by a second hit to her stomach that knocked the wind from her lungs, sending her staggering backwards.

A sweep knocked away her footing, and she stumbled onto the ground, scrambling backwards in a panic as he loomed over her, raising his staff for a finishing strike.

“Elania!” Yolani’s voice pierced through the chaos, laced with concern.

Despite the hits, her power hadn’t really been knocked down much. More worrying was that she’d somehow lost the mana shard. Raising her foot, she pushed a chunk of fifty power into her foot and slammed it heel first into the ground in front of her.

Stones flew up in an explosion, forcing Taniel back as she got back onto her feet. Yolani gestured to her and Elania made it to the other girl’s side in a jump. “What’s the plan?”

Yolani pulled out a black orb. “Shove 146 **[Power]** into this and then throw it at them.”

Elania took the item. The heft was considerable. Was it solid metal? There were little ridges built into the casing, and the resemblance to a grenade was remarkable.

Wait.

Hadn’t she given Yolani the idea when they had been discussing firearms? “When did you make this?”

“It was just a side project! They are getting back up!” Yolani hissed at her.

Not one to argue, Elania gauged the distance before dumping the power into the thing and then tossing it at the prayer monks that were clustered together, trying to help their companion out of the muck.

Taniel reached out with his staff, intercepting the orb.

That was, apparently, the wrong thing to do.

It violently exploded into a spray of shrapnel that continued with the momentum of her throw. Metal shards stabbed into the monks, dozens of shards punching through them and pelting the ground and area where they had been.

They were clearly dead, the prayer monk decapitated.

She braced herself for the incoming kill message and karma adjustment, but it didn't come. She blinked, confused for a second until she saw the color drain from Taniel's face.

Oh.

He'd hit the bomb thing before it had exploded. He'd been credited with the kills.

Wow.

That probably sucked for him. Didn't he need positive karma for his icky holy skill or something?

He was distracted long enough that she was able to find the dropped mana shard and reclaim it.

The monk turned a darkened expression on her as she brought the energy blade of the shard back to life and stepped between him and Yolani. "What? You attacked us. I don't even think it's unfair to say that you killed them."

His face contorted into an apoplectic stare before he screamed at her. "Demon!"

She parried his first swing with the staff, then ducked a blow. Taniel started to take a second swing at her when an air blast flashed in from the side. He blocked it, but it gave Elania time to strike for a leg. He parried just in time, only for another air blast to come from the other direction.

The rapid flurry of Yolani's castings and her strikes pushed him back further and further. A strike from her sword went home, exploding more of his anti-magic trinkets. Elania recognized how they worked; they were the same type that Yolani used.

Each hit was wearing down his defense fast. Desperation appeared on his face.

Before she found a final opening, he threw his staff into her face. She batted it away, but his hands snapped together and he began to

recite a chantra. She made to strike him down anyway, but a golden wall appeared, knocking back her energy blade and mana shard and knocking into her.

Elania flipped end over end through the air, but landed agilely on her feet, then moved protectively to place herself in line with Yolani.

Taniel reached out and his silver staff hovered in the air and returned to his hand. He started to chant again when there was an insane cackle from the side.

“Teeheehee. Three! There are Three and Five!” Tessa screeched. Every eye darted to her as she tore out the throat of the monk that had been slammed into the wall. The other monk that had been knocked unconscious nearby was already dissolving into light motes.

Everyone had forgotten about the real insane demoness during the engagement.

“No!” Taniel shouted. He moved to attack the disheveled demoness maid, but her fingers plunged into the dying monk’s chest, then ripped them free with the meat of the man’s insides. He began to dissolve rapidly into energy that went straight to Tessa.

The maniacal demoness jumped upward and somehow attached to the ceiling, then began to crawl rapidly away. Taniel’s rage was divided, before he moved to chase after her.

Was he stupid? From what she had seen, Tessa was more likely to gut him than the other way around. Elania stepped back closer to Yolani and the other girl’s hand settled on her shoulder while her other handheld her combat wand tightly.

Taniel glanced at them with a snarl. “This isn’t over.”

A cold calculation ran through her head, one that she’d never have considered back on Earth. Would it be better to end him here and now? Something in the back of her mind told her: Yes, for sure. Safer

for her, safer for Yolani, no witnesses. A set of dead conclave monks against her and Yolani's word backed by the Magisters.

It would be easy.

The choice was stolen from her when the ceiling suddenly melted, cutting Taniel off. Stone and brick fell in a sudden slurry of melted stone as a glowing figure in black robes floated down gently, landing on suddenly formed dry platform.

Elania recognized the woman. It was Keswick, Magister of the City Works.

**[Arch Magus - Human - Level 677]**

Yolani's hand on her shoulder tightened, and Elania could sense a tenseness in the other girl. It was one that was mirrored in herself.

Messing with Magisters was bad news.

And the state of the sewer due to the fight... she felt she had a good idea of why and how the Magister had found them.

The woman's eyes landed straight on Elania and Yolani. "You."

There was an awkward silence as Taniel got back onto his feet and cursed, trying to slip by after Tessa. A gesture from the woman pinned him to the wall, cutting through his wards and gluing him in a holding of stone.

"What are you doing?" The woman demanded. It wasn't exactly clear who she was asking.

But... at least she was on their side, right?

The gears in Elania's head turned rapidly.

She would be, if Bannon's earlier words were true, and she wanted her help with the Celestial Engine, anyway.

# CHAPTER 9 - CITY WORKS AND DEEP THOUGHTS

**M**agister Keswick's magic was a spectacle that both Elania and Yolani could only watch in awe. With a flourish of a hand, the Arch Magus summoned forth a diffuse cloud of light. It spread out to cover everything, and the sewer tunnel began to transform before their eyes.

The raw sewage and detritus that coated the walls and floor dissolved away. Even the murky water that had flowed sluggishly through the central channel clarified until it was crystal clear, reflecting the light of the spell filling the space.

Bricks and stones that had crumbled knitted themselves back together on their own. Elania recalled back when the monks had worked to repair a way station that had been damaged, using similar magic.

But this was on a whole new scale as it worked rapidly, spreading down both ends of the tunnel.

The platform Keswick stood on gracefully lowered itself while extending its length into a bridge of elegant marble, creating a new crossing over the water channel. The gouges and damage that had just occurred during the fighting filled in on its own, and new arches formed to brace the ceiling.

Above them, the gaping hole that had appeared for Keswick's descent closed up slowly before the form of a ladder was created and the hole was turned into a new entry point for the sewer.

Throughout the transformation, Taniel struggled against his earthen bindings, his face a mixture of fury and disbelief. When Keswick turned her sharp gaze upon him, he stilled and looked away, the rage in his eyes snuffed out by the Magister's presence.

Elania's spine prickled when the woman turned it upon Yolani and her.

"And I ask again," Keswick's voice echoed in the now pristine tunnel, "what is going on here?"

Elania glanced to Yolani, who met her gaze with a nod before stepping forward, taking the lead in their response.

"Magister Keswick," Yolani began, her voice steady despite the all to recent violence that had occurred. "We had a meeting with Magister Bannon earlier today. Upon our return, we were caught up in the riot at the central square."

Elania listened carefully and watched as Yolani continued to weave the events in the sewer into an ordered timeline. She omitted nothing, including their interactions with Darius and the cultists, their engagement with Tessa, and finally the monks deciding to attack them. The truth was a solid thing that needed no embellishment.



Keswick listened intently, her expression unreadable. Elania tensed up, unsure of where they stood with the Magister. Her hand itched where the mana shard remained in her grasp, its power stores mostly depleted.

When Yolani finished recounting their ordeal, they both waited, the silence stretching between them and the Magister. Keswick's eyes flickered between them, as if considering the weight of Yolani's words. She finally looked over at Taniel.

"Is this true? You attacked them while hunting for the rogue demon?" Keswick demanded.

Taniel's anger still burned in his eyes, a rage that easily found its voice once he was directly questioned. "They caused four of my brothers to perish," he spat, nodding toward Elania. "She murdered before, killing her own traveling companion. They helped the demon escape by not surrender—"

His words were cut short as Magister Keswick's face contorted with displeasure. "Silence," she commanded, her voice resonating with the hum of power that seemed to ripple through the stonework of the transformed sewer. "You are responsible, Taniel. Your obsession with this 'demon' allowed a genuine threat to remain roaming hidden beneath our city. Or do you dispute the fact that they had already disabled and disarmed it when you came upon them? They essentially did your work for you, and you threw it away because of your own personal grievances. Now many more may die."

Taniel's jaw clenched tightly, his eyes boring into Keswick that was palpable. A mutter under his breath triggered a sudden muddy rope to wrap around his face, gagging him.

"Your blind zealotry led to the deaths of your brothers," Keswick continued, her tone sharpening with each word. "Their blood is on your hands because of your actions, not hers." She nodded in Elania's

direction. “They’ve done nothing but help with the restoration of the city since Relain’s fall.”

A wall snapped into place, sealing him away. Keswick turned to focus on them. “I will deal with him and send a complaint to the Conclave when we are finished here,” she stated. A frown appeared on her face, her expression forming to contain a mix of reprimand and concern.

“Entering the sewers was reckless,” Keswick chided. “You should have sought the guard, or evacuated in a manner that didn’t leave you here.” Her gaze lingered on Elania. The tension in the air was palpable.

Elania’s frustration at the day’s events pushed their way through. “We wouldn’t even be down here if it wasn’t for the riot,” she snapped, her voice echoing off the newly marbled walls. Her golden eyes fixed Keswick with an unyielding stare. “You and the other Magisters were charged with fixing things! Everything seems to be going in the opposite direction!”

Keswick grunted, slightly taken aback by Elania’s words. It was obvious that she wasn’t used to being talked back to. “Restoration efforts are underway,” she explained, her voice steady. “Crews have been assigned across the city for repairs, but the scale of the task is immense. It will take decades for them to do all the work needed.”

Elania bit back a retort that it was her fault, but throwing blame wasn’t the answer. Her gaze slid to the newly refurbished tunnel. “You have all this power, yet the city’s underbelly is a breeding ground for filth and cultists. You repaired this entire section in seconds, without a thought, simply because it was convenient to you. Why aren’t you going around to fix things personally? Isn’t it your duty?”

A flash of something crossed Keswick’s face, her composure momentarily slipping. The runic tattoo on her forehead glowed omi-

nously, and the Magister winced, though she tried to mask it. She offered no explanation, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“Take the ladder up and go home,” Keswick instructed, her voice carrying a finality that brooked no argument. “I will deal with this monk and his order, as well as see that no ill effects from your encounter fall on you.”

Yolani and Elania shared a glance, then nodded. That was all they had wanted to do in the first place... not run around the sewers like a bad first adventure mission in a stupid video game.

“Where are we?” Yolani asked.

“It leads up to the Artisan District, so you are not far,” Keswick replied curtly.

Elania nodded to Yolani, and then the two of them made their way to and up the ladder. It wasn't until they were halfway up that Elania realized her mistake in letting the other girl go first. The rest of the way up was spent blushing and doing her best to not look.

They emerged onto a non-busy street, the familiar hammering of forges nearby. No shouts filled the air, and the frantic steps of stressed pedestrians were absent. It was like the riot and the unrest in the square never existed and they'd arrived back to their usual haunt from an insane expedition.

Yolani took her hand and helped her stand up before they slid the round metal plate back into the ground. The white ring of stone around it stood out against the dirty cobble street.

“Do you... do you think she's going to be stuck down there refurbishing the sewers for a while?” Yolani asked.

Elania blinked, eyeing the new manhole. The geas tattoo on the Magister's forehead had begun to glow when it was mentioned... “You had that thought as well?”

They stared at each other for a second before a little wave of giggles escaped and they cracked up.

It was stupid, because they'd just been in a life-or-death battle, where four of the people they'd been fighting ended up dead, and it could have easily been them instead. But something in the other girl's eyes said that she needed the levity, to reduce the stress or just balance things out... and Elania realized she did as well.

The idea that the Magister, one of the most powerful people in the city, would be hand cleaning the entire sewer was ridiculous. Just as long as she didn't hold them personally responsible...

The sobering thought replayed itself several times through her head as they made their way to Artificer's Row. A group of familiar and worried faces were waiting for them. Henri and Harlock were arguing, and Lucas and Kael were standing watch at the main gate. Elania and Yolani both got a wave from them when they were spotted.

Henri and Harlock both noticed the gesture and their argument cut off, questions written plainly on the younger man's face.

Yolani lifted a hand, preemptively silencing any inquiries. "We're fine, Henri. Just a long day," she stated, her voice carrying a firmness that left no room for prying.

He looked ready to argue, but Harlock's hand on his shoulder, and a shake of the head stalled it. "Seems they've been through a mess, lad. Give them some time to unpack."

Elania looked down at her clothes. They were a bit torn and ragged from the fight. Yolani's outfit was less damaged, but the missing items in her wand belt hinted that she'd used up some of her supplies. It was almost surprising that the old mercenary had noticed, but she supposed he had a keen eye.

"Thank you. We'll talk to you tomorrow. We made it and just want to rest a bit," Elania added.

Yolani nodded, and they passed by up the street and to the shop. The refurbished Aetherhart Artifice sign greeted them, and the wards emitted a blue glow and hum as Yolani unsealed the premises and opened the door. Inside, it was just as they had left it in the morning.

That felt like it was much longer ago than it really had been.

Yolani pressed the door shut behind them and then sealed it with her security ward, the artifice suddenly sealing them away from the outside noise of the city. The quiet was jarring after the day's tumult.

They stood there in silence, the enormity of everything that had happened hanging between them like a tangible thing. Elania bit her lip. Where did they even start?

"It—" Elania started, but was cut off as Yolani spoke at the same time. "I—"

They looked at each other again for a second before Elania nodded. Yolani's face crumpled and she let out a sigh, the sound heavy. "It was a pretty shitty day," she declared, the attempt at levity falling flat.

Elania couldn't help but agree. "That's one way to put it," she agreed, shaking her head.

Yolani's lips turned into a weak smile. "How about some food? That might make us feel a bit better."

The mention of food caused Elania's stomach to growl. A blush lit up on her cheeks. "Yeah," she said with a bit more enthusiasm, "food sounds good."

Together they shed their gear, allowing the familiarity and safety of the shop to embrace them. The day's events receded ever so slightly as Elania tugged the mana crystal lamp on and Yolani disappeared into the kitchen section at the back of the workshop.

Elania, left alone with the gear, began to lay it out and sort the things that were fine and hadn't been used from the things that needed

tending. There were a lot of things that they'd used up in the fights. Especially from Yolani's bag.

She didn't really understand most of it. Her Rank D [**Artifice**] and the knowledge and insights Yolani had been teaching her were just enough to know what was broken and what probably wasn't.

The regular stuff was much easier to determine, and before Yolani came back, she was already at work with a sewing kit fixing a half dozen tears and holes in their cloaks that she hadn't even noticed had formed during the battle. The leather was a bit more complicated to repair, but there were replacement straps already available, so she just worked at re-doing those.

The damaged ones went into a giant pile of 'repairables' that would get sent out at some point. One nice thing about the artifice profession was that it paid well enough for them to hire out a lot of things for other skilled craftsmen to work on.

The work helped release the tenseness within her, one that she hadn't been able to shake. A dozen different thoughts wanted to wage war for her attention, but the focus pushed them away.

The difference in her life as a regular college student back in the USA was so foreign to everything that had happened to her since she'd arrived in Eladu. She had done so many things she could never have imagined thinking about, much less doing.

She'd someone. Multiple people.

The weird skills and effects from the [**System**] had dulled the effects dramatically. That explained her resilience and not falling apart. She'd kept [**Crisis Management**] slotted since Yolani had explained exactly how slotting skills affected their effectiveness.

[**Crisis Management**] was a common skill, and it explained a lot of the actions and personalities of people that she had met... but in her opinion, having half of people on a permanent dosage of [**System**]

approved mood drugs wasn't great. The other half were busy murdering each other, freaking out about demons, or... trying to overthrow the government?

Her shoulders slumped. Maybe she was way off base. Socio-economics, politics, and psychology were way beyond a clueless sophomore who still hadn't figured out what she had wanted to do.

She felt like she was stuck in a pirate den, or a character plucked from history and dropped into the brutal of medieval times. Well, she was not from Connecticut, and this was nothing like King Arthur's court.

And she had been changed.

It wasn't just the magic or demonic abilities—it was everything. The way she thought was frequently bombarded by **[Darkwalker]** instincts from the permanent affinity. From what she had learned, that wasn't reversible. At least not without replacing it with another permanent affinity for something else. The way she moved, the way she interacted with things, it was all tinted through what she absorbed.

As long as she didn't overindulge in any one **[Power]** source, it would remain diluted against her normal human and **[Darkwalker]** nature. Her contract with Yolani helped with that, feeding her a constant stream of human-ness, at the expense of the other girl's mana regeneration.

Elania let out a long sigh as she tidied up her workspace and their gear.

The transformation had come with a drifting sensation once things and life had settled down in Yolani's shop. A direction-less-ness that left her feeling adrift. Survival had been her primary goal for so long, and then doubled again with Yolani. They had both adamantly agreed that they just wanted to be left in peace, but...

But beyond that... what was there? It left her feeling lost in a way that was deeply personal. A loneliness that gnawed at her even in the company of others.

The smell of cooked meat wafted out of the kitchen, and Yolani returned bearing fried ham sandwiches, each with a seasoned potato, butter, and a jar of milk. "Dinner is ready!"

As Elania took the offered plate, their hands brushed in the exchange—a simple touch, but one that grounded her.

Lost, yes. She was lost in a foreign land that had become her new reality. But as she took a bite from the simple meal prepared by the one person who had been her friend since they had met, she mentally corrected herself.

Lost, but not alone.



# CHAPTER 10

## - GOLDEN

## DREAMS

The clatter of cutlery against plates filled the cleaned off worktable used as a dining spot as Elania and Yolani sat down to eat. The savory scent of the fried ham mixed with the appealing sight of the still steaming potatoes. She sliced a piece of butter and slathered it on them.

The milk was slightly more questionable—she had never drunk milk back on Earth much, but the **[Ralfot]** milk that came from the city's large stables was delivered everywhere. It was thick and creamy and... very fresh.

Thankfully, her hydration was provided for by **[Power]** innately. Technically, the meal was sort of a waste of food, since it really wouldn't sustain her much. She wasn't sure how much, but it did lower her maintenance requirements just a bit.

The morale factor of being able to eat something tasty, together with Yolani, couldn't be understated though.

She just had to watch out for accidentally sneaking into the cold box and eating raw steaks when Yolani wasn't looking.

They ate mostly in silence at first, the quiet only broken by the occasional satisfied sigh or the clink of their jars and cutlery. It wasn't until they were mostly done that Yolani finally spoke up, her voice tinged with curiosity and concern.

"What do you think they want you for at the Magistracy, with the Celestial Engine?" Yolani asked all of the sudden.

Elania blinked, then chewed thoughtfully for a moment before replying. "I guess it has something to do with the aftereffects of when I fell into it. Maybe they want to know if I remember anything? Or maybe they want to know more about how it changed me. Physically," she added, setting down her food and leaning back in her chair.

Yolani nodded, her gaze intensifying slightly. "Have you remembered anything else about it? Any new details?"

A grunt escaped Elania as she shook her head, frustration knitting her brows together. "Just weird dreams about floating in a golden cloud, feeling warm and fuzzy. Nothing concrete, nothing about when... the engine possessed me and flying around like a gold angelic warrior thing."

Yolani reached across the table, her touch gentle on Elania's hand. "It's okay. It was a traumatic experience. For everyone involved. I don't think anyone ever came out of it before, so we can just be thankful for... to Eziel for getting you out of it."

Elania's eyes narrowed. "I don't know. I still can't put together Eziel's... well... it tried to convince me to jump in alone in the first place. Making sure I didn't get digested in some magical divine machine seems like the least he could have done."

“True. I don’t think the Paladin Anton was thrilled when he left either,” Yolani said. “Probably best if we avoid him and the Light-bringers in the future.”

Elania frowned. “I didn’t think they were very common in the city?”

Yolani nodded. “That’s right, but sometimes they come down the main shaft from the surface. They don’t like that the city uses demonology and artifice to maintain itself.”

Elania bit her lip and nodded. “How are things going with the shop?” she asked, hoping to focus on something less stressful and more tangible... and within their control. It was a dumb question. She already knew how things were going, having been deeply involved in just about every step.

Still, Yolani seemed to understand the need to switch topics and smiled softly. “We’re doing well. We’ve had a lot of orders for smaller items come in, and now the large contract with the city guard should easily cover a month’s expenses. Our war chest hasn’t really gone down any, either. We have the six mana shards, plus three hundred some large golds stashed. It’s a good thing we have the warding repaired; I was starting to get nervous about having too much stuff unprotected...”

Elania listened carefully, her mind rolling over the other girl’s summary of things. Everything was, essentially, going extremely well as could be hoped. It cast the bumps and traumas from the day in stark contrast.

The conversation shifted to mundane things, inventory, plans for the shock crystal charging, what Elania knew about electricity, and weapon ideas. It felt a bit surreal to be describing artillery, bombs, mines, and other warfare stuff. And scary. Actually, maybe it was a bad idea?

Then again, there were already people walking around that could effectively create a magical disaster just by existing. She was one of them.

The idea of a hydropower plant that could reduce the **[Power]** consumption...and reliance on mana shards was something she could get fully behind though.

Plus...

Seeing Yolani's face light up in excitement as she explained 'weird' Earth-things made her feel good. Even if she didn't really have any concrete goals, at least she had a... utility?

The evening wore on quickly, exhaustion setting in rapidly after their plates were cleared. Elania felt like she could see her own weariness mirrored in the other girl's eyes.

"Maybe turning in early would be a good idea," Elania offered.

Yolani nodded, and they moved through their nightly routines in companionable silence, each lost in their own thoughts about the day's events.

The second bedroom that held Yolani's father's things was still a no-go zone, but the novelty of sharing the bedroom, and bed, with the other girl had worn off. Apparently, it wasn't uncommon in Nef-tasu for masters to share their beds with their servants—in a wholly platonic and non-sexual way.

Elania hurried and slid into the bed first, turning onto her side to put her back towards the other side of the bed. Her back was the safest thing to point in that direction since it hid her face, and Yolani, from view.

Sometimes entire families would all sleep in the same giant bed. It was much rarer for a household to have multiple bedrooms like the artificer shop had unless they were very wealthy.

It was certainly a surreal experience, and Elania wasn't sure she would ever get used to Yolani's random wild sleeping or snoring. But she did her best to treat it like what it was, and not what she wanted it to be.

Yolani wasn't far behind her and offered a friendly goodnight.

"Goodnight," Elania replied quietly.

They'd done the same thing ever since the shop had been repaired to a livable state. It wasn't long before Yolani's breathing deepened into the steady rhythm of sleep. Elania envied her that quick ability to fall asleep, even as she appreciated her friend's presence at her back.

Elania closed her eyes, willing sleep to come. She didn't have to wait long, the events of the day catching up with her finally.

The cavern dripped, creating small sounds that echoed far into distance tunnels. Elania's ears switched slightly, rotating like little radars as she napped on a comfortable rock. The cool cave air was otherwise still, with no hint of a breeze or blow that sometimes appeared.

A clapping noise whispered its way to her, and she slowly rose onto her paws. Her keen hearing zeroed in the direction and from her memory, she picked out the sound's location. A few more of the noises gave her a good idea of what it was as well: a small herd of cave **[Ralfot]**.

She jumped from her rock and began to pad her way to them. It was time to hunt.

The location wasn't far—it was a familiar place with a small pond. Her natural stealth allowed her to find a perfect vantage point on an outcropping that gave her a complete view of the herd. It contained a bull and three large females, all plump with young. Three older calves also drank at the pond's edge.

She watched.

The bull was large, and likely strong. He would defend his herd.

She did not feel hungry, and she enjoyed watching the beasts go about with their lives, unaware of her.

Elania blinked. The realization that she was dreaming hit her.

And she was definitely in her **[Darkwalker]** form again.

The realization was weird. If it was a dream, couldn't she do what she wanted?

Without thinking about it too hard, she was suddenly floating. Yes! She could fly!

A frantic cry from the Ralfots erupted almost immediately as they spotted her. She let out a laugh and floated over top of them as they formed a stampede and ran from the cave. She chased them a little. Not really intending to hunt them, but just as play.

Once they made it out of the cave, she turned and let them go before landing back down on the stony cavern floor. A sudden surge of anger and confusion hit her in the chest.

The prey escaped!

Her vision doubled and a suddenly painful sensation caused her to stagger. Pain. How could she have pain in a dream?

She raised up off her feet and brushed her trousers off with her hands while biting her lip in confusion.

Hands? She blinked as she looked at herself. She was wearing her normal outfit, plus she was distinctly human again.

A low growl from behind caused her to whirl about.

Two yellow feline eyes stared at her from chest height, set on the head of a massive **[Darkwalker]**. Its claws dug into the stone, and it leaned forward with a second low growl.

Elania blinked. Her claws. The **[Darkwalker]** was her. "We aren't hungry. We didn't need to hunt," she replied quietly.

There was another growl, but instead of feeling fear, Elania reached forward and stroked the Darkwalker's cheek fur. It went still but

didn't attack. Then she began to rub the back of its neck and behind its ears with both hands.

It sat and purred, so she gave it more strokes and petting, until finally it stood up and nipped her on the arm, flinging her onto its back.

Then they took off, romping through the caves. Elania couldn't hold back her laughs even as she clung to the fur to hold on.

They went far.

Too far.

They reached a cliff overlooking a giant golden machine that filled the gigantic cavern full of soft, glowing light. Before she could consider anything, her **[Darkwalker]** self-jumped into its maw.

She fell off her **[Darkwalker]** self's back, and it flipped around to stare at her.

Somehow, she could feel what it wanted to tell her.

This was her fault.

Elania's thoughts were a jumbled mess as she quietly slipped from beneath the shared warmth of the blankets, careful not to disturb Yolani as she escaped a misplaced leg. It was odd to be the one who woke up first.

The pre-dawn hush of the room provided a stillness that contrasted with the cacophony of the previous day's events, and as she changed out of her night shift in the dim light, the quiet seemed to amplify her thoughts rather than stifle them.

Tiptoeing down the stairs, her fingers trailed lightly along the banister, allowing her to feel the grooves and imperfections of the smooth stone. Some of those had been formed from the damage to the shop by the guard when it had been ransacked, but their hard-won battle to restore the shop had mostly fixed the worst offenders.

The memory of her dive into the Celestial Engine in her dream came to the forefront, but she really had no idea what it meant. It would have been easier to think about the Magisters and the city and the why of what they had done and were doing.

Which was to say, it was beyond her, unless she wanted to work herself into a pretzel.

What she needed was a shower. A hot one.

The tools and projects of the workshop lay dormant in the dim night lighting. Elania paused, her gaze sweeping over the organized chaos. There was a certain amount of solace to be found in Yolani's domain of creating magical things. There was a hidden madness to the way everything was ordered, which was the opposite of her own muddled, confused feelings.

Moving to the back workshop, she approached the custom-built shower that had been their first major repair project after fixing the front door. The contraption was something Yolani and her father had built, and while it looked a bit silly, it certainly worked as a shower.

The complex assembly of pipes, valves, and mana crystals worked in harmony to provide a hot shower, a cold one, an emergency decontamination drench, steamer, or even a water distillation machine. Elania allowed herself a small smile.

The only other options were renting an expensive room at a higher quality inn that provided a bathtub service, or the more commonly used communal baths of the Artisan District. She'd gone with Yolani to one, just out of curiosity, but the other girl had convinced her it was a bad idea.

They usually had a security guard, but that wasn't much promise of safety. And bad things did happen, even in the Artisan District.



It really took little convincing to steer her away from them, anyway. The only reason she'd wanted to see them was because of the novelty and how they had sounded like historical roman bathhouses.

Well, they fit her idea of those, except for the fact they were co-ed and people were having sex in the water when they had visited.

Elania flicked on the water heater, then watched as the crystals lit up with a faint glow underneath the tank.

Then she checked the adjustment valves to make sure they were just right in their familiar slots that would produce the perfect temperature mix for a shower without risking a scalding, or worse, triggering the emergency system.

As the water began to heat, Elania leaned against the cool stone wall, allowing herself a moment to just breathe. The sound of the water heating was a gentle rumble in the pipes.

After a moment, she began to undress, neatly stacking her outfit on a chair. Wearing the same outfit with just a change of small clothes every day was the standard unless something to really dirty like their outfits from the day before.

They'd need to do the laundry day thing early due to that, which was a lot of work.

A washing machine was on the list of things to work on. Then an air dryer.

A smile appeared on her lips. Maybe they could spend all their time recreating machines from Earth and make a fortune, plus help turn everyone's lives around for the better. Not everyone could afford to place mana crystals into everything, but if the city had cheap electricity from the waterfalls...

A little light flipped on, indicating the water was ready. She grabbed one of their bars of soap and flipped a lever.

A steamy stream of water fell into the contained area with the water drain, and Elania stepped into it. She embraced the heat and let her mind wander as she let herself run on autopilot in the simple cleansing ritual of a simple hot shower.

# CHAPTER II - GEARS AND GRATITUDE

Squeaky clean and relaxed from the heat of the shower, Elania felt a sense of renewal wash over her as the last droplets of water cascaded down her body. She shut off the shower, the steam lingering in the space like a comforting embrace for a few seconds longer before the vent fan sucked it away.

She let herself drip for a few seconds before stepping out and toweeling off with brisk, efficient motions. The shop was still silent, Yolani likely still cocooned in the soft clutches of sleep upstairs. There was something to be said about being the first one to wake up. The quiet solitude was refreshing.

A fresh set of the sports-like small clothes from Bella's tailor shop slipped on easily—a small luxury she appreciated. Bella, unlike many others, had never flinched at her lesser demon status. That had prompted pretty much her entire wardrobe to be bought from the shop.

The tunic and trousers went on next, and finally her green cloak got wrapped around her middle. At least until she felt the need to put it on to go outside.

Fully dressed, Elania placed her soiled small clothes in the basket designated for washing later. It was already nearly full of the sewer coated grime from the day before. There was a slightly musky odor that seemed to try to fight through the steamy remnants of her shower. Maybe she should ask Yolani to use her cleaning wand on the stuff, even if it was expensive.

It wasn't like they were doing badly, and skipping a laundry day didn't sound too bad.

She moved to the main workshop room and surveyed for a project that she could work on, something to keep her hands busy while waiting for Yolani to wake up. The way stone clock on her HUD reported it was really only a little after seven in the morning. Normally Yolani was up by eight, and then they opened the shop by ten.

There was a half-finished gadget she settled in front of. It was meant for gauging mana shard and crystal density, plus their charge levels. For those without **[Identify]** that was very useful. She'd been learning the basics of **[Artifice]** under Yolani's tutelage, and the little trinket required a lot of basic knowledge, so it was an ideal teaching tool.

Her eyes glazed over as she looked at it, though, maybe it was too early in the day to think about projects. She hadn't checked her **[Status]** in a while, so maybe now was a good time?

**[Status: Elania Reyes]**

**[Level 121 Lesser Demon (Ascendant)]**

**[Karma: 12243]**

**[Power: 1115/1526]**

**[Perks: (Soul Siphon - Visible) (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration) (Demonic Transformation)]**

**[Class: Artificer Shop Assistant]**

**[Skill Slots: 4]**

**[Slotted Skills: Improved 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 D), Enhanced Mana Sensing (Rank D), Elemental Affinity (Rank E), Presence Concealment (Rank D)]**

**[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 D), Negotiation (Rank B), Intimidation (Rank D), Bribery (Rank C), Basic Handcrafting (Rank D)]**

She'd been slacking off.

Other than the adventure to hunt down the Hornar spiders, she really had done little fighting. Until yesterday, that was.

She had mostly been focusing on learning things from Yolani and helping with the shop. It turned out that learning new skills became harder the more you had, and without her near cheat-like ability to just gobble skills from animals and monsters, she had gained little.

Well, they definitely needed to improve her fighting skills. The fight with Taniel proved that.

She should have easily bested him considering her massive **[Power]** capacity. Instead, he had not only been tougher than he looked, but he'd also nearly brained her with his staff.

A knock at the door jolted her back to reality. It was a steady, deliberate sound that spoke of purpose and an almost, but not quite there, urgency.

She hesitated, a frown creasing her brow. They rarely received visitors this early, especially without notice. After the events of the previous day, she felt a twinge of apprehension. She rose from her seat, then moved to the wall with the ready gear and replaced her cape-belt with her leather dagger harness.

Whoever it was that had chosen an odd time to call upon them... she was not in the mood for more surprises. There wasn't even a good way to check, but she'd ask Yolani to build a peep hole. She'd suggested it once before, but then had simply forgotten about it.

The wards wouldn't let anyone in without lowering them, even with the door open, but being able to look outside without going up to the second-floor balcony was something that should be installed by default.

Elania opened the door with care, her hand on her dagger hilt relaxing when Henri's dumb face greeted her.

"Henri," she said, her voice tinged with annoyance. "It's way too early for this."

Henri's expression was a mix of concern and official duty. "What happened yesterday? I had to bring the squad back to keep watch on you two."

Elania peered past him and sure enough, a squad of half a dozen city guards stood at attention along a wall, their presence a statement of the Magistracy's interest. She sighed, a frown forming. "They just stopped doing that a few weeks ago. Don't they have anything better to do?"

"What did you do, Elania?" Henri pressed.

Elania clicked her tongue before giving him a quick rundown of the riot, their encounter with Darius and the Black Candle, Tessa's

reappearance, and the skirmish with the Conclave monks. Henri's eyes widened with every word.

When his hand went to the doorframe, there was a sudden crackle of blue energy. Henri yelped, snatching his hand back as a small wisp of smoke rose from the singed fingers of his glove.

Elania raised an eyebrow. "Remember, the shop is warded, and Yolani is still asleep. After yesterday, I'm not waking her up for anything short of an invasion."

He bit his lip and frowned. "Right. Sorry. I was just a bit shocked and worried about—"

Elania cut him off. "—worried about Yolani. Right. I think it would cause her more distress if you suddenly appeared standing above her bed while she's asleep."

He winced and nodded.

"Take your squad and do something useful," Elania suggested. "We're fine here, and we'll reach out if we need anything."

"We'll just be around outside, patrolling. We don't really have much choice in this. Orders from on high and all," Henri said with a tinge of apology coming through his voice.

Elania sighed and shrugged. "Sure, knock yourselves out. I'm going back inside unless there was anything else?"

He shook his head, and she gave him a respectful nod before shooting the door with a soft click, locking it behind her.

Yolani was down a minute later, her raven black hair a tangled mess. Her eyes were still full of sleep and she rubbed one of them. She gave Elania a frown. "Who 'as that?"

"Henri. They sent a bunch of goons to watch us again," Elania replied.

The other girl stopped and frowned, processing that for a second. She skipped past it, though, to another question. "You're already

awake?” A yawn punctuated the question as she ran a hand through her hair in a futile attempt to tame the mess.

Elania nodded. “I couldn’t sleep in. Had too much energy, I guess. Do you want me to put breakfast on while you freshen up?”

Yolani’s face morphed into a smile. “Yes, please!”

A little thrill ran through Elania, and they separated. The water system wasn’t really connected, so she didn’t have to worry about running the kitchen water or the Geru brew messing with Yolani’s shower time.

By the time Yolani reappeared, the small dining table they used was already set with a pair of plates holding two slices of toast, two fried eggs over easy and some of the coffee-substitute.

“Yay. Thank you. This looks great,” Yolani said with a smile.

As they settled down, Elania reached for her cup, cradling it between her hands. She took a cautious sip, letting the rich, earthy flavor of the slightly bitter Geru brew add a little caffeine to her system.

“I don’t like that they sent more men to watch us. Even if they are probably there to protect us... it feels like we’re being spied on again,” Yolani said before dipping her toast into an egg yolk.

Elania nodded. “I guess after yesterday, it’s not a surprise.”

Their breakfast finished with some small talk. When they were nearly done, Yolani’s tone shifted to business. “Elania, could you make a run to another artifice shop after this? There is a crate that should be ready for us.”

“Sure,” Elania agreed without hesitation. “Mira and Finn’s place?”

Yolani nodded, finishing her toast with a last bite. “Yes, there are some machined parts I ordered from them. Should be ready by now.”

Elania pushed back from the table, ready to get started. She already had her cape and belt dagger, so she moved to the mana shard board. It was a handy place they’d decided to keep their main shards, so they



didn't get lost. There were five of them now, four shining brightly, while the fifth that had been used the day before was almost burnt out.

A frown creased her face as she looked at it. "Looks like we're going to have to send for a lot more chickens to recharge this one," she muttered.

"I'll put an order in for another wagon," Yolani replied.

Elania turned to look at her and crossed her arms. "I swear if I start clucking or laying eggs or **[Chicken]** affinity replaces my **[Darkwalker]** we will have words."

Yolani stifled a giggle. "That's another vote for **[Soul Manager]** then," she said. A sly grin appeared on her face. "If you lay eggs, we could save on the grocery bill."

Elania inhaled almost enough to make a hiss.

The battle at the Magistry had pushed her above level 100, which was a perk threshold. With perks at 10, 50, 100, 200, 300, etc... she had already picked two: **[Regeneration]** and **[Soul Siphon - Visible]**. Her two built-in perks didn't seem to count against her.

The former had saved her life more times than once, and the second was very effective when dealing with energy blasts that were dense enough. Or for draining raw **[Power]** right out of people. The only issue was that it was slow, mainly because people's souls naturally resisted giving up their energy to someone.

It was probably missing some type of synergy with another perk or skill. **[Regeneration]** worked so well simply because it allowed her to power level her **[Power]** capacity and she could force more power into it to heal faster.

Yolani didn't have a track on all the current options open to her, but they did at least know what **[Soul Manager]** did. It allowed her to measure the amount of affinity for different monsters, animals, or

rages in her own body. It even allowed her to manipulate them, as long as she had a sample.

It stopped short of allowing her to freely transmute a permanent affinity, but if she had wanted, she could maximize something else, then push it over the edge with further... snacks.

It wasn't her first choice. Elania brought up the options and scanned them for the hundredth time.

**[Available Perks: (Weakness Negation), (Resistance Improvement), (Resistance Selection), (Physical Ability Improvement), (Body Manipulation), (Reactive Adaptation), (Magical Resonance), (Soul Manager), (Total Regeneration)]**

**[Total Regeneration]** sounded very much like it'd probably make her immortal or impossible to kill as long as she had **[Power]** remaining. That seemed fantastic at first glance, but it didn't actually make her tougher or stronger. If something was able to kill her in one hit, it could probably do so a second time. Dying over and over until out of **[Power]** sounded like it would suck.

Still, what if it was something that killed her in one hit that couldn't be repeated willy-nilly? Or if she had control over where she... well, she assumed she would reform somehow. It was maybe the strongest contender at the moment.

The **[Physical Ability Improvement]** sounded good, too. She was already amped up based on her **[Power]** percentage. Going over 100% not only increased her **[Power]** capacity but also supercharged her strength, agility, everything really.

The only problem with that was that now that her capacity had grown so large, it was getting to be pretty difficult to overcharge it considerably. That was one downside she hadn't seen coming.

**[Body Manipulation]** was... a little shiver ran down her spine. It was almost certainly what Tessa had displayed in the sewers.

[**Reaction Adaptation**] sounded good too, but neither she nor Yolani had any actual idea of what it did exactly. [**Magical Resonance**] was out, because if it created a weakness like the Hornar spiders had with their antlers, she'd be in trouble. Being able to manipulate the resonance of spells wasn't really worth adding a magical off button to her forehead.

Resistance and weakness improvements seemed like the lowest tier choices, although becoming resistant to magi would be nice, except it was divided up into a bunch of different magic types. She'd never get enough perks for them all.

"Hello? Eladu to Elania? You in there?" Yolani asked.

Elania blinked in surprise, knocked out of her mental journey down perk-selection lane. The table had already been cleared, and Yolani had her artifice goggles on.

"I know you sometimes zone out when thinking really hard, but we do need that crate," Yolani said. A small smile appeared on her lips.

"I—yeah, I'm off," Elania replied, turning to make her way to the door.

"Don't get lost! We have a bunch of things to do today!" Yolani called out to her as she made her way outside.

"I'll be fine, and it shouldn't take long!" Elania replied, her mood improving.

Not even Henri and his guard detachment waiting outside could ruin it. She gave Henri a parting wave while ignoring the two of them that broke off to follow her.

It was a bit early to be out and about. The morning street was just beginning to come to life. The journey to Mira and Finn's shop wasn't long, but it took her past Ranolf's old shop, now a city-run mana charging depot. There were multiple wagons parked, which often ran

to the city's massive chicken farms that lined the outer walls of the city cavern.

A sour taste lingered from the knowledge of the enslaved demons that powered the operation below the building. Although from what she understood, the demons used weren't more than livestock themselves. That softened things considerably. She really didn't have a problem eating hamburgers or chickens, and the demons at least got fed regularly and didn't have to worry about becoming dinner.

Although she was pretty sure they could have had nice accommodations and maybe allowed to stretch their legs a bit.

Oh well, she had to pick her battles.

She quickened her pace as she neared the shop, wanting to leave the thoughts behind. The shop sign was already turned to indicate the store was open, so she went on inside. The shop bell announced her and the cozy interior of an artificer workshop greeted her. It was much the same as Aetherhart's was, although there were some noticeable differences.

Mira and Finn specialized more in metal machinery and less in the arcane. Precision metal cutters, countless gears of different sizes, and plenty of clocks filled the space completely. Mira was standing behind a counter and waved at her.

"Mira," Elania greeted, offering a smile to the woman. "I'm here for Yolani's order?"

Mira's face brightened at the greeting. "Good morning to you as well, Elania." The woman turned to call over her shoulder. "Finn! The package for Aetherhart's Artifice! Elania is here to fetch it!"

A moment later, Finn emerged from the back, wiping his hands on a cloth. Elania followed him to the back, where he used a lift to pull down a crate from a heavy shelf. "It's heavy," he warned her. "Are you sure you can carry it?"

Elania eyed the box before kneeling down and lifting it with her knees. It was probably at least two hundred pounds, but that wasn't a problem for her. "It's fine. The weight isn't a problem, it is just a little bulky to carry. I'll make it back fine."

He followed her to the door and she paused, realizing the issue. "Hah, a hand with the door would help, though."

Finn nodded and opened it for her. "Tell Yolani that we appreciate the business. If she has another order, just send it on by and we'll take care of it."

"Of course! Thank you both for the help," Elania replied cheerfully.

"Have a good day, Elania!" Mira called after her.

Elania replied with a smile. Her escort filed in behind her far enough to be inconspicuous, and she headed up the street back to Yolani. It seemed the day was ramping up quickly as more merchants and wagons began to fill the street, along with the regular day workers.

Henri spotted her returning first and opened the door to the shop for her.

"Thanks," she acknowledged, adding a brief nod. As awkward as things were between him and Yolani, he really tried his best to be a gentleman.

Elania made her way to the back of the workshop, the box secure in her arms. Yolani nodded to her briefly while she took care of a customer.

Setting the box down, Elania found her way into the kitchen and got a glass of water. After the quick drink, she found Yolani had already finished serving the patron and was locking the door.

And then she flipped the store sign to closed.

Confusion filled Elania's brow. "We're closing again? We were gone all day yesterday."

Yolani's smile was full of anticipation. "We'll open up later. For now, I want to dive into this." She pointed toward the box Elania had brought.

With a nod, Elania followed Yolani to the crate, and together they opened it up. The contents were packed tightly with wooden spacers and little boxes holding different sized parts. She wasn't really sure what she was looking at.

"What's this all for?" Elania asked.

Yolani's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Parts for the guard's firearms. But most importantly..."

Yolani reached in and pulled out a piece of metal with a copper cord wrapped around it.

"Electricity," they both said at the same time.

# CHAPTER 12 - SHOCK AND MAGAZINE

E lania watched as Yolani laid out the parts with care. The artificer's ability to take a vague idea and turn it into reality with drawings and schematics was nothing short of magic. It also highlighted one of the major short-comings of relying on simple skill ranks rather than actual learned knowledge.

There was no way she could draft something to produce the components that she saw on the table. If Yolani handed her something, then maybe the skill would subconsciously prod her into knowing how to use it, but that was no substitute for actually knowing what you were doing.

And having practice doing it.

That didn't apply to every skill—[**Tracking**] was certainly much more intuitive, especially if she pushed [**Power**] into it. Maybe that was a side-effect or synergy with her [**Darkwalker**] affinity, though?

“We are going to make the lightbulb using these parts. And if that works,” Yolani continued, her gaze drifting over to a spool of wire, “an electromagnet could be next. Then maybe the permanent one if we can figure out how to bake the ferrite...”

“I just know you need to use the electromagnets on it somehow to make it permanent...aligning it somehow?” Elania said hesitantly.

Yolani nodded. “It makes a bit of sense, but we’ll need some testing to figure it out for sure.”

She launched into an explanation of her plans for the components and Elania listened intently, her mind alight with the possibilities. It was more than enough for her to forget about the guards outside, the Magisters, and all the lurking threats outside the shop.

The glass for the lightbulbs was easy to recognize. The little black filaments were thin and wiry and array in a line. All of them were slightly different. A spool of copper wire we set aside next to a collection of metal caps and insulating materials.

Elania picked up a small, flat disc. “What’s this one for?” she asked, turning the disc over in her hand.

“That’s a base for the lightbulb,” Yolani explained. “It’s where we’ll attach the filament and secure everything in place.”

Elania nodded, placing it with the others. Her eyes fell on the mana crystals before locking onto the largest glowing stone in the set—the **[Monster Core - Ralfot]**.

“How will the battery work?” Elania asked, her gaze fixed on the core.

Yolani followed her line of sight and smiled. “The **[Monster Core - Ralfot]** will act as a transformer for some built in mana crystals. We’ll have a dial to increase or decrease the rate of discharge so we can fine tune it. Since the Monster Core has a secondary specialization in lightning, it should do the electricity thing.”



Elania examined the components more closely. “What if it doesn’t work?”

Yolani gestured to another crate that had been set aside at some point. “Then we’ll try the copper-zinc-vinegar battery thing. Lode-stone is very expensive, so we probably can’t get any of that. But what you told me about electromagnets and making our own permanent magnets...”

Elania swallowed and hoped she had got things right. She had not been too big of a science nerd. “Just remember, I wasn’t really an expert on these things. I am just repeating what I remember, and it was already very general, anyway.”

Yolani nodded. “Don’t worry. Just knowing that you can do things is a lot of the process! Figuring out the specifics is the fun part.” The smile appearing on her face went from ear to ear, and she rubbed the back of her head, looking slightly embarrassed. “Or... uh, expensive part, depending on what it is.”

A smile appeared on Elania’s face, and she nodded.

The conversation turned back to the task at hand as Yolani picked up one of the glass bulbs. “So, run it by me again—how does the bulb work exactly?”

Elania pointed to the bulb, then the filament. “Well, when you run electricity through the filament, it heats up and starts to glow. That’s what is supposed to give off the light. The glass bulb keeps oxygen away from the filament, so it doesn’t burn up too quickly.”

The explanation seemed to spark a new energy in Yolani. With a nod, the filament was inserted into the bulb, and then she used another wand to adhere it to the non-conductive plate. Elania watched with a mix of excitement and nervous anticipation.

Once the filament was secured, Yolani pulled out another wand and a green Aether spell appeared. “This will create a vacuum inside the bulb.”

Elania’s eyes lit up. She had been wondering about how that would work without a vacuum pump. It should have been obvious that magic, well... [**Artifice**] would be responsible.

The mana crystal-monster core ‘battery’ was put together next, and then Yolani connected the wires to the light bulb’s base. There was a single switch to flip the whole thing on.

“Here goes nothing,” Yolani said with a half-smile, flipping the switch.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, faintly at first, the filament began to emit a soft glow. The light grew slowly, casting a warm, gentle illumination around the workshop. It didn’t stop there, though, and quickly began to glow brightly enough to cause Elania to raise her arm up to protect her eyes.

“It’s working,” Yolani whispered, almost in disbelief. Her face lit up, mirroring the bulb’s glow. “We did it! We actually—”

There was a low-sounding pop from inside the bulb, leaving the lantern lit workshop bathed in its usual illumination.

Yolani sighed, a small puff of disappointment. “Well, that didn’t last long.”

Elania squeezed the other girl’s arm. “What are you talking about? It worked great! The filament part is supposed to be hard to get right. We just need to find the right material.”

Yolani’s smile reappeared. “Right. Let’s try the different types and see which one does the best.”

They moved on to the wood carbon filament, which held a promising glow for a longer span of seconds before succumbing to the same fate as the cloth one. They discussed potential treatments to maybe

enhance the wood's resistance, but Yolani had no inkling of what bamboo was.

Elania bit her lip. She wasn't even sure if that was the right wood type, but something in the back of her head told her that maybe she had read it somewhere.

With a sense of cautious optimism, they prepared the seraph bone filament bulb. The moment the switch was flipped, the bone filament came to life, radiating a light so bright it was akin to a floodlight. They shielded their eyes, expressions alight with excitement.

"This is pretty strong! Maybe lower the power input?" Elania asked.

Yolani turned the voltage dial downward a few marks, but if anything, the bone began to get even brighter. In a panic, she disconnected the wires entirely.

The bone continued to glow brilliantly.

"Uhh. Is it supposed to do that?" Yolani asked.

"You're asking me? There are no such things as Seraphs on Earth!" Elania replied hastily.

A subtle hum began to fill the room, and she realized that the glass bulb was vibrating. "Uhh—"

"Get back!" Yolani shouted. Elania stood and took a step back, before the other girl pulled out a wand and then pointed it toward the ceiling. Over each bench was a blue crystal, and Yolani fixed it in line with her wand. "Emergency shield!"

A blue column appeared, surrounding the workbench and the seraph bone. The hum continued to raise in pitch until the bone and lightbulb exploded into a thousand shards, creating a violent rain against the protective barrier.

The echoes and dust settled quickly, but Elania could still feel her heart pounding in her chest as they exchanged shocked looks.

“I don’t think Seraph bones are safe for filaments,” Elania whispered.

Yolani bit her lip and lowered the shield, her eyes scanning the workbench. The aftermath revealed all the lightbulbs shattered. Yet the mana crystal-monster core generator was untouched. So it wasn’t quite the worst-case scenario.

“At least we know we can convert **[Power]** into electricity now,” Yolani muttered.

Elania checked the mana crystal and her eyes widened. “At a pretty good rate, too. The mana crystal isn’t even down a single point.”

“I think the Seraph bone reacted somehow and probably produced the explosion on its own,” Yolani said.

Together, they began the process of cleaning up, sweeping up glass, and collecting the remnants of the failed experiment.

After that, they took a quick break, but it wasn’t long before Yolani was already calling her over for something else.

Elania shifted over to the worktable the other girl had moved on to, it held a large parchment with a recently penciled schematic on it. Leaning in to look at it closely, she recognized it almost immediately.

It was a meticulously detailed drawing of one of the City Watch’s smoothbore rifles, matching the weapons they had been working on charging. Her eyes slid to the middle, and she realized it was slightly different. Instead of a hinge that opened to allow reloading, there was an opening in the top that could be pulled back to insert a small clip.

“Already?” Elania murmured, tracing her finger near the modification. “I just told you about this the other day, and you already have it figured out?”

Yolani’s lips curled into a proud smile. “Your explanation made sense. The only real problem I see is how expensive it will be. That’s why there is a hopper.”

Elania followed Yolani's finger to the round thing that stuck out on the side and realized what it was for. Catching the mana crystals and casings for reuse later? It certainly made sense, considering the cost of mana crystals.

"So, each crystal only charges one bullet?" Elania asked.

Yolani nodded. "You might not have noticed, but the barrel is also considerably heavier. Almost twice as thick. But it will allow for some seriously powerful shots. Multiple times. I am not sure if it will be feasible to replace the muskets, but I can work on a slimmer design later."

Elania nodded, letting Yolani continue her walkthrough.

"Actually, I was thinking why not have multiple clips of mana crystals and the projectiles for that? It would increase the complexity of the mechanism, but it would solve having to have the catcher," Yolani said.

Elania pointed to some blocky metal additions around the barrel. "What about this? More reinforcement?"

Yolani shook her head. "With the increased rate of fire, we need to dump a lot of heat from the barrel quickly. Otherwise, it would be too hot to handle after just a few shots."

"This is pretty awesome. When will the parts come in for trying to build the prototype?" Elania asked.

Yolani's eyebrows shot up. "We're going to work on it right now. You brought them this morning!"

Elania's jaw dropped. "What...but how? We just talked about it the other day!"

A light laugh escaped from Yolani. "We already have it. It was in the bottom of the crate you brought."

Sure enough, there was a second section of the crate that was below the one that had held the electrical components. The crate had felt

pretty heavy for just the generator, but she hadn't really commented on it.

Elania worked on pulling out and setting everything on the workbench while Yolani fetched two of the muskets from the workshop wall. They had been slowly processing them one by one, and there were already two dozen crated and ready to return. Yolani laid the two she fetched on the workbench.

A frown appeared on Elania's face. "Are you sure it's okay to experiment on these? Don't they belong to the City Watch?"

"It'll be fine. If it works, they'll probably pay us to convert all the rifles," Yolani said.

Elania eyed the custom barrel. "Seems to me like they'd just have to order a bunch of the new ones."

Yolani laughed. "You're right. That would probably make more sense. Either way, there would be a lot for us to figure out and tinker with while improving the design... All of this is just prototype stuff. I'm sure we can refine it a lot."

Elania nodded. She certainly could think of a lot of things, but maybe she should hold back a little. Yolani really loved to press things ahead, and she was literally a genius on it, but... Well...

Hadn't the inventor of the machine gun expected it to end all wars or something? But that had been far, far from the case.

"We're going to put it together," Yolani declared, her enthusiasm spilling out.

Elania nodded. Working on this should be fine. They could talk about the ramifications of implementing things without consideration, especially weapons and the like, later.

"What can I do to help?" Elania asked.

Yolani handed her one of the custom parts—the heavy barrel that would replace the original tube. "Start with this. We'll integrate it

carefully with the original stock and make sure it aligns with the rest of the components.”

Elania steadied the metal—it was obvious why Yolani had picked her to hold it—the thing weighed a ton and Yolani’s earlier observation that it might be too heavy for regular use was probably apt. It didn’t pose a problem for her, though.

Yolani removed the pieces from the original, then marked the stock and used a wand to cut the wood with magical precision. Finally, she sanded it down with another one. The artifice-powered tools were as effective as power-tools, or maybe even better.

When it was ready, Elania slotted in the barrel in the newly widened groove and Yolani bolted a tightening iron strap that held it in place.

“Keep it steady,” Yolani instructed, as she began the delicate process of rebuilding the firing mechanism to accommodate the new design. The new parts were already pre-fabricated, but several times she had to shave down the metal to make things fit or slot in correctly.

Tiny little mana circuits were run via a golden hued wire. The rifle would use gas to power the mechanism that cycled the action to load a fresh round into the chamber after each shot.

The next step involved integrating the cooling system. The heat sinks clamped down onto the rifle’s barrel, and Yolani explained exactly how the system allowed them to draw heat and then dissipate it safely, without risk to the user.

With the firing mechanism and cooling system in place, Yolani moved on to the trigger assembly. Elania passed her the springs and gears, each piece slotting together with a satisfying click and snap. Finn had done a wonderful job of making sure everything was perfectly matched to Yolani’s schematic.

It was almost a surprise when Yolani’s face turned into a smile. “That’s it. It should be ready.”

The clip had already been loaded earlier while they were working. Yolani reached for it, but Elania captured the other girl's hand and shook her head.

"Let's not put in real ammunition until we're ready for test firing," Elania cautioned.

Yolani blinked, then laughed softly. "Right, we wouldn't want an accidental discharge in the shop."

That didn't mean they wouldn't test it, though, and Yolani spent the next thirty-minute fabricating a safe replica clip with fake crystals and bullets that were inert. With the inert clip loaded, they carefully tested the musket's mechanisms. The faux crystals safely jumped into the hopper, and the bullet came out freely.

They had to manually cycle it after each test, though, since it would require firing a live round to test the gas cycle.

Yolani's eyes sparkled as they moved to the second musket. It was much the same, and Elania didn't realize it was different until Yolani went to cut a hole in front of the trigger guard underneath.

"I don't understand," Elania admitted.

Yolani paused and looked up at her. "There needs to be extra room for the magazine on this one."

"But what about the mana crystal catcher?" Elania asked.

"This one doesn't need one," Yolani answered with a grin.

"What?"

The grin only widened, her excitement palpable. "That's because you don't need mana crystals, Elania. You're your own power source."

Elania stared at her for a moment before her eyes widened in realization. The second musket had been designed for her—her unique abilities as a **[Lesser Demon]** would provide the energy needed to fire it. It was a bespoke weapon; Yolani had designed it and was making it for her.



# CHAPTER 13 - FIREPOWER TRIALS

Elania yawned and put her hand over her forehead as she paused and looked up at Neftasu's light stone morning, the giant crystals glittering and lighting up the cavern's ceiling. After an evening of experiments and testing, Yolani had eventually convinced her they should do a test of the musket projects the next day.

The main issue was that the only firing range was in the City Watch garrison. Unfortunately, Henri had been at his usual post outside and Yolani had somehow convinced him to get permission for them to do whatever they wanted.

Despite Yolani's enthusiasm, Elania felt like maybe it wasn't the best idea to showcase the weapons. But her suggestion that they take them out into the caverns and try them where no one would notice had been shot down as impractical. That hadn't actually been her concern...

She was more worried about introducing more effective firearms to society. She didn't think Yolani was thinking about all the ramifications. She just wanted to push the science of [**Artifice**] and their experiments to the next level.

Elania watched the other girl lead the way for the group, the bubble of Henri and his guards warding off foot traffic and allowing them to cruise toward their destination.

Maybe she should have argued more against it, but in the end, she had gone along with what Yolani wanted. The muskets and equipment were all stuffed in an oversized pack on her back since she was the only one strong enough to carry it easily. A carriage would have been more workable, but the cost of the artificed ones had gone up and the [**Ralfot**] driven ones weren't as safe.

It had given Elania plenty of time to pick at the reason she'd given in, and it made her feel bad. She'd been afraid of fighting, of Yolani disapproving of her, of maybe risking breaking the patchwork life they'd put together since signing the contract.

That wasn't healthy. She needed to talk to Yolani about it.

But not until after she had screwed her head on right and thought about it some more.

The early morning markets clamored and mingled with the sounds of craftsmen as they pushed out of the Artisan District and closer to the City Guard headquarters. The comforting familiarity with the city's rhythm contrasted with the knot of worry and anticipation filling her stomach.

They passed through the heavy wall and external security point of the Watch Fortress, and their escort ensured they didn't have to wait or pause to be inspected. Henri took the lead and maneuvered them straight for the firing range, which was its own separate building.

Stepping inside changed the acoustics dramatically, as the sounds of the distant city shifted into the echoing thwacks of crossbow bolts and arrows. A dozen guards were practicing, their shots slamming into the targets and dummies that bore the scars of many drills.

They were met with a few curious glances from the guardsmen, and the range officer headed straight for them. The stocky man had a clipboard tucked under his arm and an aura of authority about him.

The officer's gaze was questioning, his eyes flickering over Elania and Yolani, lingering on the oversized pack on Elania's back. "What's this about?" he asked.

"We've got some new equipment to test," Henri explained, gesturing to Elania. "Special modifications by Aetherhart's Artifice."

The officer raised an eyebrow but pulled up his clipboard. His lips turned into a frown after a moment. "Special slot ordered by Captain Harik."

He looked up and eyed the group again before finally nodding and stepping aside to let them through. He waved his clipboard to the end of the range. "Firearm range is at the end. Rules require that all other lanes, crossbows and bows, be cleared during your hot phase. Fire nothing until I give you authorization."

Yolani and Elania nodded, before following Henri and the other guards to the designated area. There was a table for them to unpack, and it only took a few minutes to set everything out. The range officer blew a whistle and gestured to the guards, who were firing. They all finished and began to come over to watch.

Elania felt self-conscious at the crowd forming, all focused on Yolani and her.

The range officer approached, his interest in the musket Yolani was holding in her arms apparent. "Never seen a musket modified like

this,” he said, eyeing the new components and barrel. “Looks a lot heavier.”

Yolani stepped forward, her confidence clear as she laid out the details for the design. “We’ve increased the barrel thickness and added heatsinks for better heat management. We also created an internal mechanism for quicker loading and firing.”

The skepticism on the officer’s face was clear, but he nodded. “If it fires faster, I can imagine why the extra cooling is necessary.”

Yolani took the musket to the firing line, using a hook mechanism on the firing end of the weapon to lock it into place on the firing range wall. Setting four clips on the small bench beside her, she took the first one and cycled it into the weapon. She then braced it against her shoulder and took careful aim downrange at the straw target.

Elania frowned, looking around at everyone. “Wait.”

Yolani paused and looked up at her with a confused look. “What?”

“Where are the ear protectors? I’ll probably heal, but you all could have permanent hearing damage,” Elania said.

The range officer grunted. “That happens, but it’s just part of life.”

Yolani blinked at her. “Something like... ear plugs?”

“Those can work too. I was thinking ear muffs. They go over the ear and block the sound from hurting your ears,” Elania explained.

Henri coughed. “I know we have some ear plugs somewhere in the Headquarters, but they aren’t generally used down here.”

Elania crossed her arms. “Well, that’s stupid. I’ve heard these go off before, and they are loud enough to damage your hearing, especially with repeated exposure.”

“I could go look for some,” Henri offered.

“I can’t hold the range all day for you,” the range officer said.

Yolani looked between the three of them before biting her lip. “Let’s just get this done. We’ll put ear protectors on the list of things to bring

next time. Maybe mention to Bannon the firing range isn't equipped properly?"

There was an almost visible paling of the guards at her casual reference to their ultimate authority. Yolani didn't pay attention to it and went back to aiming.

Elania bit her lip and stepped forward, placing her hands over Yolani's ears. The other girl turned to look at her with widened eyes before settling with a nod.

The range officer, with a nod of authority, stepped back and raised his hand. "Range going hot!"

There was a momentary delay before the next command. "Commence firing!"

Focusing on her hands, she poured a tiny bit of **[Power]** around them to prevent the sound vibrations from hurting Yolani.

The girl was steady and undaunted, positioning herself firmly to prepare for the musket's recoil. Elania held her breath. With a smooth pull of the trigger, the artifice barked, a loud crack as the sudden power sent a shot hurtling forward.

The projectile slammed into the straw target with fury, splintering wood and sending shards spinning through the air. Beyond the initial impact point, a deep gouge and plum of sand erupted from the barrier that served as the range's backdrop.

The range officer let out a low whistle, clearly impressed. Elania relaxed the hold on Yolani's ears.

"Great shot," the man admitted, and from the murmurs and nods around them, it was clear the display had everyone's full attention.

"That was just the first test," Yolani replied. She checked the crystal catcher and then the chamber, confirming that the next round had loaded correctly. Elania quickly replaced her hold over the girl's ears.

Yolani took aim again and worked the trigger, a steady series of clicks completely shadowed by the sonic cracks accompanying the smooth action. One shot followed another, each discharge smashing through another target and destroying it. Six more targets disappeared in a spray of splinters without a single miss.

The accuracy was incredibly impressive to Elania. The musket wasn't even rifled, although the round ammunition used was precisely machined. Maybe it was the relatively short range that helped.

There was a silence from the guards at the display. There was obvious shock at the rate of fire, and the girl not having to reload between shots. Yolani pulled out the spent clip strip and replaced it with another before rapidly emptying the clip into the sand.

Elania glanced back over her shoulder; everyone had raised their hands to cover their ears. Yeah, she figured that hearing protection would become standard quickly. Probably before the day was over.

Without pausing, she reloaded again and dumped another seven rounds into the sand. The fourth clip snapped in and dumped its contents as well. By the time Yolani was finished, there was a wisp of steam coming off the barrel's muzzle.

Yolani stood up and Elania released her again while the guards began to murmur and mumble to each other. The range officer stared at them with an unreadable expression. Finally, he raised his hand again. "Range is going cold!" he shouted, much more loudly this time. He gestured to a few guards, and they went to replace the targets with fresh ones.

The range officer shook his head. His initial skepticism seemed washed away. "Incredible. Absolutely incredible."

A stillness settled over the range as Yolani stood, her movements deliberate and composed as she cleared the musket and gathered the spent clips. She carried it over to the range table and sat it down with

the rest of their gear, then checked the basket for the mana crystals. A sigh of relief escaped as she confirmed they were undamaged and reusable.

A low rumble of conversation picked up from the guards and filled the air, a mixture of excitement and speculation about the new weapon. Henri stood in shocked silence, his gaze following Yolani's every move.

The artificer girl's attention shifted to Elania, offering her a smile and the demon-modified gun, along with a large round magazine that made her think of a tommy gun. "Your turn," she said, a hint of excitement in her voice.

Elania took the weapon, surprised like always by the heft. "I feel like a gangster with this," she said with a light chuckle. An image of her wielding the thing like an old-timey tommy gun flickered through her mind.

Yolani raised an eyebrow, clearly slightly confused. Elania just shrugged and offered a reassuring smile, and turned toward the range. It took a few more minutes for the range to be set back up. When the range officer confirmed it was clear and declared it was hot, she raised the weapon to her shoulder without bracing it on the wall.

Her strength would be enough to steady the weapon and contain the recoil. She aimed down the length of the barrel, making use of the makeshift sight at the end of the muzzle.

There was a single mana crystal permanently installed into the firing mechanism that was easily connected to through a single magical artifice conduit that ran to the grip. She pulled on her **[Power]** and pushed it into the crystal, filling it.

Then she pulled the trigger.

The shot rang out just as loud as Yolani's musket had, and she confirmed the recoil was easy to control. The heavy barrel definitely

helped. Her musket ball struck the center of the closest target, sending it to the same fate as the previous ones.

The range officer raised his eyebrow. "If there's no crystal, what's powering it? A built-in mana shard?" he asked, peering at the drum magazine.

Yolani glanced at Elania with a small smile. "Elania's using her own **[Power]**," she explained. "She can channel it directly into the action."

There was a momentary silence as the man took that in. Elania ignored it and checked the musket. Everything seemed to have cycled correctly, so she raised the weapon and aimed and fired again, letting several rounds go in quick succession.

That allowed her to get a good feel for feeding the mana crystal in the weapon with a nice constant stream of **[Power]** instead of doing it in clumsy chunks.

A tense breath escaped her. That was good enough for a test, right? She looked back over her shoulder, only to run into the expectant expression of Yolani. It was obvious what the other girl wanted her to test out: the fully automatic action.

She turned and let off another set of shots, then a third. But she stopped short of using the full mechanism.

No, this was good enough.

"Is everything okay?" Yolani's frown felt accusatory until after Elania processed her question and realized it was due to concern for her.

Elania nodded. "I'm fine. I think that's it for testing today."

All the men watching began to clap.

Henri approached them, his expression mixed with concern and admiration. "That was something else," he said, his eyes flicking over to the decimated targets. "But this is going to draw a lot of attention to you both. I thought that was the opposite of what you wanted.



Yolani let out a breath. “We don’t want to be harassed or bothered constantly. But in this case, attention can be good. If it means support, and extra backing from Magister Bannon, we’re looking at steady, secured contracts—minus the failure clauses and other strings. That’s steady, safe income without having to take any risks.”

Elania could sense the hesitation in Henri’s voice as he replied. “Can’t argue with that logic, but with all the unrest in the city, there are plenty who wouldn’t mind seeing the Guard—and anyone associated with—knocked down a peg or two.”

“Well, that’s why we are so thrilled to have you and your escort follow us everywhere,” Yolani replied. She turned away and started stuffing their muskets and other items into the large travel pack.

It didn’t take long before they were ready to go, and Elania pulled the pack over her shoulders. The range officer and other guards bid them farewell, and she expected they’d get a message back from either Captain Harik or Magister Bannon by the end of the day or tomorrow.

Henri led the way while the rest of their escort took up the rear. As they reached the gate, a group of six figures stood inside the threshold, blocking traffic. The stark white of their robes stood out against the gray stone of the city. Underneath their short sleeves, chain-mail was in evidence and each carried a longsword on their belt. When she noticed the red emblem emblazoned on their shoulders, she realized what they were.

Lightbringers. Elania scanned their levels with **[Identify]**.

**[Armsman of Light - Human - Level 344]**

**[Warrior of Light - Human - Level 289]**

**[Soldier of Light - Human - Level 358]**

They were all relatively high level, with the same three class types in the group.

“We were accosted by thieves! We demand that your send for your sergeant at once!” The lead man bellowed.

“Get out of the way. You’re blocking traffic. Ain’t no one got time to speak with ya about some thieving orphan. City’s full o’ them. Watch yer’ shit better next time,” the guard replied.

Elania grunted and watched as the leader snarled with anger, looking up at just that moment for his eyes to lock with hers.

The anger turned into fury.

“Demon!” the Lightbringer shouted, drawing his sword. The rest of his group followed suit without hesitation.

# CHAPTER 14 - TRUST

As the Lightbringers' swords flashed in the dim light of the gatehouse, a chaotic reply of steel and shouts erupted from the City Guard. Every single guardsman drew his weapon without hesitation in response to the threat, drawing a series of shocked looks on the outnumbered Lightbringers.

Elania's hand went to her own belt, making sure that her **[Vorpall Dagger]** was clear to draw as well.

Henri looked over his shoulder at her and Yolani, before barking an order to the guards flanking them. "Form up! Protect the Artificers!" The guards shuffled into a protective crescent around the two of them without hesitation.

The lead Lightbringer finally broke out of his shock and gestured straight for Elania, shouting another obscenity. Elania squeezed her hands and relaxed them repeatedly. It was obvious that if the guard hadn't been present, then they'd have attempted to assault her and that she and Yolani would have had to fight. It had been long enough since she'd seen such a reaction that it seriously bothered her.

An argument broke out between him and the two gate guards manning the entry way. The Lightbringer took a single step forward.

Henri's voice cut through, clear and commanding. "Breach!" he shouted.

The reaction was instant. The crew inside the gatehouse springing to action, pulling heavily on the two levers that controlled the portcullis. With a grating cacophony of chains and gears, the metal bars slammed down, sealing the Lightbringers inside the gatehouse.

Another half dozen guardsmen bust out of two side doors to reinforce the two men manning the entryway, all of them looking rather miffed at being called to duty.

The guards who had been trying to send the Lightbringers away moments before now spat curses, their annoyance palpable. "Damned Lightbringers!" one guard muttered, his face twisted in anger. "Now we're stuck with them 'til the sergeant gets here!"

The sentiment was shared by just about everyone present, their frustration clear as they muttered among themselves. "Pain in the ass to raise the portcullis," another guard grumbled.

The enraged Lightbringer began pounding on the bars, but a guard overhead leaned over a murder hole and then doused him with a piss bucket. "Shut up, ye lot down there! Yer all gonna pay for ruining our card game!"

Elenia glanced at Yolani, who met her look with a furrowed brow. The danger seemed diffused, but there was still a sense of tension in the situation. She managed to keep her voice neutral. "Henri, this won't cause trouble for you, will it?" she asked.

"Better not," Yolani said testily, giving the Lightbringers a sour glare.

Henri shook his head, his expression hardening. "Just following orders and protocol. That's protecting you both, and they tried to

breach the gate,” he said. His eyes remained fixed on the contained Lightbringers. “Right now, our priority is your safety and keeping them away from you.”

Yolani nodded, her hand reaching out to hold on to Elania’s arm. “Is there another way out?”

Henri shook his head. “Except in emergency, all traffic must use the primary gate, even if it’s delayed because it is blocked.”

The indignation and threats continued. “Unhand us! This is an outrage!” one of the Lightbringers shouted.

The annoyance on Henri’s face finally boiled over. “You drew weapons on the guard! There are laws here!”

The gate sergeant arrived, his presence immediately commanding attention. “Enough!” he shouted. The area fell into a hushed silence. The man looked to Henri, then nodded to Elania and Yolani. “Give them a tour around the corner for a bit.”

“Just our luck,” Yolani mumbled under her breath. Their escort sheathed their weapons, and Henri led them away.

One of the Lightbringers shouted after them. “You’ll answer for harboring a demon!”

As they headed back inside, they ran into Lieutenant Gaston on his way out. He stopped and greeted them. “Heard there was a mess.”

Henri nodded, but Elania could only frown. “Some anti-demon Lightbringers were holding up the gate when they saw me and lit off.”

Gaston grunted. “No wonder they called me down here. Didn’t bother to tell my ass what it was, though. Thought it was another riot situation.”

“If there were more of them, it would be,” Yolani said.

“Leave it to me, I’ll go sort them out,” Gaston replied, nodding them again and then heading outside.

They found a corner of the main lobby to claim while waiting. Elania sat down beside Yolani, but after a few minutes, it became clear it was going to take a while. The desire to check her smart phone hit her. Of course, she didn't have one anymore.

Yolani glanced at her. "It's not your fault."

Elania frowned. Technically, it sort of was, since she'd triggered them. But Yolani's sentiment was right about one thing: she wasn't going to worry about the stupid Lightbringers being asshats. "Not sure how they functioned in the city if that's their reaction. I'm not exactly the only demon around. What are they even doing in the city, anyway?"

Henri nodded. "I heard a few reports on them. There are apparently a few groups about that size that came down the line. They've been staying couped up in the Conclave District. They probably don't get out much. No idea on why they'd be there."

Yolani looked up at Henri with a smile. "Thank you, Henri. For protecting us."

Henri gave a small nod, his demeanor still serious. "Lightbringers might not like demons, but that doesn't give them the right to cause a scene like they did. They might be used to preferential treatment in Tiria, but they won't receive one here."

Yolani's lips pressed into a thin line, a flash of indignation showing in her eyes. "Stupid zealots," she muttered. "There's nothing wrong with Elania."

Henri's agreement was immediate. "Absolutely."

Elania swallowed and wasn't sure what to add to the topic. The support made her feel awkward, but she was happy at least Henri and Yolani were on her side.

After what seemed an eternity, the Lightbringers were led inside wearing cuffs. Their faces were a mix of rage and humiliation, one

sporting a black eye. All of them had been disarmed, and a young guardsman followed, carrying a bundle of their swords. They marched past Elania and Yolani, their shackles clinking. More than one of them offered an evil eye, but none of them spoke out.

That was probably thanks to the sergeant, who had a whip in his hand. They certainly weren't getting the light hand treatment.

Gaston followed behind, stopping to talk to them. "That's sorted, for now," he said, adjusting his watch-cap. "You two should be fine to head out now."

Elania watched the Lightbringers disappear into the lockup and couldn't help but feel a pang of concern. "I hope this doesn't fuel more unrest," she commented.

Gaston didn't seem perturbed. "We'll handle it. The City Guard won't let this escalate. That they are causing trouble is enough for us to go inspect the rest of them for what they're up to."

Yolani stood up. "Let's get out of here."

Elania followed suit, but Henri held up a hand.

"I've put in a request for two carriages for us. They'll be here in a bit," he said.

A frown creased her face. The artificed carriages were expensive and getting two of them seemed excessive. "I don't—"

"It'll be on the Guard's dime, so no complaints. If you need to stop somewhere else before getting back, we can do that as well." Henri's tone was firm and seemed to brook no argument.

Yolani nodded to her, so she stood down.

Of course, that meant more waiting, but it wasn't as long as before and when they finally climbed up into the carriage and it set out to return to the Artisan District and Artificer's Row, Elania felt a bit of relief. She adjusted the pack and made sure it was secure on the seat beside her. She allowed herself to relax slightly.

The carriage rolled forward, the steady clatter of its wheels against the cobblestones filling the silence that settled inside the cabin. Elania gazed out the small window, watching the city streets pass by at a steady rate. It felt like another busy day had hit.

Yolani shifted in her seat and turned to face Elania with a furrowed brow. "Why didn't you try the fully automatic fire?" she asked.

Elania's lips turned into a frown. She's expected the other girl to bring it up, just not so soon. "I just... didn't feel like it was a good idea," she admitted. She traced the cloth covered metal of the carriage seat nervously.

Yolani's expression shifted to confusion. "But we agreed to test it. We needed to see how it worked under those conditions. I'm not sure the heatsinks will be capable of handling firing that fast."

Elania took a deep breath to loosen the tightness in her chest. "I know what we agreed on, but... I didn't think it was a good idea," she repeated.

Yolani's frown deepened. "Why didn't you say so, then? Why agree before?"

Elania looked away. "I didn't want to upset you. Or make you think I didn't support you."

Yolani crossed her arms, hurt appearing on her face. "Elania, I can't read your mind. If you say one thing but feel another, how am I supposed to know? We're a team. We need to trust each other enough to speak our minds."

Elania met Yolani's gaze, guilt and fear mixing into a bitter cocktail. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'll try to be more honest about what I think, even if it might lead to an argument."

Yolani reached out, her hand finding Elania's and squeezing. "We need to be able to have those arguments, Elania. I'm pretty sure our friendship is strong enough to handle a few."



Elania squeezed back and nodded. "Sorry. It was just... you were so excited, and I didn't want to disappoint you."

"Do you want to talk about why you think it's a bad idea?" Yolani asked.

Elania looked at her. "The men who invented it... they thought it would be so dangerous that it would stop wars and conflicts. Who would ever be insane enough to wage war when one gun could kill hundreds, or one weapon could destroy a city?"

The other girl's lips creased into a frown.

Elania looked back out the window. "They were wrong."

Yolani remained quiet for the rest of the carriage ride.

# CHAPTER 15 - GUIDANCE

The silence that enveloped the carriage was like a thick blanket that persisted until they dismounted at Aetherhart's Artifice. Henri and his squad offered them farewells as they took up their favored positions on the street around the shop.

Elania shook her head. She wondered when Henri actually found time to go home and sleep since he seemed permanently available and on call any time they went anywhere.

Once inside, they both fell into the familiar rhythm of returning from a day out. After putting away their things and equipment, Yolani moved to take care of a small lantern artifice project for a customer who had put one on order.

Elania found herself gravitating toward a small stack of books in the workshop's corner.

The books were an eclectic mix of texts, from tomes on arcane artificery to practical manuals on various mundane trades like carpentry and metalworking. All themed with artificery in mind, of course, but

there was one title that caught Elania's attention: "The Caverns of Neftasu: A summary of an underground realm and its environs."

She slid it out of the pile carefully, then settled in the nearby chair. The book was heavy in her hands, relatively thick compared to the others. The hard leather cover creaked slightly as she opened the book to the first page.

The pages offered a faint smell, and as she flipped through it, she found maps and descriptions of the city they called home.

It was a section on geography that truly drew her in, though.

A picture of a bubble centered on the city, deep underground, took up the bottom of an entire page, while a long narrow umbilical cord stretched up to what she assumed was the surface world.

The description made it clear that without the Celestial Engine providing a wide blanketing effect on the area underground, everything would become uninhabitable molten rock.

That was interesting, and from the illustration, it looked like the edges of the bubble were molten landscapes—even the top layer sitting above them.

It showed a zone of water between the molten zone and the inhabited one, and pictures of fish swimming in the water highlighted just how unique the ecosystem was.

A small map scale in the corner hinted that the entire bubble was approximately six-hundred miles wide in diameter, although she wasn't sure how accurate the measurements would be.

Then again... they had artifice and magic. Maybe they were pretty accurate?

As Elania turned the page, her eyes glimmered with excitement. A two-page illustration showed Neftasu in relation to the overworld. Two large continents ran across the pages separated by a narrow sea and connected by a tiny isthmus.

The location of Neftasu's umbilical sat nestled between three different nations—The Empire of Monevoian, the Archdiocese of Tiria, and the Republic of Wenia.

The area directly above Neftasu seemed to be composed of dry, rounded hills and a few mountains. The way that there were only two major roads into the region where Neftasu connected to the overworld, plus the relatively few towns or other communities, hinted not a welcoming area.

The Empire dominated the land to the northeast until its territory went off the map, with one single highway that looped around until it reached Neftasu's borders.

Hundreds of settlements ranging from cities that had their own tiny illustrations to towns and villages that simply received a dot and name covered the area. Just by looking at the map, she could picture several smaller kingdoms fitting inside, and some areas had a hub and spoke road system that hinted at just that.

Tiria was much smaller and located to the southeast. It looked heavily forested and temperate from the little drawings of trees and fields on the paper.

There wasn't any description or explanation of what exactly made up an Archdiocese, so that was unfortunate. She remembered hearing that the Lightbringers were arriving in Neftasu from there... so understanding that relation would be nice.

The Republic of Wenia was the smallest of the three bordering nations and was right up against the western sea of the continent.

A small circle surrounded it and several other small nations, linking them to the nation that sat on the isthmus that connected the western and eastern continents. There wasn't any drawing of a canal, but she suspected that the Duchy of Torland somehow benefited from holding the chokepoint.

Elania's brows furrowed as she turned a few more pages. It was all about Neftasu, with nothing more on the other regions. That filled her with frustration...although that wasn't the book's fault. It was supposed to be about Neftasu.

It was just that she realized she knew very little about the world, and it was much bigger than she had thought. Maybe the faraway places had little bearing on where she was at, but the Lighbringers hinted that maybe Tiria at least was relevant.

Besides, what was it like in the other countries? Did they all treat demons the same? The memory of 'karma-markets' suggested that some places were... far worse than Neftasu.

Closing the book with a soft thud, she sighed and leaned back in her chair, eyes drifting to the window. The artificial hue of the light stones filtered inside to meld with the standard artifice lighting Yolani was working under.

Yolani poked her head around the large device she was working on wiring, her expression softening upon seeing Elania's troubled gaze. "Find anything useful?" she asked, standing up and taking a break from working.

Elania shook her head, a rueful smile appearing. "Just how much I still don't know. I feel like I'm just stumbling around in the dark with no purpose."

Yolani came over and settled into a chair next to Elania. "We can get more books, if you like."

Elania shook her head. "First, we need to figure out what books. Although after looking at this, I think I'd like a primer on the other nations... so geography?"

The other girl raised an eyebrow. "You want political books? I thought you'd want something on demonic treatise or something."

A groan escaped from Elania as she rubbed her temples. “Well, we’ve been over that. I’m a demon. Relain—Bishop, whoever—used a ton of mana shards to summon me. Normally, it’s impossible to summon a sapient creature, or a human, but he was trying to summon some dark goddess who shared my first name, and bang, here we are. Elania, lesser demon, with ridiculous ‘Potency’ on the same level as some god or demigod whatever.”

Yolani tensed up and looked around the room, as if she was worried someone might overhear. “I wouldn’t say that part out loud. It might be... dangerous. But I suspect the Magisters might already know...I don’t think a normal lesser demon would have survived a dip into the Celestial Engine, even with the help of an arch-seraph.”

Elania nodded. “Sorry. It’s just a bit overwhelming when I think about it.”

“No worries. I can see about getting some books about the overworld from a bookstore. Or... you could just ask me? I know a little, at least,” Yolani said.

Elania perked up. “Well, what about Tiria? That’s where the Lightbringers come from?”

Yolani shook her head. “The Lightbringers are a holy order that’s spread all over the east. Their headquarters are based in Rocoralia. That’s the kingdom ruled by the Holiness.”

“The pope?” Elania asked.

“Pope... hum. I think it’s the same thing? I’m not really that religious... actually, there aren’t very many followers of Aurorism in Neftasu,” Yolani admitted.

“Alright. So, the big religious head is on Rocoralia. I didn’t see it in the book, so I guess it’s further east?” Elania asked.

Yolani nodded. “Very far. Halfway across the continent, maybe twenty-five hundred miles?”

“And Tiria is ruled by an independent religious head,” Elania said.

“They’ve never really bothered Neftasu, although they are certainly anti-demonic. There are various degrees of legality for demons—and slaves—for that matter, all across the overworld and in the other city-states and the overland nations,” Yolani explained.

“That’s right... there are other underground cities like Neftasu, each with their own Celestial Engine?” Elania asked.

Yolani nodded again. “There are fourteen Celestial Engines across the world. Six belong to underground city-states and seven are held by overworld nations in an above-ground capital.”

Elania raised an eyebrow. “That’s only thirteen?” she asked.

“The fourteenth one is Contia. It’s supposed to be... well, a flying city.” Yolani’s eyes seemed distant. “I’ve always wanted to see it; they are supposed to have the most advanced artificery in the world.”

A smile appeared on Elania’s face. It was the first time that Yolani had talked about any big goals or wants outside of fixing up the shop and putting their lives back together. “Well, why don’t we go see it?”

Yolani’s eyes widened, and she shook her head. “There’s no way... the shop... the shop won’t mind itself, and besides, that’s so far away, it would probably take a year just to get there!”

Elania shrugged. “Who knows then, maybe in the future?”

“Let’s just focus on piecing things back together here for now,” Yolani said.

Elania nodded. “Why don’t we make lunch? I’m pretty sure we skipped a meal.”

Yolani laughed. “For someone who doesn’t have to eat, you’re always looking for food.”

A grin appeared on Elania’s face. “I am part **[Darkwalker]**, you know.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’d ever let me forget,” Yolani replied, rolling her eyes. “But it’s unfair. You can eat anything without having to worry about gaining weight.”

“Does that mean we are going hungry?” Elania asked with a grin.

Yolani chuckled. “Of course not. I definitely need a break from wiring. Let’s make something.”



# CHAPTER 16 - PLANS

They moved to the kitchen and worked at the food prep like a well-oiled machine. Elania chopped the vegetables and prepared the seasonings while Yolani handled the eggs and fried some ham.

The sizzle and pop of the pan mingled with the rhythmic chop of the knife against the cutting board. It was a musical play of domesticity that grounded both of them after the events of the day.

Yolani pulled out the rest of the morning milk from the chiller, and they sat down for their meal. Yolani finished hers quickly and ended up getting back to work on her project.

Elania watched the other girl for a moment before her mind turned inward in introspection.

When she was finally done, she took everything and began to clean the kitchen and the tools they'd used to cook.

When she began to rinse the knife, her hands froze. Water poured on it as she stared at the blade.

[**Martial Bladesmanship**] made it easy for her to chop vegetables. Before she'd come to Eladu, she'd have been hard pressed to chop anything into equal-sized pieces at all.

She needed to improve her skills. There was no denying that Eladu was a violent and dangerous world, especially because of who she was. What she was.

The months had given her time to rest and relax, get to know Yolani, and begin to put herself back together from the whirlwind that had occurred after her summoning. To the point that she had become listless—lost.

Well, regardless of what she wanted to do long term, she needed to level up her skills and make sure she was capable of keeping herself, and whatever she cared about, safe. Even if she only had a fuzzy idea about what she wanted, those things were absolute.

The epiphany lit a fire inside of her.

Elania turned off the water and hurried out into the workspace. “Yolani!” Elania began hurriedly.

The other girl peeked out from behind a project, worry appearing in her expression. “Elania?”

“I need to work on my skills!” Elania replied.

Yolani blinked for a few seconds. “Okay?”

Elania shook her head. “I’ve been wasting time. I really need to work on getting the right skills and leveling them up.”

The other girl scratched her cheek with a gloved finger. “But you already have a ton of S+ rank skills. More than... well, probably anyone other than the Magisters.”

Elania nodded. “I know, but a lot of them aren’t very helpful or I’m useless at them. Especially the personality ones.”

Yolani giggled. “Well, you have to put a bit more effort into things than just trying to yell [**Negotiate**] at the person...”

“I only did that once,” Elania muttered. “The point is, I’m pretty much set to be a combatant. Even if I enjoyed making things as much as you, [**Artifice**] makes my head hurt and no matter how much you repeat things, it hasn’t gone up a single rank.”

“Because ranks generally come from understanding and aptitude. The fact you can gain levels from absorbing animals, monsters and... people... well, it’s an artifact of you being weird,” Yolani said, her expression replaced with seriousness.

“We can’t really know what creatures will level up different skills, because there isn’t any open knowledge on it,” Yolani continued. “There are places more friendly to demons in the far east, and maybe there would be more information near the scar, but it’s hard to find things like that here.”

“I think something changed when my potency stat morphed,” Elania stated. “I haven’t been able to gain skills like I used to.”

Yolani turned thoughtful before nodding. “I’ve never heard of ‘ascendant’ before, but it probably had an effect. Although the difficulty of getting new skills might just be because of how many you already have.”

“Getting blocked out of important skills I need is not a good thought,” Elania said.

“Normally when people get too many specific skills and don’t need one, they evolve them into a more general skill that covers more things. Like, if you don’t need the [**Swordsmanship**] skill, you could evolve it into something that is more general, like [**Martial Weapons**] or something like that,” Yolani explained. “And it can work backwards, too. It’s pretty free-form... otherwise people would get stuck.”

Elania let out a breath. That made her feel a lot better. She hadn’t realized that you could work through a skill backward. “Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“It never came up?” Yolani said with a frown.

Elania shook her head. She shouldn’t get frustrated at Yolani. “Sorry. Thank you for putting up with me.”

Yolani reached out and took Elania’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “It’s not a problem. I don’t mind at all, and it’s part of our deal to help each other, remember?”

“Th—thanks.” It was impossible to stop the blush that appeared on her cheeks, but Elania quickly tried to shove the first thoughts that ran through her head aside. Yolani was her friend. She was nice. She was smart. She was pretty, and funny, and—

Elania straightened and moved to one of the muskets. “Like, you made a special one of these for me, but I don’t even have a shooting skill. I don’t think **[Archery]** counts. I’d need to practice a lot before becoming an expert.”

Yolani didn’t move to follow, and a frown crossed her lips. “I don’t think practicing at the firing range is a good idea anymore, but it’s the only one in the city... firearms aren’t exactly legal unless you are in the City Watch.”

Elania turned and raised an eyebrow. “We aren’t in the City Watch, and we have an entire arsenal.”

Yolani crossed her arms. “You know what I mean. We’re the ones working on them, so of course we have access. I meant for walking around the city and the like. How many people have been carrying around muskets?”

That was a good point. The only people with the firearms she had seen so far were guardsmen. She had a pretty good idea what they’d do to someone carrying one around illegally, too...

“And going out into the caverns to practice would be a pain in the ass, even if it would be far more likely for it to be acceptable to take the musket out into the Depths,” Yolani continued.

“Maybe you can modify one not to shoot full power? We had guns like that on Earth. Paintball, Airsoft, things like that,” Elania said.

“I have no idea what those are. I could lower the power, yes. To avoid the sound and practice without scaring all the neighbors? But that doesn’t solve the fact that you can’t practice here in the shop.”

Yolani found a seat by the workbench and leaned back, adjusting her goggles. “There are too many fragile things to smash up, and we can’t let that happen again.”

Elania almost agreed without thinking, then froze, looking into the back workshop where the shower’s water pipes ran into the small crawlspace where they connected to the sewer. “What...what if we built a basement under the shop? You’re always complaining about not having space.”

Yolani stared at her for half a minute before finally blurting out a “What?”

Undeterred, Elania’s eyes sparkled with the idea. “Why not build one? Expand the shop downward?”

“Expand the shop?” Yolani echoed, the concept clearly a novel one to her.

Elania nodded enthusiastically. She could almost see the gears in Yolani’s head begin to turn like they usually did when the girl faced a complex [**Artifice**] problem. It was almost like she was being transported into a whole new world while considering the project.

Yolani finally let out a deep breath. “Expanding buildings isn’t commonly done in Neftasu, not without good reason. I’d need to investigate what’s under the shop. If there isn’t any major pipeage or sewer work running underneath, then... maybe.”

The girl’s verdant green eyes flickered to Elania. “Then there is getting permission from the City Works, who are notorious for turning

down any and every expansion request unless it was their idea in the first place. I don't even know where to start with getting a permit..."

Elania grinned widely at her. "Good thing we have a meeting coming up with Magister Keswick then, isn't it?"

The thought seemed to strike a chord with the other girl, who turned thoughtful.

"I'll start looking into it," she conceded. "But even if we make a large basement, it may not be the best for practicing shooting. I doubt we could extend it much into the street, and it's going to take a while and probably cost a lot..."

Elania's smile didn't falter. "Probably won't be great for distance shooting. But what if you build some mechanisms that can move the targets around randomly? I can practice close-quarters accuracy, swapping magazines, archery... throwing. Plenty of stuff."

Yolani's eyes lit up like she'd just been thrown a bone.

"Moving targets in a controlled environment? That react to the user's score and performance to provide variable challenge? I could... design some [**Artifice**] constructs for that purpose," she said with a growing excitement.

Elania watched as Yolani's gaze shifted to the corner of the room where a pile of gears and tools lay. It was clear the other girl was already envisioning the project.

"I should take Sergeant Harlock up on his offer for combat training as well," she said, almost to herself.

That broke Yolani out of her [**Artifice**] inspired bubble. "You think you really want to do all that? It's not like we can't afford the training from Ironfist, but I doubt they would go easy on you."

Elania shook her head. "I don't plan to join... just learn and do some actual practice with weapons. I've always just improvised...which

makes sense because that's my main combat skill, but I think some more formal instruction might be a good idea."

Yolani nodded. "I think it would be good as well. Less likely you just let them stab you in the future..."

"Hey! It's usually a good idea since it locks down their weapon and then I can hit them back," Elania countered.

Yolani frowned. "That's what I'm worried about. Eventually, someone will have something nasty to stab you with..."

Elania winced. The truth was, Yolani was right.

And someone had already stabbed her with something nasty—the **[Vorpal Dagger]** that she used had lost its poisonous effect, but at the time it had nearly melted her insides until she had purged it with a blast of **[Power]** that had chunked her internals.

**[Regeneration]** was amazing, but relying on it so much... probably would not be good for longevity. One thing she had learned was there were always more nasty things to learn about in Eladu.

Breaking free of her contemplation, she realized that Yolani was staring at her.

"What's gotten into you all the sudden?" she asked, a teasing edge to her voice.

Elania returned a small smile. "I just... I feel like I have been stuck for a while. Being pulled along... being proactive... might be a change of pace that I'd like. Instead of reacting all the time."

Yolani's expression softened. "You probably just needed some mental rest. Time to adjust to all the changes. Don't be too hard on yourself."

"That probably goes for both of us..." Elania mumbled.

"Yeah." Yolani nodded. "Well, we have mostly finished repairs on the shop. It's really just **[Artifice]** equipment needing rebuilt, anyway. I don't need you in the shop all day long, so you should have plenty

of time to work on training. We can afford the tuition. It's a good investment."

Elania smiled. "Thanks, Yolani. That means a lot."

The sound of a knock at the door interrupted. Yolani moved to answer it, but Elania still couldn't hide the slight flash of tension that ran through her whenever anyone knocked.

A man greeted the other girl and handed her a letter. Yolani closed the door back and then held the paper up and examined it on her way back into the workshop.

Sitting back down, Yolani snapped the seal and opened it without hesitation. She took a moment to read it and then offered it to Elania.

"Seems like our plans are lining up with the needs of the city," Yolani mused. "We're asked to arrive at the Magistracy tomorrow morning to see Keswick."



# CHAPTER 17 - APPROACHING RESONANCE

E lania took in a deep breath of the morning air. It was crisp and carried the scent of mana as she and Yolani stepped out of the carriage and onto the cobblestone of the Magistry's main square.

Robes of scholars and the learned dominated the dress of the people moving between the assortment of libraries and other buildings around the massive tower that jutted out of the ground and towards the cavern's ceiling.

Patrols of guards in groups of three dominated the closer area near the tower, and the open area directly around the raised stairs that led to the Magistry's base was cleared except for designated lanes for entry and egress.

She placed a hand on her forehead and looked up. The light stones overhead blazed with an intensity that felt stronger near the city's heart. The memory of their first visit came to her; it had been night then. It felt odd to be walking into the tower in broad daylight.

“It was nice of them to pay for the ride,” Yolani commented as she gathered her satchel and followed Elania out of the carriage. She held onto a shoulder as she stepped down, then scanned the open square herself.

Elania hummed agreement, her attention caught by the grid pattern engraved on the stone beneath their feet. The faint glow of the artificery was barely visible and easily missed during the day, but if it had been night, every group walking about would have been lit up for the guards to observe.

A buzzing sound, barely perceptible at first, began to fill Elania’s ears as they walked towards the tower. It grew louder, a familiar resonance that she couldn’t shake. It wasn’t painful, but it was distracting, causing her to tune out Yolani’s conversation with Henri as he and his squad escorted them.

Yolani seemed to notice and frowned at her. “Are you alright?”

Elania frowned, wondering how to explain. “There is a buzzing. I think it is coming from the engine. I can feel it from here,” she murmured.

“Let me know if it gets worse than that,” Yolani replied, giving Elania’s shoulder a squeeze. “If we need to, we can leave.”

Elania shook her head. “We need to see what this is about. Maybe it’s related to the buzzing. I don’t think that’s normal.”

Yolani bit her lip. “Buzzing isn’t normal, but if you’re the only one affected... well, there is only one reason I can think of.”

A group of guards assembled on the steps and then moved to meet them halfway. Their gear was immaculately polished, with red cloth and golden trim. Half of them carried artificery muskets, while the rest held halberds with two ribbons tied to their tips. It was very... flashy.

“Looks like this is as far as I can go,” Henri said. “Magistry Guard aren’t going to let City Watch like us into the tower.”

Yolani offered him a grateful smile. “Thank you for seeing us this far, Henri.”

Henri exchanged a few words with their new escort, then turned back toward the carriage. The new guards were polite, but...

Elania let out a sigh and focused. The buzzing tinnitus made her just want to get things over with.

As they moved up the steps toward the primary entrance, a set of double doors cut in the wall beside the massive permanently closed gates, the volume of the buzzing became even louder. It seemed like every step toward the tower made it worse.

It almost certainly was coming from the Celestial Engine.

Yolani seemed to sense her unease and moved closer, her presence a silent offer of support. Elania took another deep breath, steadying herself as they entered.

The first step inside provided an almost instant relief. “It stopped,” Elania blurted out. The guards looked at her without understanding, but Yolani nodded.

“Maybe it was some kind of resonance. The tower could have been acting to amplify it,” Yolani said.

Whatever the reason, it had become much more bearable.

The short corridor that led to the first floor lobby was lined with intricate murals depicting Neftasu and its different districts. Two guards standing to side of a set of doors straightened, thumped their polearms on the floor and then pushed the doors open.

The grandeur of the room was far more ostentatious than the City Watch’s lobby, even if the layout was similar. The golden wall trim, sets of plush furniture, even a working fountain with a pond in the corner, were all extremely... extravagant.

The back wall held a set of elevators, each one privately used by each of the Magisters. That was a relief—they would avoid the maze-like

corridors and stairways that she remembered when she and Yolani had infiltrated the building months ago.

A Magistracy worker pulled a lever, opening the elevator cage for them. As they stepped inside, the woman put them into motion.

As the elevator ascended, Elania fidgeted, the sensation of the Celestial Engine's proximity escalating to an itch beneath her skin. She could feel the silent hum inside of her chest, a sound that wasn't a sound, resonating within her core.

Yolani cast a sidelong glance her way, a wordless question in her eyes.

Elania offered her a weak smile.

The elevator came to a stop, and the cage doors slid open with a smooth motion. They stepped out and were both taken aback as they realized the room was one they had been in before. It was the library attached to the vault doors that led to the balcony of the Engine itself.

It was completely empty; no guards or researchers present.

"Miss Aetherhart, Miss Reyes, welcome," Keswick greeted, drawing their attention to the library counter. The Magister was sitting on a stool, a large tome sitting open on the counter before her.

"Please, come have a seat," she invited, gesturing to a nearby table.

As they approached, Elania's gaze flickered to the large vault door that was the Engine's entry point, the ornate threshold standing like a silent, gilded guardian. Yolani took the lead as they sat down.

"Magister Keswick," Yolani began, her tone polite, but carrying an edge of defensiveness. "I trust you've had time to consider the assistance you require from Elania? She's not been feeling well since we arrived, and I feel like it might be prudent for us to finish quickly so she doesn't have to linger here."

Keswick marked the place in her tome with a ribbon before closing it and giving them her full attention. "Your concerns are noted," she

assured. “The feeling of unease might be directly related to Elania’s purpose here.”

Well, that was ominous.

But maybe not unexpected.

Elania leaned forward, her hands clasped tightly together on the table. The itch had become a light tug, straight towards the vault door. It was like a golden thread connected her to the thing within.

It wasn’t happy.

“What exactly am I needed for, Magister Keswick? And why me specifically?” Elania asked before Yolani could continue.

Keswick came around from the counter to sit with them, placing the book she had on the table. It was leather bound, but golden ornate lettering filled the cover.

“This,” she began, her gaze locking onto Elania’s, “contains what little documentation and knowledge we possess about Neftasu’s Engine and its precise workings. It’s a divine artifice crafted by the Gods themselves. Over the millennia, much of its function has been lost to time.”

The word ‘Artifice’ caught Yolani’s attention like an eager fish on a hook. When the Magister slid the book across to her, it only took a few seconds before Yolani had flipped open the cover and was reading the first page.

“Relain’s tampering siphoned its power into hundreds of mana shards, many of which were used in the process that created you,” Keswick continued.

Elania’s brows knitted together in a frown. “I was summoned here, not created.”

Keswick shook her head. “Your body was created, while your consciousness was conjured from another... well, time, place... realm, or

universe. We have no way of knowing the truth. It's the very reason such an exorbitant amount of **[Power]** was required."

Elania frowned. "But why? Why to go through so much trouble to use so much power on it?"

Keswick inhaled. "Aurorism celebrates the seven gods, while abhorring the seven demons. They make a clear delineation between the two."

Elania shook her head. Religion? Well, he had been a crazy bishop in a cult. "What does that have to do with it?"

"They are the same. They were not different. System-wise, the 'Gods' were Demons as well. The difference between them was simply their morality. Relain was attempting to summon the Demon Elania'onbe'tila, who was the creator of Neftasu's Celestial Engine," Keswick explained.

Yolani lowered the book and stared at Keswick. "They messed up the summoning and got Elania instead because of her name?"

Keswick nodded and looked straight at Elania. "For whatever reason, that is what occurred. The amount of **[Power]** used during the summoning explains your unique traits as a Demoness. That you have developed so quickly is directly related to that extreme potential you possess."

Potential. There was that word again. Elania pulled up her **[Status]** screen and looked at the offending line that had changed after her dip in divinity.

### **[Level 121 Lesser Demon (Ascendant)]**

Was it a good idea to reveal the change? Elania glanced over at Yolani, who was looking back at her with concern.

Well, it was relevant, and the Magister might have insight on it. "About that. After coming out of the Celestial Engine, my potential

stat changed. Instead of reading really high, it just reads ‘Ascendant’ now.”

Keswick stared at her for a moment, then grunted. “Ascendants... Then it’s actually true. You have an incredible potential and could be walking down the same path as the Gods themselves did... or perhaps a new one altogether.”

Alarm bells started going off in Elania’s head. This was all a bit much.

“Are you saying Elania is a Goddess?” Yolani blurted.

# CHAPTER 18 - APPROACHING RESONANCE (CONTINUED)

Elania glanced at Yolani skeptically. The question pounded in her ears. She was very much not a God, or she'd know about it. Right?

Keswick shot the idea down with a shake of her head. "She is not a Goddess."

The Magister turned her gaze onto Elania. It felt much too like she was appraising her. "But maybe after a thousand years, she could become something like one. The point is her potential is limitless. Unlike you or I, Miss Aetherhart."

Elania looked down at her hands. "What does this have to do with me being here, though? What does it have to do with the Engine?"



With a theatrical flourish, Keswick held up her hand, conjuring a magic bubble between them. “The Engine creates a magical pressure around itself that prevents the weight of the earth from crushing this underground realm.”

They had just read that in one of Yolani’s books the day before. Elania’s hands slowly formed into fists as she squeezed them. “Yes? Are you suggesting the city and region are in danger? That something is wrong with the Celestial Engine?”

Keswick’s expression was grave. “That’s precisely why you’re here,” she said pointedly. “The Engine has been... discordant since... that day. It has been growing more so, by a measurable amount each day. I am not surprised you started sensing it already. It is your unique connection to the Engine that I hope to investigate and possibly use to restore it.”

Yolani shot up out of her seat, leaning forward with a furious look on her face. “You can’t throw her back into it. That’s a death sentence!”

“Calm yourself, Miss Aetherhart. I have no intention of doing so, and I doubt that such an action would solve things permanently in any case,” Keswick replied calmly.

“Then what?” Yolani said with slightly less hostility.

Keswick let out a tense breath. “Elania. You are a demoness, and demons have the ability to manipulate and transform based on their essences. Yours is primarily a mix of three: Human, Darkwalker, and now, Divinity. I would like you to exchange essences with the Engine.”

Elania blinked, confused. “How will that help?”

“In the same way that Demons have permanent affinities that dictate the mix of essences they themselves produce, the Celestial Engine works the same way. We believe that when the Seraph was consumed

by the Engine, it shoved this balance out of alignment,” Keswick explained.

“Divinity is one of my affinities now... but I’m not sure how you knew,” Elania mumbled.

“Please, it’s very obvious to anyone with mana sight. Or anyone with eyes, for that matter. Have you not looked in a mirror?” Keswick raised an eyebrow.

Oh. Her golden eyes. It had been remarked upon by many, and there had been no missing it. It was just the implications had not been clear. While golden eyes weren’t common, it wasn’t exactly unique... was it?

“Okay. Yeah. We noticed some things... but even if you’re right, I don’t think I can actually separate my essences out? There are also... probably some chickens involved,” Elania replied.

The thought of interacting with the Engine again was both daunting and... intriguing. It was impossible not to feel a mix of excitement and fear, with her mind racing with the potential implications.

“What happened to the Gods? If they were like me, then... did they manage to... return home?” Elania asked.

Yolani shot her a worried look, but Elania’s attention hung on Keswick’s answer.

“I do not know,” Keswick replied. “What we know is that they fought amongst themselves. Eventually there was a conflict, and then they disappeared without a trace, leaving only their works and creations behind.”

Yolani’s hand found hers under the table and squeezed it. Elania glanced at her and smiled weakly. She wasn’t sure what she would have done without Yolani’s constant support since they had met.

“Well, if you think I can help fix... whatever is going wrong, I am willing to try,” Elania said.

Keswick nodded and stood up, glancing at the book sitting in front of Yolani. "That will have to remain here, Miss Aetherhart. If you wish to continue reading it, you can stay in the library until we are finished."

Yolani glanced down at the book, then shook her head. "No. That's alright, I'll come with you."

Magister Keswick nodded. "Very well. Follow me." The woman turned and headed for the vault door.

Elania shared a glance with Yolani, and then they followed.

When they came to a stop outside the large metal door, Elania frowned. Her memory of it was hazy, and the events that had transpired after she had fallen into the Engine had never really firmed up other than a few vague notions. The buzz seemed to intensify as Keswick began to rotate the door's opening mechanism.

It was like a bank vault, just without the fancy locks. There was a noticeable pop as the door swung open. Keswick didn't linger and stepped through, gesturing for them to follow.

She remembered the large balcony that overlooked the Engine, but rather going to the railing and looking over the edge, Keswick led them to the inside of the tower's wall. A small lift elevator was there, just large enough for the three of them to stand on it.

"It's best to have a firm hold on the railing before we descend," Keswick advised.

They both placed their hands on the lift's railing.

The sudden plunge was rapid, and Yolani let out a yelp before sliding an arm around Elania's middle and holding on tightly.

The close contact was enough to heat Elania's cheeks, but she didn't mind. To be fair, her extra strength made holding onto the lift easy, and she was much easier to hold on to than just the railing. The wind was cool as it whipped their clothes into a flapping frenzy.

Once they settled into the rapid descent, they had the chance to examine the Celestial Engine from the side, and up close. It seemed like the machine expanded the lower they went, the walls of the contraction reaching out until it was only a few meters away from them.

She was sure that they had plunged far below the base level of the Magistracy and were well below the average height level of the city by the time they reached the bottom. Maybe level with the lake and waters in the canyons that sat below the city?

As they neared the bottom, the lift slowed to a safer speed, and Yolani moved away with a mumbled apology.

Regret thumbed its way into Elania's chest. She wanted to tell the other girl she could have stayed like that as long as she wanted... but Keswick was there and as the lift clicked into the floor, her confidence in the thought evaporated.

The cloak of mana in the air felt heavy and thick. It was like breathing warm, humid air. Except it was raw **[Power]**... It was strong enough to remind her of her mana shard, before she had good control and it had innately seeped into her just by having the shard close to her skin.

Except this was on an entirely different scale. Like standing inside a mana shard, even?

"It's incredible," Yolani murmured, following behind Keswick closely, her attention riveted on the arcane looking consoles and levers. There were hundreds of them, but most of the panels were dead, obviously turned off. One large panel that sat at the front of the control area and closest to the Engine itself had a green line shimmering on what appeared to be a monitor.

It was sloping gradually downward.

Keswick's voice cut through the awe. "Typically, every Magister exchanges essence with the Engine to keep it functioning. But ever since

the... incident, this exchange has been... problematic. Instead of the Engine stabilizing, it seems to become worse with each maintenance.”

A frown appeared on Elania’s face. Why would the Magisters exchanging essence with the Engine help it? Didn’t that contradict the earlier explanation of what was going wrong? Yolani glanced at her, as if she had the same thought.

Keswick stopped beside a large pedestal with a dimly glowing orb that sat below the monitor. She gestured to it with a smile. “The exchange process is simple and works on its own. You simply place your hands on the orb, and an equalization will occur.”

“That’s it?” Elania asked.

“For Elania’s **[Divinity]** essence to be high enough to improve the engine’s ratio, it would have to be below thirty percent approximately... why is the Celestial Engine’s ratio so low?” Yolani asked with an edge in her voice.

Keswick met the girl’s gaze squarely. “The Engine always has had a low ratio. It’s a cyclical generator for **[Power]**, but it utilizes a significant amount of harvesting to drive the process. Those that enter the Dwerven Dungeon inside the city...”

Elania’s shoulders tensed up. “They become the fuel for it.”

Yolani’s hands tightened into balls.

“Just so. The Engine generates mana shards and controls the encounters, engineering them so that the rate of production is in balance with the requirements for the Engine itself as well as to continue to encourage further ventures into it,” Keswick stated.

Elania took a deep breath. Yolani’s father had perished inside the dungeon... and she had a memory that somehow reminded her of him. The other girl had even told her she’d delivered a message from him, although that part was blank. The pieces clicked together.

She didn't know how she felt about it, other than a general feeling of that it was wrong.

There was one fact that made her push that aside, though. If the Engine failed or the cycle stopped... everyone, and everything in Nef-tasu's bubble would die.

That would be...

Yolani's hand settled on her shoulder. "It's up to you if you want to try. We could go home and think about it more if you want."

Keswick's expression turned grave, her lips turning into a frown.

Elania wondered for a moment. If she made that decision, would they have to fight the Magister to escape again?

She shook her head. "I'll do what I can."

Yolani followed closely as she stepped up to the orb.

"Why not cease the essence exchanges, then? If the Magisters' human essence is simply diluting the Engine, stopping should solve the problem, right? Let the Engine build up its divine essence on its own," Yolani said.

Keswick's silence stretched thin, the question hanging in the air. The gears and arcane mechanisms continued to dance around them, oblivious to the tension.

The Magister finally spoke. "It would slow the degradation, perhaps, but it wouldn't halt it. The Engine's balance has been too disrupted. It's trying to restore its lost energy, and by doing so, it is diluting the divine essence to levels low enough to cause strain. If it continues, it will damage itself before its **[Power]** levels have returned to its normal operating level."

Yolani stared at the graph and then reached out and turned a knob.

Keswick reached out a hand toward her. "Don't touch—"

The green graph zoomed out, showing a longer time period. The periodic blips in the slowly sloping line hinted at the exact timing of the Magisters' maintenances.

"It was only half the truth you told us," Yolani said flatly. "The maintenance you've been doing isn't for the Engine, it's for yourselves."

# CHAPTER 19 - APPROACHING RESONANCE (FINALE)

Keswick lowered her hand. “The Engine doesn’t need our essence—we rely on the exchange to maintain the city. If we stop, we will lose our powers and connection to the Engine. The city would be left vulnerable. We’ve reduced the rate of our exchanges to the lowest amount possible, but the Engine still hasn’t recovered.”

A well of annoyance rose within her, and Elania looked back at the orb. “It doesn’t matter,” she said icily. “Either way, I have to try, or the city is doomed.”

Keswick nodded gratefully. “Just place your hands on the orb. With your mana manipulation, it should be instinctive what needs to be done.”



Elania tuned the rest of the room out and placed her hands on the cool metal. Almost immediately, she could feel the connection snap into place.

**[Outsider detected.]**

**[Authority Level Recognized: Maximum.]**

**[Vessel Status: 1526/1526]**

**[Equilibrium: Enable? Y/N.]**

It wasn't what she had expected, but it reminded her of when she'd first arrived in the city and had to pay her 'taxes' to enter. Well, there was only one obvious thing to do.

**[Equilibrium: Enabled]**

The thrum of the Engine pulsed stronger, matching the beat of her heart as she closed her eyes. It felt like a river was flowing out of her while another one replaced the lost essence. Her entire body felt warm and tingled, and with her eyes closed, it almost felt like she was floating in a warm bath.

Glimpses of the city from high above near the cavern's ceiling flashed inside of her mind, a view of the Magistracy, of the City Watch Headquarters, of the bridges and waterfalls all rushing along.

The buzzing in her ears, and the itch under her skin that she'd nearly grown used to came to an immediate stop.

The flow stopped on its own... but something was not right.

The sound of the engine hummed in her head... it had grown smoother, slightly less discordant, but not repaired. Her small contribution of divinity was... just a drop of what was needed.

That was frustrating. She could feel the difference between the pools inside of her, and she still had more she could give. But she didn't have a way to manage it...

Elania inhaled as she recalled a key detail. There had been a way offered to her...

She had her perk selection choice still, and there was one option that somehow seemed very relevant and useful.

**[You have gained the Soul Management perk!]**

**[You have spent all your available perk selections.]**

**[Perks: (Soul Siphon - Visible) (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration) (Demonic Transformation) \*(Soul Management)\*]**

All physical sensation suddenly washed away until she was cradled in a warm bath of liquid. She opened her eyes. The vast ocean before her didn't burn her eyes, and it suddenly lit up with an ambient light that seemed to come from every direction.

Several pools in the water began to form, each with a different color. She knew what they were instinctively, just by looking at them.

A pale, inviting beige showed her a scene from Aetherhart's Artifice; Yolani and her were eating ham sandwiches and chatting. It was her humanity. It was the largest of the pools, taking up nearly half the circle that formed in front of her.

A thread seemed to weave its way into the pool of humanity, shining and pulsing with energy. Somehow, she knew it was her connection to Yolani through their contract.

Black; it was her **[Darkwalker]** side. A scene of her prowling through the caves on the hunt turned into one where she was sitting on her haunches, getting ear rubs and scratches from her favorite human.

The third largest pool was a diffuse cloud of gold that shimmered in the ocean. She saw no scenery or other features inside of it, instead it pulsed with a constant warmth that seemed to fill everything with energy and **[Power]**.

Nearly crushed between the other three was a small blob of milky white liquid. There was a vision of a coup of hens, each laying eggs.

Elania winced internally when she saw she was sitting on one of the nests. It was the **[Chicken]** essence from her latest meal...

The sensation of sound-but-not-really-sound pulled her attention to the side. There was a giant whirlpool sucking down... something. To the other side was the exact opposite... a pressure of new substance flowing through.

Somehow, she could tell it was mostly **[Human]** essence flowing through it, but tinged with a small sprinkle of others, especially **[Divinity]**.

What she needed to do was fairly clear. The weird dreamlike world seemed to obey her will, so she pictured a firehose sucking out the golden divinity from her pool while leaving the others alone.

The desired tube formed from nothing, and then she felt a lurch in her chest as the divinity began to be sucked out of her.

Panic at the sensation almost forced her to kink the hose and stop the transfer, but the turbulent feeling inside calmed as pressure from the incoming whirlpool deposited a mix of fresh **[Human]** and **[Divinity]** into her essence pools.

Since she was effectively filtering out only the **[Divinity]** that pool quickly began to shrink while her **[Human]** pool grew thicker.

Before the golden essence became too thin, she practiced controlling the rate of flow by stopping it and starting it a few times. When the divinity was nearly empty, she saw something new.

A golden sphere was half submerged in the shallow **[Divinity]**, with tiny amounts of golden liquid forming on its shell. It began to roll toward the hose and Elania shut down the connection for good.

She needed time for her **[Divinity]** to regenerate.

She was done. For now. It was the best she could do.

The world flashed around her, and she was back in the Celestial Engine's control room.

“Elania? Elania!” Yolani was up close to her face, waving a hand in front of her eyes and calling her name.

Elania blinked and reached up to take Yolani’s hand. “Hi? Are you alright?”

“That’s what I’ve been asking you! You’ve been zoned out for a few minutes!” Yolani hissed.

Keswick was standing at the monitor. “You did it. The levels have gone back up. The Engine is running more smoothly than in over a month.”

Sure enough, the green line had spiked upwards, returning to the level it had been a half dozen Magister ‘maintenances’ before.

“But it’s still sloping downward...” Elania whispered.

“Your eyes,” Yolani mumbled.

Elania blinked. “What?”

Yolani fished in her bag, then pulled out a mirror.

Elania looked in it. It was her—but her eyes had changed to a deep sapphire blue, with sparkling glints of gold that shined like glitter in them.

The discordance that had been a constant hum through her body had completely evaporated. Whether that was because she had less **[Divinity]** essence, or because the Engine was operating smoother, she wasn’t sure.

Keswick turned to them. “This is excellent. With your assistance, I believe we can stave off disaster and return the engine to its previous function before it was disrupted while maintaining our current practices.”

Elania withdrew her hands from the orb slowly, the warmth of the Engine’s essence lingering on her palms. A frown etched itself onto her face. Maintaining their current practices... of draining the divinity

from the Engine to maintain their... immortality? Power? She wasn't sure.

"How quickly can you restore your **[Divinity]** essence? Do you know how many days? It's important we measure your recovery speed, and possibly reduce your production and consumption of other essences. For starters, ending your contract should reduce the transfer of **[Human]** essence from Miss Aetherhart," Keswick said, her voice reaching a rapid clip.

Elania stared at her. "No."

Keswick blinked in surprise. "What?"

Yolani moved to stand beside Elania, crossing her arms, her posture rigid. "Our contract isn't anyone else's to be canceled or modified. If we wish, we can modify it to assist."

Elania nodded. "I've helped you, and I am willing to come periodically to help maintain the Engine, but not for free. Right now, we have some needs from the City Works."

The gears turning behind Keswick's eyes were almost visible. "Of course, Miss Aetherhart, Miss Reyes. What is it you require?"

Yolani raised her chin and met Keswick's gaze unflinchingly. "We're considering an expansion of Aetherhart's Artifice. A basement to serve as extra space and additional workspace. We'll need permits, assistance from City Works personnel, and materials."

Keswick nodded almost immediately. "I see. Given the circumstances, I believe arrangements can be made immediately. Your contributions today have been invaluable and will continue to be so."

The Magister checked several more panels before finally being satisfied. As the three of them headed towards the lift to return to the library, she took hold of Elania's arm.

“Our mandate is to safeguard the Engine and the city. You’re vitally important for that now—critically so. We will be keeping tabs on you,” Keswick said.

# CHAPTER 20

## - FORGED

## PURPOSE

E lania's steps mingled with the buzz of the city as she meandered through the Artisan District. The rhythmic clanging of metal and the roar of the forges not far from Artificer Row had drawn her closer.

Her meeting scheduled with Sergeant Harlock was still some time away, and she found herself on her own, without Yolani, for the first time in... well, a while.

Wagons were busy hauling various resources back and forth, and she weaved between them as she moved between the streets.

When she came to one of the larger forgeworks, she stopped at the corner and watched, almost entranced, as a large cart full of coal was unloaded into a pile for the bloomery forges.

The men inside worked with a synchronized urgency, funneling ore into a large crucible. The molten metal glowed like a captured star, its

fierce light reflecting on sweat-licked faces as they moved the crucible over a large mold and began to pour.

The heat washed over her as she stepped across the street to get a closer look.

In another area, workers used tongs to grip hot pieces of metal, their hammers descending in a relentless cadence. Each strike produced sparks, scales, and flakes that danced through the air, glinting briefly before settling to the ground.

The transformation from raw to refined was a mesmerizing process she had never really paid any attention to before.

Elania enjoyed the spectacle, the heat, the noise—it was life, it was energy, it was the city. Yet, there was a part of her that felt detached, as if she were observing the scene from afar.

She'd contributed to the city the day before, helping with the Celestial Engine. No one would argue that it hadn't been vital, but somehow her special circumstances felt... unearned.

Almost all the events that had led up to the climactic encounter in the Magistracy those months prior had been her reacting to things... like a leaf caught up in a tornado.

Somehow, she and Yolani had managed to land on their feet, but the last week had shown there were more gusts to come.

She was sure of that.

They needed to be prepared for them. Or at least prepare for them the best they could.

Elania moved on, continuing down the street toward the gates to the Mercenary District. The Ironfist Headquarters wasn't too far into what was charitably considered the 'slums' of the city, but she didn't want to linger too long.

She checked her **[HUD]** clock and confirmed she had another thirty minutes before she was supposed to arrive.



As she left the clang of forges behind, she entered a street full of shops and outdoor stalls. There weren't as many people hawking their wares as in the central square's main bazaar, but the quality was generally much higher—and the items much cheaper, especially compared to the shops and market in the Conclave district.

It was a perfect ratio, in Elania's opinion. She couldn't help but have her attention drawn in by a tailor's shop where vibrantly dyed fabrics hung behind the windows.

The steady beat of a cobbler's hammer echoed out from a leather shop, where various backpacks, shoes, belts, and other accessories hung on visible racks.

The next shop that caught her attention was an arms dealer. A large sign hung over the open door, and inside she could see dozens of racks of blades, spears, shields, and everything else in between.

Almost fittingly, there was an armor shop next which had various leather and chain-mail armors on display, with a single suit of heavier armor of the same style that the City Guard wore.

At the end of the street, a small stall had a dozen felted trays laid out with various accessories that sparkled in the cavern city's light.

Copper and silver rings with tiny, detailed engravings made up most of the offerings, but in the center of the table was a single tray with glittering gemstones adorning the craftwork.

Several necklaces hung as well, with their delicate silver chains and clear gems drawing attention like a lodestone.

"Good day, miss," the merchant said. "See anything you like?"

Elania's gaze drifted over the items. A particular silver bracelet with an intricate knotwork design drew her closer.

**[Silver Bracelet]**

[Identify] indicated it was exactly what it seemed, with no obvious magical properties, but it was beautiful in its simplicity regardless. She picked it up and examined it further, the cool metal gracing her fingers.

“Everything,” Elania remarked. “I like the bracelet, though.”

“Aye, it suits you,” the merchant replied with a knowing nod. “A warrior’s grace, even in peace.”

Elania smiled faintly, but she set the bracelet down. “Not today, thank you.”

She moved on, her thoughts drifting back to the task at hand as she reached the edge of the district. Her HUD hinted she needed to pick up the pace. The guards at the gate stiffened as soon as she joined the line of people waiting to pass through.

The moment she saw them relax, Elania glanced over her shoulder. Sure enough, she spotted Henri’s people following from an almost unnoticeable distance behind her.

Well, having shadows had a few benefits, so she didn’t really mind their presence. Especially when they had the telepathy available to tell the gate guards not to hassle her.

Once she was through, it only took a few blocks to reach the Iron-fist Mercenary Headquarters—a large square building that stood out from its neighbors simply due to its pristine maintenance.

The only entry point was through two large double doors flanked by a smaller personnel entry door. Four guards stood rigid and alert, several pedestrians giving them a wide berth as they walked.

When she approached the two by the smaller entry, they tensed up.

“Hello. I’m Elania. Sergeant Harlock should be expecting me?” she offered from a safe distance.

The guards glanced at each other and relaxed. “Demon,” the first one said.

The other nodded. "She's the one. He acknowledged her with a nod. "Miss Reyes, Sergeant Harlock mentioned you'd be coming." He gestured to the door. "Right this way."

Elania followed him inside and into a narrow stone corridor that seemed to swallow her. It would not be a pleasant space for someone with claustrophobia, that was for sure.

The tunnel opened into a lobby with a warm atmosphere that was thrumming with the undercurrent of some of the less rowdy taverns that she had seen.

Tables were scattered about, their surfaces littered with tankards and plates, and a dozen out-of-uniform mercenaries were chatting comfortably with their comrades.

Her escort led her toward a reception desk that had shelves of books behind it, and she even spotted a bulletin board that seemed to have requests posted.

She pinched herself to make sure she wasn't seeing things... it reminded her of an adventure guild thing.

There was another door that he opened, and she slipped inside to another room of more of the same. A few mercenaries glanced her way, their conversations hitching for the briefest of moments.

Harlock was clearly visible at one of the nearby tables, reading from a ledger.

Harlock looked up and greeted her. "Elania. Welcome." A nod to the guard who had walked her in dismissed the man, and the sergeant gestured for her to sit.

"Sergeant," Elania said, a familiar tension entering her stomach. She let out a breath and tried to release it. Starting new things was always nerve-wracking. "I'm ready to begin."

"Glad to have you here. Training's not cheap, but it's worth every silver," he said. His hand reached out, and she handed him the

agreed-upon payment—a handful of small silvers that clinked into his palm. In truth, it was far below the going rate for hands-on advice from an expert.

Almost immediately, it felt like the rest of the room had forgotten about her, too. Maybe paying customers weren't considered so much as an interloper as a guest?

Harlock pocketed the payment and stood. "This way," he said, gesturing to another door.

They passed more mercenaries, some cleaning weapons, others binding wounds or polishing armor. There was still a faint tension in the air as they caught sight of her; these were warriors in their den, and outsiders weren't common.

At least, that was the best theory she could put together. Harlock ignored all of it.

The corridor spilled into a large, open space that reminded her of a gymnasium. It was alive with the sounds of training—the clash of wooden swords, the twang of crossbows, and the rhythmic thud of boots on the ground. Men and women sparred in pairs, each set of movements a dance of potential violence.

A group of a dozen runners paced themselves around the edge of the room and passed in front of them, their breaths on the edge of becoming ragged and their faces and skin plastered with visible sheens of sweat.

They crossed to an unused corner with racks holding various forms of wooden training weapons. Harlock turned to her and grinned. "What do you think?"

Elania's eyes swept the room again, taking in the details and motion. It was a world of strength and skill, of warriors honing their bodies to their purpose.

"It's impressive," she replied. "An entire ecosystem of training."

Harlock grunted, his lips switching into a half-smile. “That it is. Now let’s find your place in it.”

# CHAPTER 21 - FORGED PURPOSE (FINALE)

Elania's gaze followed Harlock's gesture to the group that was running. They'd already almost made it around for another lap in the time it had taken to walk to the small area with the wooden training weapons.

"Most recruits train with a group when they're taken on," Harlock said. "But for you, it'll be personal attention."

"I didn't say I was joining the Company," Elania said before frowning. "I paid for instruction."

"Payment was a token. The Ironfist won't train just anyone," Harlock replied as he turned to walk toward the weapon racks.

"Then why are you training me?" Elania asked.

“We’ve worked together before; Ranolf’s chickens. The Hornar. I like to think that I’m a good judge of character, and I think you and the lass will remember the favor and repay it,” Harlock said. He examined the rack of wooden swords and selected two.

He tossed her the weapon, and she caught it by the hilt, but the confusion felt like a spike in her chest. “So, what? You’re just helping because you, or the Ironfist, want something?”

“Everyone wants something, Elania. Some might want to use you. Others to be used by you. Some might abuse you... or want to be abused. Give and take—I believe helping you and Miss Aetherhart will be good for the company,” Harlock replied.

“I thought you were a Sergeant, but that sounds awfully political for the rank,” Elania replied.

She moved the sword in her hand, her body somehow knowing what to do as she made a few loose swings and twirls with the weapon. It was some type of fungal wood that had been turned into fibers. **[Tower-cap]** weaved into a blade, with iron or another type of metal inside the handle for weighting?

Wasn’t there some kind of Japanese practice sword like that? It certainly resembled something that she’d seen in an anime before, even if she couldn’t recall anything specific.

“Don’t worry overmuch about it. Let’s focus on the lesson,” Harlock continued. “You have raw talent, and I’ve seen you fight. I know you have several high-level combat skills already.”

Elania nodded. “I’ve been relying on **[Improved Combat]** at Rank S+ as my main skill. It’s served me well since my style... is well...”

“Improved. I’m not surprised. It is generally the first combat skill anyone learns, especially if they aren’t formally trained. At Rank S+ it is no wonder that you adapt to things so quickly in a fight,” Harlock said.

“In Ranolf’s Kennels you showed what your **[Darkwalker]** form can do, and against the Hornar Mother you showed the potency of your **[Mana Manipulation]** and **[Power]**,” he continued. “But none of it involved intricate weapon work. I’d like to see what you can do.”

“I have **[Martial Bladesmanship]**,” Elania said as she took up what felt like a combat ready stance.

Harlock placed an arm behind his back and placed his sword between them. “When you’re ready.”

Elania nodded, took a breath and released it along with her tension, then sprang forward. She avoided pressing any **[Power]** into her body, considering it was a spar. Their blades cracked together; she tried to dart under the strike to come at him from the side, but his sword was there waiting and she had to jump back to avoid an uppercut.

They made several more exchanges. She did her best to land a hit, but somehow, he always kept his weapon in place to prevent her from reaching him. Even when she tried to speed up.

She let free a small drop of **[Power]** into her body to increase her agility, but as soon as she did, his blade smacked her hand. Her weapon went flying and landed in the sand nearby.

“There’s no doubt that you could overpower me if you use your **[Power]** abilities, but what we want to work on is your baseline. There’s a large disconnect between your own skill and talent and how much you are relying on your skills,” Harlock said.

She listened as she fetched her weapon. When she turned around, he had slid his weapon into his belt.

“I had no training at all. Most of my skills are from absorbing them. I basically got the skills without any of the work,” Elania said as she walked back.

Harlock nodded. “That can make it difficult. Because you will be relying on your skill to do all the heavy lifting, unfortunately there is



no quick fix for that except from experience.” He walked toward her. “Now, let’s start with the basics. Show me your stance.”

Elania positioned herself as she would in an actual fight, her feet spread for balance, her grip on the blade tight but not rigid. Harlock circled her, his eyes critical.

“Good foundation,” he assessed. “But you’re too tense. A relaxed body reacts faster. Loosen up.”

She did her best to do as instructed, letting her muscles relax without sacrificing their readiness. He seemed pleased with the adjustment and moved to correct her grip on the sword.

He stepped back. “Now, let’s see how you move,” he said. “We’ll start with a simple over head slice, then returning to guard.”

She followed his instruction through a half dozen different strikes. For each movement, he corrected or modified her posture until he was satisfied that she was carrying them out correctly.

“These are the basic strikes. We’ll now combine them to form training kata, which are simply different combinations,” Harlock explained.

There were almost twenty distinct movements in the first kata, and she was getting worried that it would be too long to remember by the end.

Harlock seemed satisfied. “A kata is not generally for combat, but is for your daily routine. They can become quite meditative.” “Daily routine?” Elania blinked.

“You’ll be repeating this kata—it’s called the basic fist—every day. I suggest either in the mornings after waking up, or in the evenings before bed. In either case, it’s good to stick to a schedule,” Harlock said.

Elania nodded. “Alright. I can do that.” She glanced back at the weapon racks. “What about the other weapons?”

“They each have their own specialized uses, but since you have **[Martial Blademanhip]** I believe it is best to stick with a sword for now,” Harlock replied. “Later, we can work through the rest of the weapons. Although we need to work on hand-to-hand martial arts before that.”

“I was actually hoping to ask a few things about another skill. I have **[Archery]** and **[Throwing]**. Archery is pretty low, and I’ve never actually used a bow, but Throwing is also S+ rank. I was wondering, though... if I can change my skill for using a musket,” Elania said.

Harlock grunted. “The law prohibits anyone outside of the City Watch from using firearms, so we don’t have any here. I can see how you might be an exception to that law, though.”

“How do I actually go about combining the skills, though? Like, instead of three specialized ones, what about a general ‘Ranged Combat’ or something?” Elania asked.

“Ah. I see what you mean. That might work, yes. I believe muskets utilize the same skill as crossbows, actually. If you practice with one until you gain the skill, you should be able to direct the **[System]** into morphing the three skills into what you want,” he explained.

He pushed her through the kata again, this time without as many hints. She managed it, but a thin sheen of sweat had formed, and she was puffing. “Without using any **[Power]** that’s a bit of a workout.”

“You’ve got good instincts, but you’re relying too much on your ‘skills’—and I don’t mean your ability to fight. They will ensure that you have a good baseline, but they’re no substitute for hard-earned training and knowledge. Right now, you’re more than capable of simply overpowering your foes, but that won’t always be the case,” Harlock continued. “There is always someone stronger.”

Elania lowered her sword, considering his words. It was true. She had leaned heavily on her innate demon abilities since arriving in the

world. Through all that, though, she thought she had at least picked up some skill. Or at least ability to use her synergies together... effectively.

She'd even fought the Magisters! Although she'd essentially lost, the fight had been four on one. Five if you included Relain, too. "So, what you're saying is that the skills are just a starting point?"

"Exactly," Harlock confirmed with a nod. "They're a quick fix, and can act as a foundation, but true strength comes from building on that. Understanding the why and how, not just the what."

"Well, I sort of figured that. That's why I ended up asking for some training," Elania replied.

"Which will take much more than a single lesson, and a lifetime of dedication," Harlock said. "I also have a suggestion. **[Artifice]** would make an excellent addition to your arsenal, considering your ability to manipulate and store **[Power]**. I would recommend learning some from Miss Aetherhart and figuring out how to utilize some of the tools she uses."

Elania frowned. "I actually have **[Artifice]** as a skill, but... I'm really not proficient in it. It's like studying for math..."

Harlock chuckled. "Artifice is complicated. No one can deny that. However, it's a wide discipline. Ask her to teach you about the tools, and less the science."

That was smart. Why hadn't she thought of that? She'd just ended up avoiding it altogether...

Elania nodded. "I'll ask about them. Maybe if I could learn to use a basic wand or two, that'd be helpful. Or maybe some of those magic-nullification bombs..."

The possibilities began to bloom in her mind like an opening flower. Integrating some of Yolani's weapons into her fighting style.

Adding the musket would definitely open up new avenues and strategies for her to explore, too.

“Just don’t forget about your new kata training. There’s a reason why daily drills are a staple in any warrior’s regimen,” Harlock said.

He eyed her belt which held her [**Vorpal Dagger**]. “And you might consider equipping yourself with a longer weapon. The dagger is an excellent choice up close, but your [**Martial Bladesmanship**] will apply equally to a larger weapon, and with your strength, that should be no issue. The extra reach and leverage would do you well.”

The weapon shop she had seen on the way to the Ironfist HQ came to mind immediately. “I’ll look into it.”

Something that could channel [**Power**] without destroying itself would be great. For a second, she remembered how Eziel had felt when she had used the holy seraph sword. That would have been perfect...

“We aren’t finished,” Harlock said. “In fact, we’ve only just started.”

Elania’s whole body tensed up as she realized she’d been lost in thought. “Uhh. Sorry.”

Harlock gave her a stern look. “Let’s move on to the martial arts—and then we’ll discuss how you should be applying your special demonic abilities when fighting ‘regular’ opponents.”

She nodded.

It was going to be a long day.

# CHAPTER 22 - SOLITUDE, BLUEPRINTS, AND THOUGHTS

The quiet solitude of the artifice shop was enveloping as Yolani sorted through a new crate of supplies.

She hummed to the soft melody of the artifice energy emanating from the walls and trinkets that was just barely audible. The box held a brand-new set of pencils and a large roll of parchment that she wanted to use to draft the blueprints for the shop expansion.

Setting the items she needed on a cleared off workbench, she let her mind drift back to the initial rebuilding of the shop with Elania. Together they had taken the fragmented shards of their lives and, piece by piece, begun to reconstruct something.

As she unrolled the parchment, her hand paused as she considered the small community that had formed around them. Henri and the City Watch, the few other artificers who she did direct business with, the Ironfist mercenaries, and the meetings with Magisters Bannon and Keswick.

Her reputation as a [**Master Artificer**] was no longer an unrealized future, but a well-established reality. There was a certain pride that came with that recognition. She had put her father's teachings and lessons to full use and mastered the family craft.

But it was tinged with an undercurrent of guilt and sadness.

Her father hadn't lived to see it, but somehow, she thought maybe he knew. Especially after Elania's message from him.

The shop and its regrowth had been a shield, a distraction from the pain and void left by his murder by her uncle and his plot with Relain. Each successive artifice was a brick in the fortress she'd built around herself to ward off her grief.

Every time she had felt like she was going to fall off its ramparts, Elania had pushed her forward. Even if it was clumsy... even if it was full of improvisations... life had gone on and they had found a way to make things work.

The blank canvas was filled with possibilities, and as she sharpened the first pencil, her mind was awash with mental constructions of the space underneath the shop. She'd already measured things herself, going so far as to climb down into the sewers and gauge their extent as best she could.

The rest was much harder. The crawl space under the shop narrowed to where she was worried about getting wedged between the floor and the stone beneath.

It was good enough to get an idea, although the City Works hopefully had more detailed schematics for the street construction and knowledge of what was underground—if it wasn't just solid stone.

Her humming resumed as her fingers began to dance and sketch with the assistance of a straight ruler, the future of Aetherhart's Artifice forming on the table with each precise line.

Time flew by as she lost herself in the work. When she had a rough outline of the blueprint—built from measurements taken from her notes—she leaned back in her chair and let out a deep sigh. Justice had been served on the man who had ensnared her father, but it had done very little to assuage the hollowness that gnawed at her.

Needing a break, she got up and went to the kitchen and began to brew some hot tea on what Elania called her 'coffee pot.'

A smile appeared on Yolani's face. Elania's arrival had been like a star streaking unexpectedly into her life, upsetting her existence with both chaos and solace. The red-haired demoness—the human girl from earth—had filled the void left by her father's death.

Elania gave her someone to engage with daily and provided the companionship that had prevented her from falling into the pit of depression that she knew was lurking around the corner.

Today was one of the very few days that they had been separated.

Actually, she couldn't recall the last day they had been apart for more than an hour or two, for whatever reason.

That was... shocking to her.

Not that spending so much time with Elania was a negative thing, but just the fact that she had become so used to the other girl's presence that she hadn't noticed.

A knock at the door disrupted her thoughts, and she quickly paused her hot water before finishing the tea.

Yolani made her way to the entrance, checking the brand new ‘peep-hole’ that Elania had insisted on, only to find Henri standing on the other side with some other men.

She disarmed the wards and pulled the door open, the jingle of the shop bell filling the shop.

“Yolani, some men from the City Works are here to see you,” Henri explained.

She nodded and greeted them. “Hello.”

“Miss Aetherhart? We’re here to inspect the premises for your requested expansion,” said the lead engineer, a clipboard clutched under his arm.

She nodded and moved aside to allow them entry. “Great! I was waiting for you to show up. I’ve already drawn up some plans for your review, although they aren’t finished yet.”

Her voice was steady, but inside, a flutter of apprehension stirred. Probably a vestige of her earlier musings; she pushed it down and offered them all a smile.

The engineers bustled in with their measuring tools, and Yolani directed them through the shop.

Each room needed measured and catalogued, and she didn’t have a blueprint of the new renovations they had already, although they were certainly close to the shop’s original configuration. It was just the wall was a bit thicker now.

In the back, the lead worker glanced at the shower. “Do you have sewer access back here? Believe it runs quite close to the back wall.”

Yolani nodded and showed him the trapdoor and access to the sewer and crawlspace.

One of the engineers grunted. “Saves a bit of time finding access and finding the right spot down there, but I’ll never get used to the smell.”



The lead engineer nodded. "Right, we'll need to get down there, Miss Aetherhart. I assumed the access is locked?"

She nodded and fetched a key from the wall. The grate and sewer access had been demolished by the City Watch when they had been chasing after her and Elania, so it had been the first thing she'd repaired. With a one-way vent that kept the smell locked underground.

"Apologies for the inconvenience," Yolani said as she handed the key over.

"No worries, we've had worse jobs before," the man commented.

The other worker nodded. "Ain't that the truth? Bit harry working down there though. Some teams have been going missing lately."

Yolani tensed internally. Missing people in the sewer. The combat with the Conclave monks and Tessa came to mind almost immediately.

The two men disappeared into the space below, one to re-measure the crawlspace, and the other to map out the sewer and water lines running around the building.

While she was waiting, Henri knocked lightly on the propped open door and peered inside. "Just checking in," he said, concern clear on his face. "Everything going fine in here?"

She offered him a small smile and nodded. "Everything's normal. They're checking out underneath."

Henri winced and raised his hand to pinch off his nose. "I can tell."

The lead engineer took a few more minutes to finish up in the crawlspace, then emerged. "Measurements done. You said you had drawn something up, Miss Aetherhart?"

Yolani nodded and walked him over to the draft. In truth, it was only really half finished, detailing the necessary changes and general outline for adding a large basement floor, the stair access, and a question mark for maybe an additional area if space permitted.

“You’ve done thorough work here, but we’ll need to confirm everything before we start tearing up stone,” the man said. “There aren’t any city blueprints for the specific section the shop is sitting in—it’s ancient.”

“So we’ll need to be careful regardless of whether or not things look clear,” Yolani mused.

He nodded as the other worker slid out of the sewer. The smell grew worse and Henri winced.

“Sewer’s clear,” the second worker reported. “Shouldn’t be any danger in running a new site. I took measurements just to line them out on the schems, though.”

Henri’s brow furrowed. “How exactly do you plan to dig under a shop without risking collapsing it?”

Before the workers could delve into an explanation about bracing and structural integrity, Yolani interjected with a confident air. “This is an artifice shop. I have some methods to reduce the weight of the structure and enhance the durability of the floor. We can excavate and put in bracing as we go, without concern for collapse.”

The lead engineer raised an eyebrow. “That sort of artifice is costly, and while it will save some time, proper support still needs to be built.”

Yolani nodded. “Magister Keswick has agreed to cover all expenses.”

The engineers exchanged looks. They took a few more measurements, and she granted them permission to take her rough blueprint sketch as they departed.

She turned to Henri. “I think I’ll step out and grab dinner for Elania and me,” Yolani said as she grabbed her coat and belt.

Henri nodded. “I’ll come with you. The guards can keep an eye on the shop.”

A smile crossed her face as she turned to move to the door.

“How have you been doing?” Henri asked.

Yolani froze and did a double-take as she realized she had stepped a bit closer to him than she had intended. Looking up at his face, she could see his expression of concern plainly written there.

He'd been around almost every day since her father had died and the shop had been destroyed, doing the work of a constant go-between them and the City Watch and Magisters when needed.

But they hadn't really talked. Not alone, not about things, not about anything, really.

And he was standing really...really close.

The memory of him kissing her in the shop before they went to search for her father in the Dwerven Dungeon with the Ironfist mercenaries came to mind.

Her cheeks heated, and she turned and slid out the door in a hurry.

"Yolani?" Henri asked, confusion tinting his voice.

"I'm doing fine! Let's go!" she called back.

He shut the door and waved to the rest of his squad to stand guard by the shop before catching up to her halfway down the street. "Hey, Yolani! Slow down..."

She reined in her fast pace to a more regular one. "Sorry. It's just."

"We haven't really had any time to ourselves to talk about things, have we?" he asked.

That was like a thump on the head, hitting way too accurately. "I know. I just..."

Yolani swallowed. She didn't want to think about it. She took a deep breath. "I don't think I'm ready for any kind of relationship," she blurted.

There were a few moments of silence as they continued down Artificer Row. Henri shook his head. "I wasn't really asking about that. I just wanted to know how you felt about how things have been

going. I know we see each other every day, but we don't really talk about anything other than business anymore."

"I honestly haven't been thinking of it. Just taking one day at a time and moving forward," Yolani replied.

Henri nodded. They made it to the end of the street and passed through the Ironfist checkpoint, then she guided them towards the sandwich shop. It was down a side alley, nestled in a corner with a little sign out front with offerings and prices written on an A shaped board.

"Sandwiches?" Henri asked as he spotted the sign.

A smile appeared on Yolani's lips. "Yeah. I'll be getting ham sandwiches, they are Elania's favorite. Do you want to eat with us? I can get an extra one."

"Elania," Henri said, almost as if he were tasting the word. "Sure. I would like that. I'm glad you found a friend that has been able to help you so much."

She glanced at him, but she couldn't see any anger or bitterness behind the statement.

He looked back at her and raised an eyebrow. "I mean it. I think she needed to find you as much as you needed someone, as well."

Yolani nodded slightly and pushed open the sandwich shop's door. The bell dinged, and the shopkeeper greeted her from behind the counter. There weren't any other customers inside, so she stepped up with a smile. "Three of the ham and cheese sandwiches, please."

The older man nodded and began putting her request together quickly, slicing the lengths of bread and then putting a thick helping of sliced meat and cheese onto them. There were fresh vegetables as well, and since she had ordered three, he cut them up fresh for her.

"Nice place, a bit hidden, though," Henri said.

Yolani nodded. "I didn't even know it was here until Harlock showed me a while ago. It's a favorite from the mercs."

“It cuts down on customers, but things are fine with the regulars,” the shopkeeper said happily.

The shop doorbell rang behind them as it opened. Yolani felt Henri tense beside her, and she glanced over her shoulder.

A group of four large men clad in black robes and masked faces stood inside, all four wielding iron banded cudgels.

The memory of meeting the cultists in the sewer was the first thing that leapt to mind as Henri drew his sword.

# CHAPTER 23

## - SHATTERED

## SERENITY

“Get back!” Henri’s voice cut through the air with commanding urgency as the black-robed figures surged forward.

Yolani stumbled backward into the shop counter, her heart pounding. She barely registered the sound of shattering glass and splintering wood as the cultists swung their cudgels at the shop while they approached.

The shopkeeper cursed and bolted, sandwiches falling to the floor in a sad display of ruin as he disappeared through the door to the back.

Henri engaged with swift precision, his sword a silver flash as he parried the multiple attackers. It was not a fair fight, and the attackers were skilled at using their numbers.

Yolani pushed down her panic and grabbed her combat wand. She needed to help him before they surrounded and pinned him! Deciding on a simple kinetic attack for speed, she leveled the tool at the closest cultist and activated it.

The crystal on the tip of the wand flared, then spluttered with interference before going dead.

She realized what was wrong immediately; there was an anti-power field! They had prepared for this ambush ahead of time, knowing about her abilities. She didn't have her main tool bag and there wasn't anything she could do to disable the field without smashing whatever artifice they had directly.

Panic hit her hard; Henri wouldn't be able to use his telepathy in the field, either! They were on their own.

The clatter of sword against clubs filled the shop, items went spilling everywhere and Henri shouldered one of them aside before parrying a strike from the side. A third club hit him in the back, but instead of going down, he made a wide slash that caught one of the cultists in the arm. Muttered grunts and curses filled the air.

Yolani whipped around, spotted the shopkeeper's knife that he had been making their sandwiches with, and grabbed it. By the time she turned around, Henri was cornered between the wall and one of the counters.

She charged.

The men didn't spot her until she was close, swinging his heavy metal banded length of wood for her head. She ducked down and jumped forward, her deli-knife streaking towards his torso. There was a brief moment where it felt like the blade had snagged and didn't want to pierce, but then it slid in easily, a hot wash of liquid erupting over her hand.

A loud curse from her target heralded a back-handed strike to her face.

Somehow, she kept a grip on the knife, though, and it caught on something hard: bone. As she went down, he shrieked and went with

her, his weight slamming her into the floor while his fists and knees struck wildly.

Everything went fuzzy, but she slipped the stuck blade out of him and then stabbed him again, this time under the armpit. He went rigid, and she pulled the weapon free, and this time stabbed him in the side of the neck.

The man's blood poured all over her, the rapid spurting sprays turning into a slow river. When she reached to grab his torso and shove him off of her, she felt metal—chain mail underneath his robes. By the time she got him off of her and sat up, it was too late.

Henri had fallen to one knee. He made a swing at their feet, but two of the cultists pinned his weapon with their cudgels while the third one stepped forward with an overhand strike. Henri raised his forearm to block, but the weapon crashed through and slammed into the back of his head.

He went limp and collapsed forward.

Rising to her feet, Yolani glanced at the front door and then pushed forward into a sprint for escape.

Her heart pounded as she passed the three men by, but as soon as she reached the door, a new enemy appeared in the doorway without warning, reaching forward to grab her shirt and shove her backwards. She realized she was screaming; a rapid swing of her knife plunged without hesitation, but the man captured her wrist.

A series of blows with his free hand stole the wind out of her and she realized that her body's strength had deserted her. The only reason she hadn't fallen to the floor was because he was holding her up by her wrist.

"She killed Mark," one of the men called out.

The man holding her spit in her face and tossed her to the ground. "Whore."



One of the other men stepped forward and swung his cudgel at her. The world blacked out.

Consciousness returned in fitful waves.

Each surge brought with it an acute awareness of pain. Her body ached, her head throbbed with the rhythm of her heartbeat, and her jaw... she could barely think for the agony that seared through her on her first attempt to move it. It felt wrong, misaligned, swollen to the point of immobility.

Cracking an eye open, she found herself in some type of dungeon cell.

The chill of the stone beneath her was a stark contrast to the burning pain that enveloped her. Slowly, with an effort that seemed to drain what energy she had, Yolani pushed herself up and leaned back against the stone wall. Her breaths came out in shallow, ragged gasps that did nothing to ease the pain from each inhalation.

Her vision began to clear, revealing the small, cramped cell that oozed with humidity. The air was moist and cold, carrying with it the scent of mildew and decay. Maybe they were near one of the city's waterfalls?

A heavy iron chain was clasped around her ankle, its links cold and chafing against her skin. Following the chain's path with her eyes, she saw it was secured to a ring on the wall. There was no keyhole or other unlocking device, hinting that it was an artifice-controlled restriction.

She tried to move her leg, but even that small action sent a jolt of pain shooting up from her ankle. There wasn't even a memory of how it had been hurt.

The chill seeped into her, and she realized with a start that was stripped down to her undergarments. Were they trying to freeze her to death? With the chill and dampness, that was a real possibility.

Her injuries prevented her from balling up to try to conserve her heat. Doing her best to focus on her surroundings beyond her immediate pain and discomfort, she studied her surroundings.

Through her cell bars, there was another cell, and she spotted another figure, unmoving. It was Henri—sprawled out on the ground, his gear and equipment stripped. His chest rose and fell with shallow breaths. His face was turned away from her, hidden in the shadows cast by the flickering torchlight that filtered in from outside their cells.

“Henri,” she tried to call out, but the sound came out as nothing more than a pained whimper aborted by her injured jaw. She doubted he could hear her even if he was awake.

A sense of helplessness settled over her like a blanket. They were restrained, injured, and at the mercy of their captors. The memory of the attack flashed through her mind—the black-robed figures, the ambush, the brutality. Anger flashed within her, but it was quickly smothered by a wave of despair.

They had been targeted with precision and trapped with nowhere to run. The knowledge that she had taken one of them down did nothing to alleviate the dread that filled her now.

She closed her eyes against the tears that threatened to spill. Her thoughts turned to Elania—they had obviously waited until they were separated to make their attack.

What would the other girl think when she came home to an empty shop, instead of sandwiches and smiles?

Yolani swallowed and did her best to bring her knees up to hug. The contract would tell Elania that she was still alive.

The City Watch and her friend would be looking for them.

She eyed the metal bracelet around her ankle.

She couldn't give up hope yet.

# CHAPTER 24

## - UNSEEN

### TETHERS

W ooden swords clacked together, creating a sharp, resounding beat that filled the training hall. Elania's breath came in heavy pants, her muscles taut with exertion and her entire body dripping with sweat. Just a single point of **[Power]** would have eased the stress, but Harlock somehow knew whenever she did so.

And raised the bar of his sword-work to compensate. She lunged forward, her blade aimed at his midsection, but the veteran mercenary parried with a deft twist of his wrist, sending her staggering to the side as she did her best to create enough distance to avoid the counter strike.

He followed her, and she realized she wasn't going to recover in time, not in her winded state.

Giving up on trying to run on her body's own endurance, she released her core and pulsed enough **[Power]** through her limbs to refresh her completely. Her foot dug into the sand, and she reversed course, striking at his head.

She saw the moment he realized what she had done, as his eyes widened slightly.

Instead of retreating into a defensive stand like she expected, he continued to move forward, his sword parrying hers away at an angle as his other hand swept in and captured her wrist.

They spun around each other as he clasped onto her, but he broke free first, dragging his sword across her middle as he stepped past her.

“Point,” he called as they moved apart.

Frustration started to prickle at her, but she knew she had improved some since beginning earlier in the day.

Between the instructional periods where he had explained concepts to her, and where he had called in other Ironfist members to spar, and her ability to refresh herself so she could continue...

She had to have improved a little, right? Even if it didn't feel like it.

Elania moved into a loose defensive stance, sword angled toward him and ready to block or switch to offense. “Again?”

He nodded, and they tapped blades. They slowly began to circle one another.

Harlock made the first move to attack, but suddenly, mid-strike, Elania froze. Her senses prickled with an unexplainable urgency that had nothing to do with the fight.

Harlock aborted the strike just in time to avoid contact with the weapon, coming to a stop only inches away from her neck.

“What's wrong?” Harlock grunted, lowering his practice sword and eyeing her with a mix of concern and confusion.

Elania shook her head, her heart pounding in her chest from the sudden onset of dread. “I don't know,” she whispered.

Her hand went to her chest and clutched her damp shirt. “Something's not right. I need to get back to the shop.”

Harlock scrutinized her for a moment before giving her a curt nod. “Alright. If you feel something’s amiss, trust your gut.”

She nodded gratefully and hurried to gather her bags and equipment. Slipping her green cloak back on, she felt the weight of Harlock’s gaze on her back as she prepared to leave.

He escorted her out of the barracks. “Remember the training katas every day, and see if you can bring Yolani with you next week—I’d like to see you both working together.”

“I will,” Elania promised, although her mind was elsewhere, on the strange feeling gripping her.

Her two shadows had been waiting in the outer room where they had been nursing two tankards of something. They let out a curse as she passed through the room quickly, grabbing their things and hurrying after her.

The scene on the street revealed just how long she’d been inside training. The morning was gone, replaced with the evening hues of the light stones high above. There were fewer people, although she spotted some looking back onto the street hidden in the shadows of an alley.

The Mercenary District wasn’t a place to spend the night, even if she had before when desperate. She really didn’t want to run into another person with the **[Stabber]** class. She was halfway down the street toward the Artisan District gate when her two escorts caught up.

They fell in beside her. “Is something wrong? What’s the hurry?” one of them asked.

“We need to get back to the shop,” she answered more curtly than she meant to. The man nodded, and they continued. It was actually a relief that they had stopped concealing themselves and seemed to understand her urgency.

It certainly made their passage through the gate faster. It wasn't that close to curfew to be worried. There were still several hours left in the day, but people going from the Mercenary District into the others were generally given more scrutiny.

Having an escort minimized that.

The gate to Artifice Row was well manned as always, and she even recognized the mercenaries manning it—Lucas and Kael.

"Hey, Elania," Kael said, but she passed through in a hurry, barely acknowledging him. "Sorry, can't talk!" she called back without stopping, leaving the two mercenaries looking at each other in confusion.

The feeling of impending doom that had settled in her chest had settled in and decided not to leave. Whatever it was, it was tugging her back with alarming insistence.

She hurried into a jog; her cloak billowing behind her while boots clattered against cobblestone. The thin crowd on the street allowed her to pick up the pace.

A small wave of relief filled her as she saw Aetherhart's Artifice come into view.

That didn't last long as she took in the two guards stationed outside the door. One guard was missing.

"Evening, Elania," one of the guards greeted.

She cut straight to the chase, her voice tight. "Where's Henri?"

"He went out with Yolani," replied the second guard, nodding down the street. "I think they were picking up groceries."

Her panic didn't abate. If anything, it only got worse. "How long ago was that?"

"A couple of hours, maybe? Not sure when they planned to get back," one of the guards answered.

"Contact Henri with your telepathy. Now. Ask how they are," she ordered. A feeling of stupidity washed over her as she realized she could

have asked her escort to do that in the first place. If only the stupid metaphysical panic button on her back that something was jamming repeatedly came with directions.

The guard closed his eyes, his brow furrowing in concentration. A moment later, his eyes snapped open, and he shook his head with a frown. "That's odd... Henri is out of reach. I can't contact him."

"Something's wrong," she hissed, her hands balling into fists. "Contact Lieutenant Gaston immediately. Tell him something has happened to Henri and Yolani."

The guards shared a glance. One of them frowned before answering. "It might be... well, they are close. They could be... spending some time together?"

"No. That's not it. Call for back up right now," Elania said icily.

The men shared a look. The guard who spoke shrugged. "Sure. Give me a second."

He closed his eyes, and she watched as he sent out a mental call for assistance.

Elania rocked on her feet while waiting.

It felt like it took much too long when he finally nodded to her. "Gaston is on his way."

"Thank you," Elania said. She pushed through the door of the shop, the wards immediately recognizing and accepting her.

The familiar jingle of the bell sounded hollow to her ears as she took in the regular disarray of the main room. She quickly scanned for any sign of struggle, but found none.

She swiftly moved to the back room where they kept their gear and began to fully outfit herself. Yolani's combat bag went over her shoulder, even if she didn't know how to use the things in it.

Her [**Vorpal Dagger**] was honed and ready and she strapped it around her waist. She eyed the new firearms that had been prepared, but decided not to take the prototype weapon.

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, Elania made for the door once more. It felt like she couldn't wait for Gaston; every moment was precious. With one last glance at the shop, she stepped back out and clicked the door locked and warded behind her.

There was only one problem. She had absolutely no idea of where to search. Despite the doom feeling, there wasn't any hint of a direction. She'd have to wait.

By the time Gaston and his escort arrived, Elania's boots were tapping an impatient rhythm against the cobblestone as she paced back and forth in front of the shop. Her mind was a whirlwind of dread and conjecture, each minute stretching like an eternity.

"Gaston!" Elania called out as soon as she spotted him. She cleared the space between them rapidly enough to cause him to pause in alarm.

"Elania. I got word that Henri was out of communication, and a demon was in a panic. Can you tell me what you know?" he asked calmly.

Elania looked back over her shoulder and gave the guard a glare. He tensed up and straightened while refusing to look her in the eye.

She turned back to answer. "I don't know what it is. I can feel something is very wrong. They said Henri and Yolani went out, but he's out of communication. I didn't know they were gone until I got back from Ironfist. We need to search for them!"

Gaston furrowed his brow. "A feeling isn't much to go on." He turned to the guard standing beside him. "Start a wide search for them. Around the Row and expanding into the Artisan District."

Relief filled her as she realized something was being done. "Thank you, Lieutenant."



Gaston grunted. "If that boy just had his mind somewhere else and was blocking things out, he's going to be doing paperwork for the next month." He eyed her. "Regardless of who he was with and how much pull they have."

"I don't think that's it, sir. I have a terrible feeling," Elania replied.

He nodded. "Well, there are plenty of things that could cause a 'feeling', but it would help to know what this one was coming from. You said it occurred while you were training, so it wasn't just when you learned they were alone together. Is there anything in your contract to stipulate something like this?"

Was that even a possibility? Could the contract do something like that at all? Elania ignored the insinuation that she was just panicked because Yolani and Henri were just spending time together. "Nothing like this... well... we are connected by the contract. Yolani said she saved me from the Engine once because of it, although I don't remember. Maybe it is that."

One of the City Watch guards stepped up. "Lieutenant, we have a report of a robbery in the Artisan District nearby, at a sandwich shop. Owner says there was a watchman, and a girl taken. Happened over an hour ago."

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

Yolani and Henri had been kidnapped!

"Where is he? We need to question him!" Elania blurted.

"Still at the shop. It's a few blocks from the entrance to the Row," the guard replied.

"Let's go," Gaston ordered.

Everyone fell in line and headed down the street, but the pace was much too slow for Elania. She wished she could urge them to run. The procession was a blur.

They didn't even use the smaller personnel gate at the Ironfist checkpoint, the entire troupe of guardsmen pushing through the large opening meant for wagons and carriages.

When they turned into the alley, the façade of the shop came into view, and it was a mess. The windows were shattered, and the door hung awkwardly on its hinges. A small sign was broken into pieces, leaned up against the wall.

Inside, overturned chairs, broken dishes and glass covered everything, including the massive stain that had once been a recent pool of blood. Someone had bled enough to not be living anymore.

"God..." she whispered, her voice barely audible over the crunch of boots.

An elderly man sat slumped on a stool near the counter, his face pale and his hands shaking. A guard who was talking to him nodded to Lieutenant Gaston.

"Sir, could you please tell us again what happened here?" Gaston asked as he pulled out a small notepad and pencil.

The man nodded. "They came in here like a pack of beak dogs... The lad tried to fight them off," he said. "But there were too many. I ran through the back."

"Yolani didn't run with you?" Elania asked.

He shook his head. "No one came to the back. When it was finally quiet, they were all gone."

The shopkeeper's story only solidified her fear—they had been taken, and it was by no means an accident or something else. Somehow that made the horrible feeling filling her less nebulous, and the panic disappeared. Having something to go on gave her something to work on.

"You said they were wearing robes?" Gaston asked.

The old man nodded. "Black robes. Nothing ornate, but solid black."

"Black Candle," Elania blurted out, her voice tinged with certainty and a rising anger she could barely contain.

Darius and his henchmen's questionable presence in the sewer and part in the central square riot immediately pushing them to the front of the line of suspects that matched the description.

Gaston nodded slowly, his expression hardening. "We've been working on locating them. They've holed up in the Mercenary District slums, in a warehouse they've been using as a free medical clinic."

Elania's eyebrow shot up. "I thought the entire Merc District was the slums," she said, a bitter edge to her words.

"Some areas are worse than others," Gaston replied with a shake of his head. "This section... it's deep in the pits where we don't general allow our men to patrol."

A cold determination settled over her. "We need to go there," she said firmly. "Now."

Gaston met her gaze. "Taking in a large group of guard could cause a riot."

Elania tensed. "I'll go alone. If necessary. Just tell me where it is."

He shook his head and looked at the others. "We won't leave our own behind. We'll need to get out of uniform."

A wave of nods from the men followed.

Elania worked the fingers of her hand.

They would get Yolani... and Henri back. If something happened to her friend... she didn't know what she would do.

# CHAPTER 25 - RAID AWRY

Elania followed Gaston through the thinning streets of the city, her mind a turbulent mix of worry and determination. The weight of Yolani's combat bag on her shoulder served as a constant reminder of the urgency that powered their steps.

The feeling of dread had formed into a solid knot, but it was a feeling that she could at least fight against now.

As they passed through one of the city's gates, she couldn't help but form a question in her mind. "How could the cultists have gotten them past the gates? It doesn't make sense."

Gaston grunted. "The sewers, most likely. Easy to move unseen, and they used them before."

Elania clenched her jaw, frustration filling her. "Maybe we should wall up the damn sewers or something. It seems like all manner of shit makes its way through them."

"The system is absolutely massive. The noble district and the Conclave district have their underlayer barred by section," Gaston said.

“Oh. Of course the well-to-do sections of the city have proper security and safety,” Elania replied sarcastically.

Gaston eyed her. “Take it up with Magister Keswick. You’re the one with their ears.”

Elania tensed up at the rebuke. She knew he was right, but it did nothing to quell her impatience. Well, she would remember this, and bring it up on her next trip to the Magistry.

The barracks loomed into view, but it didn’t suppress the feeling that the diversion was wasting time. Men were already inside, changing their gear, the sound of clanging armor and weapons filling the area.

She stepped inside and Gaston moved to change with the others. There was a controlled sort of chaos as the dozen or so men stripped out of their uniforms and donned more inconspicuous armor. Leather brigandines and chainmail shirts were hidden under jackets, while longswords and muskets were traded for hatchets and cudgels.

They looked like a lot of the rougher thugs she’d seen roving around the Mercenary District, but she guessed that was the point. It did nothing to fool her **[Identify]** as she scanned them. Their classes were still very obvious, but she had learned that **[Identify]** was hardly a universal skill.

She pulled Yolani’s bag closer and checked its contents. The wands and other gadgets she had no idea how to use, but Harlock’s words on learning how to at least use the tools, even if she didn’t understand the concepts, hit her. If they managed to rescue Yolani...

Panic filled her, and she felt like she’d been jolted by an electric shock.

When. When! When they rescued Yolani.

Elania repeated the mantra in her head like a shield. They would get her friend back.

She sat down and waited. It felt like an eternity before Gaston approached her, now dressed in the civilian outfit that barely hid his armored underlayers.

Maybe people wouldn't put that they were part of the City Watch together right away, but they would certainly know that the group was ready for trouble.

Maybe that was the point.

"Ready?" he asked, his gaze sharp.

Elania nodded and stood up. The clamor of armor and the murmur of hushed voices filled the barracks as they started out. She realized that another wave of men were getting ready. "More?" They already had gathered a dozen extra escorts.

"They're backup," Gaston explained. "In case something goes wrong. They'll be waiting on the edge of the district to dive in if we need them."

"Smart," Elania replied. Reinforcements were good, especially if things went wrong or the hint of unrest from the previous weeks showed itself. Things were still tense after the central square riot.

It didn't take long before they made it to the gates leading into the Mercenary District; the guards acting with an unspoken cue, halting traffic, and sealing off the entrance as soon as they were through.

Whatever preparations the rest of the guard were making in relation to the sudden rescue mission, they were larger than just a few squads men. They were preparing for another riot.

People on the street seemed to sense it too; they scattered at the site of Gaston and the group, their faces etched with concern. The light stones overhead dimmed slightly, plunging the district into the darker shades of the late evening, only one step removed from the dark setting.

Even the usual suspects looking for prey on the streets seemed to draw back into the alleys. A palpable tension hung in the air as they pressed forward. Even though she wasn't in her **[Darkwalker]** form, she could taste the waiting violence on the air.

Elania tightened her grip on Yolani's bag and glanced at Gaston. His eyes met hers, a silent communication that they would be continuing despite the risks.

That was good. There was no turning back. Not for her.

As they turned the corner, she scanned the street for any danger, her hand on the hilt of her **[Vorpall Dagger]**. They came to a sudden halt as Gaston held up a hand.

The group closed in to listen. "Our destination is around the corner. It's the largest building on the block. Half of us will surround it on the outside to make sure no one tries to run off."

Elania glanced at the men around her, seeing a mix of resolve and acceptance. The plan was simple in theory, but she doubted it would go smoothly. Things didn't have a tendency to be easy.

"Once we're in position, the rest of us will breach the front. We go in hard and fast. No hesitation," Gaston ordered. "Let's go."

Nods of agreement rippled through the group. They moved and as soon as they were around the corner, Elania spotted their destination. Gaston gestured toward it to make sure everyone was on the same page.

What she didn't expect to see was the large line of people huddled in front of the entrance, their faces weary and desperate. Didn't Gaston mention they were using the building as some sort of medical clinic?

Gaston grunted under his breath. "They're using innocents as cover," he said, his voice laced with contempt.

Elania felt a surge of disgust for the cultists' tactics, but also a worry for the people that were going to be caught up in the brewing action. Part of that went towards Yolani and Henri as well.

If the cult was willing to use average civilians as cover, what would they do to her friends?

"We stick to the plan," Gaston stated loud enough for everyone to hear. "We can't let them have time to figure things out or slip away."

The group split as directed, half moving to surround the building from the back and sides. Elania stayed with Gaston and those heading for the front, her heart pounding against her ribs. All her combat senses began to tingle as she searched for any hostile activity.

Other than the civilians eyeing them warily, nothing happened. Some of them stepped back while others pulled their cloaks or blankets tighter and fled.

They reached the front of the line quickly, and Gaston addressed the black-robed man controlling traffic at the entrance directly. "Please step aside."

"I'm sorry, you'll have to wait with the others—" the man's words trailed off to a whisper as Gaston and the guards unsheathed or brandished their weapons.

It was a clear signal their intentions were beyond a mere inquiry. Elania's hand tightened on the hilt of her dagger, ready for any sign of threat as they pushed their way into the building, shoving aside several cultists who had been loitering just inside.

The interior of the building was a stark contrast to the outside. Wounded and sickly individuals lay on cots and bedrolls attended to by robed figures whose benevolent façade did little to ease Elania's suspicion. The air was thick with rot, miasma, and sharp antiseptics.



One of the black-robed figures with a wooden necklace stepped forward, a mix of indignation and authority in her posture. “What is the meaning of this?” she demanded, her eyes narrowing.

Gaston stood firm, waving several of the men to search the room. “We’re looking for prisoners taken by your cult. Release them now, or face the consequences.”

Elania scanned the room, her gut tightening. The place had the atmosphere of a trap, the dim candle lighting leaving the place in flickering shadows. Even with her **[Darkvision]** it felt... hostile.

“We have no prisoners here. This is a place of healing and charity,” the woman replied. “I must insist you leave at once; we’ve already paid your kind for protection.”

“Search upstairs,” Gaston ordered, gesturing to a staircase in the corner. Several guards spread out with grim determination, moving through the crowd. Another pair of guards opened side doors, uncovering sicker and more injured, but no sign of Yolani or Henri.

“You can’t do this! We paid! We paid!” the woman shouted as she grabbed Gaston’s arm. He shoved her hard, and she fell to the floor.

Before he could retort, the front doors burst inward behind them, and a group of armed men Elania didn’t recognize stepped inside.

“That’s right,” the lead man sneered, stepping forward with a swagger that came with the confidence of having a dozen men at his back. “This is blood-dog turf! Who in the seven hells do you think you are, barging in here?”

Elania sized up the new arrivals. There was an edge to them that spoke of violence and ruthlessness.

**[Gang Leader - Human - Lvl 126]**

**[Basher - Human - Lvl 111]**

**[Gang Fighter - Human - Lvl 98]**

**[Roughneck - Human - Lvl 121]**

The front four made it obvious what they were when she used **[Identify]**. Their levels were high enough to suggest familiarity with combat, and in line with the common violence in the Mercenary District. The other dozen men behind them were all more of the same.

If it wasn't for the numbers, she doubted they would be much of a threat.

Gaston turned to face them head-on, his demeanor unflinching. "City Watch. This is an official investigation; I suggest you stand down." He pulled a golden badge out of his jacket and held it up, the official seal of the Guard glinting in the clinic's dim light.

The man let out a cold, mirthless laugh, then sneered. "The Magisters don't run things down here. We do."

Elania shifted her weight, preparing for a fight. The guards searching the first floor slowly filtered back to stand behind Gaston, backing him up.

The moans of the sick and injured filled the air, despite the standoff. The black-robed cultists cleared the area between the two groups while doing their best to tend to their charges.

"A member of the City Guard has been kidnapped," Gaston stated, "and we have reason to believe the cult is responsible."

The thugs exchanged uncertain glances and murmurs. The woman on the ground protested loudly. "We haven't done anything but offer aid to the sick!" She gestured towards the injured civilians.

Elania felt her heart sinking. She had expected many things—mostly fighting—but this wasn't one of them.

"Elania," Gaston said, glancing at her, "take a look in the basement."

As she nodded, a mocking laugh erupted from the blood-dog's leader. "Maybe once I'm done with her owner, we'll have a new pet boys. Looks like an obedient little thing!"

Elania froze for a fraction of a second, her blood turning to ice. She reached out and grabbed Gaston's arm, her voice low. "Take the others and go search the basement. I'll stay here on the first floor."

# CHAPTER 26

## - RAID AWRY

### (CONTINUED)

Gaston gave her a sharp glance, then finally nodded slowly. “Don’t lose control,” he replied. Gesturing to the guards, they headed to the back, where the stairs led downward into the bowels of the building.

The gang leader’s laughter pealed out again, his voice dripping with vulgar amusement. “Interested in us, are you?”

Elania’s gaze was steely as the thugs pressed further into the room, shoving patients and cultists out of their way as they formed a loose crescent around her. There was a lecherous intent and hunger in their eyes.

“I suppose Tessa was right,” she remarked coolly. “The people in this city are morons. I should eat the lot of you.”

“Don’t worry, once you’re done taking care of all of us, we know how to treat a lady,” the leader replied.

Onder of the underlings had a hint of caution in his eyes, whispered loud enough to be heard, “She’s a demon, boss. Be careful.”

Elania’s lips curled into a smile. “You should listen to your minion.”

His face twisted into a snarl. “Grab her,” he ordered.

Memories of her confrontation with the ranger Marcus flashed through her mind, but these thugs didn’t feel as intimidating or spike her survival sense. They were overconfident and unaware of just how outmatched they truly were.

Elania held out her palm and activated her **[Demonic Aura]** and amplified it with a dose of **[Power]**. She kept it tight and close, only loosing it far enough to engulf the closest ring of thugs. “Kneel,” she ordered.

All the men fell to the ground at once, almost as if she’d given the command physical force.

The others halted in their tracks, their expressions shifting from aggression to fear. Elania stepped forward, stepping over the prone bodies with deliberate contempt, her boot coming down on one man’s back hard enough to draw out a pained grunt.

“Who wants to be eaten first?” she taunted.

The men that weren’t pinned to the floor began to back away. She took a step backward and slid her boot under the prone man, then lifted him into the air and kicked him like a soccer ball toward the leader. They crashed together in a lump; the force carrying the two backwards several meters into the front door, smashing them wide open.

“All of you. Get out of here,” Elania said.

All the men scrambled to their feet and fled, tripping over each other in their haste to escape her wrath.

The cultists and wounded they had been tending to watch in a mix of shock and awe. The moans of the sick filled the space as their caretakers tried to calm them.

The leader of the gang escaped with his men, but the thug she'd kicked lay groaning on the floor. Two of the cultists ran over to him and turned him over.

"Cracked ribs, maybe broken," one muttered as they placed him on a stretcher and carried him to a bedroll.

Elania watched them work, but did not interfere. The matron who was in charge had backed off into a corner, speaking in hushed tones to some of her workers. That was fine too. They weren't here to interfere with the clinic.

The heavy tread of boots announced the return of Gaston and the other guards from their search of the building. Elania's heart sank as more of them returned. Their empty hands and grim expressions told her all she needed to know.

Anger simmered within her, warring with panic that scratched at the edges of her composure.

"No sign of them," Gaston reported. The words were like a blow. The men coming back down the stairs similarly shook their heads negatively.

Rather than thin out at the evidence of violence, the crowd outside had begun to thicken. At least twenty men were looking inside from now busted doors, a growing angry murmur hinting at the prospect of more violence.

Before they could determine the next course of action, four burly men in black robes holding large clubs pushed inside, making way for Darius to enter the building.

Elania recognized him immediately. “Darius,” she hissed, taking a single step forward to confront him, that was only aborted by Gaston’s hand on her shoulder.

Darius held up his hands in a gesture of peace. “We have nothing to do with the kidnappings,” he declared, his eyes locking with Elania’s.

Skepticism etched itself onto her face. “The ones who took them were wearing cultists robes.”

Darius raised his chin. “It’s easy enough to dye a white robe black. The Lightbringers have been harassing our members. Attacking them, even. I wouldn’t be surprised if they moved on to kidnapping.”

Elania stared at him, then looked around the clinic. Defeat stuck its icy fingers into her. They’d failed.

“They took Yolani because of Eziel...” Elania muttered.

“They hold you two responsible for the loss of their artifact. I suspect they took her as the easier target. They might believe you have some way to return the sword,” Darius replied.

Gaston grunted, two fingers going to his temple. “We need to get out of here. The men outside are fleeing. There’s a crowd forming.”

Shouts filtered through the walls, the angry cry of ‘City Watch Bastards!’ igniting the tense situation. Several people stood at the door trying to keep the gathering cluster of people from entering, but it rapidly turned into a growing wall of angry people.

Considering the layout of the building, Elania realized they were trapped with a growing incensed mob surrounding them. Well, she could probably escape—the advice to climb onto the roofs and jump from building to building instead of going into a sewer came to mind almost immediately.

But that would mean leaving the City Watch behind, and they were her main allies.

It was Darius who broke the tension. "I can offer you a secret way out," he said, his voice calm.

Elania's eyes narrowed in suspicion. Trusting Darius was not something she wanted to consider... except they had been wrong about everything so far.

Gaston looked at her, then back at Darius, seemingly coming to a decision. "Show us," he commanded. Elania nodded finally. Unless they wanted to fight their way free from the mob, they didn't have a choice.

"Keep them out and try to defuse the situation," Darius ordered his escort. They grunted and turned toward the front doors. They were pretty large men, but Elania doubted they'd be able to stop the mob if it tried to breach the building.

Darius waved them towards the back of the room, straight toward the basement stairs.

Gaston grunted. "It's down there?" he asked.

"You must have missed something, guardsman," Darius replied.

Elania could see the flicker of annoyance on Gaston's face. The steps creaked as the entire group made their way down. The basement was cool and dry, but well kept. It wasn't lit well, with only a single lantern sitting in a corner, but her eyes quickly adjusted thanks to **[Darkvision]**.

The walls were lined with shelves of medical supplies and fresh linen. Elania watched Darius closely, a flicker of doubt gnawing at her. Gaston stood firm beside her, his hand resting on the hilt of his short-sword. At least she wasn't alone in her worry.

With a theatrical flourish, Darius reached a large shelf in the back and pushed it sideways. It looked much too heavy for him to move, but it slide like it was on an oiled rail. The wall behind it gave way to a narrow passage.



Elania sent Gaston an accusing glare. “Are you sure your men searched everywhere?” Elania asked, her tone sharp.

Gaston’s jaw clenched. “If they were here, we would have found them,” he replied.

She didn’t miss the frustration in his voice, but she hoped he was right. Either way, she didn’t think they’d be getting another chance to search easily.

“This leads under the street and to another building. There is a back door that leads into an alley,” Darius explained.

The tunnel was barely wide enough for two abreast, the ceiling low enough that even she had to duck to fit. Some of the men had to double over, while the tallest man ended up at the rear, forced to crawl. The tunnel was thick with the scent of mold, and the shuffling through the tunnel drowned out the now distant shouting of the mob behind them.

Darius seemed true to his word as the tunnel ended abruptly in another basement. He gestured toward a rickety-looking staircase that looked like it hadn’t been used in years. “There are some people living in the house. We’ll want to leave quickly before they can cause a fuss.”

“They just enjoy having a secret tunnel to your building?” Gaston asked.

“It’s seldom used and for emergencies. Sometimes people need help and care without being seen. They’re compensated for the intrusions,” Darius said.

Elania caught the man’s arm, her grip firm. “What do you know about the Lightbringers and the kidnapping?” she demanded.

Darius met her gaze unflinchingly. “The Lightbringers have been bringing more and more men into the city. They’ve been filling several Conclave District Inns for weeks now. They’ve had regular meetings with the monks.”

Elania's thoughts jumped straight to her travels and encounters with the only Conclave monks she knew: Taniel and Joren.

Yeah, they'd probably be the types to work with the Lightbringers, especially if it was to do something about their hatred for demons.

"What does that have to do with the kidnapping?" Elania asked pointedly.

"Don't tell me you don't understand the connection: The Lightbringers hold you and your contractor responsible for the loss of one of their seven artifacts. I believe they're trying to find a way to get it back," Darius replied.

Elania released his arm, but she didn't relax. "But it was destroyed! They told the Paladin that!"

"People lie," Darius said simply.

"There are truth stones!" Elania objected.

"A person might believe something to be wholly the truth, and yet be completely wrong, and the stone will still shine," Darius countered.

"Enough. We need to get out of here before things get worse," Gaston interrupted.

Elania glanced at him. Sure enough, the last guard in line had made it through. "We need to learn everything we can."

Gaston looked at Darius. "He's coming with us."

"I think not," Darius said. "I have no plans to leave the district. I believe several of the Magisters are looking for my head."

"More reason to bring you with us," Gaston replied.

Darius raised his chin. "I've provided you with an escape. If you want to try to take me, it won't be without a fight, and my people will redirect the mob on to you."

Elania's gaze flickered between the men. It wouldn't be hard to incapacitate Darius before he could act. Probably. His claim to have

a failsafe felt hollow and like a bluff. But was that worth risking having to fight their way out of the district? That would be a bloodbath.

Gaston shook his head. "This won't be the end of things, Cultist. The Magistracy isn't about to have an organization like yours exist for long."

"We do nothing but lend aid to the city. Some of our members were tricked into following Relain, but the ones that remain are true to our mission," Darius stated.

Gaston didn't answer and pushed past the man and to the staircase. The other guards followed without hesitation. When Elania stepped up, Darius' hand stalled her.

He spoke in a low tone so that the guards couldn't hear. "I can help you. But not while you're working with them. Come back when things have calmed down, and I can—"

She reached out and grabbed him by the throat, lifting him off the ground and pinning him to the basement wall. He struggled against her, kicking and grabbing her wrist, but she let a thin stream of **[Power]** flow through her body, turning her into a solid force.

"Are you holding anything back? Gaston might not want to see a massacre, but I don't care. Tell me where Yolani is, or I'm going to crush your throat," Elania whispered.

From the top of the stairs, Gaston yelled at her. "Elania! Stop."

She ignored him. Darius' frantic attempts to bat her away continued until she finally loosened her grip enough for him to breathe again.

"Tell me," she ordered.

"—don't know!" Darius wheezed. "Maybe, in the... conclave... dungeons..."

She tossed him to the floor and turned toward the stairs. Gaston gave her a serious glare, but she ignored him again. The room at the top was filled with several terrified people and the rest of the group.

Gaston grabbed her arm. “Elania. I can’t have you going wild. Our priority right now is to get out of the district without escalating the situation.”

She stood still. “We need more information on how the Light-bringers and the Conclave are working together. We need to go to the Conclave district and demand—”

Gaston released her arm. “Listen to me. We can’t help them if we’re caught in the aftermath of a riot or worse. We need to get back, regroup, and plan our next move.”

The internal struggle, the desire to do something immediately burned. But she knew he was right. She was letting her emotions dictate her actions instead of thinking through things clearly.

He was right. They needed to regroup and reassess. At the very least, she could recruit Magister Bannon and Keswick to assist. She didn’t know much about the Conclave fortress inside the city, even though she’d visited the district there several times. She did her best to avoid the monks.

She nodded to Gaston. “You’re—”

**[Contractee Initiated Contract termination.]**

**[Contract Completed]**

**[No violations have been assessed.]**

**[All clauses fulfilled. System-termination of Contract completed.]**

She could see him flinch. Her **[Divinity]** essence was still low from the donation to the Engine, so her eyes had likely changed hue. Her gaze swept the room, and the terrified people living in the room began to scream. The guards stared at her with contained fear...and wariness.

Elania bolted down her thoughts. She wasn’t ready to consider what whatever had happened meant. Not unless she wanted to go on a rampage.

“Let’s go,” she ordered.

# CHAPTER 27 - SHACKLES AND SHADOWS

A distant metal scrape prompted Yolani to shift.

Pain was the first sensation that greeted her as consciousness slowly crept back into her. The numbing cold of the stone floor, the throbbing of her jaw, and the metallic taste of blood in her mouth were her first companions. Pressing herself back up to a sitting position sent stabs of agony through her body.

How long had she been asleep? Or passed out. There was little to differentiate between the two in the cell.

Her first thought ran to Henri—she looked out across the cell and felt her hopes drop as she saw he hadn't moved. The dim light of the distant lantern or torch made it hard to tell for sure. The sound of a gurgling snore told her he was still breathing, at least.

The noise of metallic doors screeching on their hinges, and of locks being undone, echoed down the corridor. She counted two heavy doors opening before the sounds of footsteps approached. A grim note ran through her mind: at least they weren't being left to rot, forgotten.

The light from the hall flickered as someone stepped in front of it. Two figures appeared in the dim outside her cell.

One was clad in the unmistakable garb of a Conclave monk, while the other donned chainmail armor that seemed to shimmer in the low light—a white capelet around his shoulders hinted that the man was a member of the Lightbringers.

Yolani activated her **[Identify]**, despite the effort it took. A small transparent scroll opened up in her vision, confirming her suspicions.

**[Armsman of Light - Human - Level 243]**

**[Martial Monk - Human - Level 188]**

Her voice came out a hoarse croak as she struggled to speak, the pain in her jaw causing her to have to keep it still as she made the sound. “Please, help me get out of here.”

The Lightbringer scoffed at her plea, his voice laced with disdain. “A demon-keeping whore wants freedom?” His sneer was audible even if his face was hidden in shadow.

Resignation tinged with anger strangled the feeble flame of hope that had struggled against the flood of pain and helplessness. They weren't there to help. What could she possibly say to sway men who had already judged and condemned her without knowing her at all?

“She's in a much worse state than your men reported,” the monk stated.

The Lightbringer snorted. “Not my problem.”

“Please,” she tried again, her voice crackling. “Henri's hurt badly. He hasn't moved.”

The monk remained silent, his face an impassive mask as he observed her. The Lightbringer stepped closer to the bars, leaning in as if inspecting an object rather than a person. “He killed one of my men. I couldn’t care less if he’s a corpse.”

The man reached up and pressed a metal key into the cell door; the metal creaking as he turned it. “You’re associated with The Demon. That makes you complicit in her crimes against our order.”

Yolani’s mind spun. What crimes? They’d saved the city from an insane cultist Magister. They—her mind froze as the missing piece clicked together. The sword. Eziel. It had been eaten by the Celestial Engine. It had belonged to Paladin Anton—to the Lightbringers.

“I’m an artificer,” Yolani argued weakly. “My work is here in Nef-tasu, not against anyone.”

The Lightbringer laughed coldly. “We have some questions for you to testify to while under truth stone. If you cooperate, we can consider releasing you when we are sure it won’t cause issues.”

Yolani fell silent. She wasn’t sure what they wanted exactly, but it was becoming clear that the Lightbringer saw the world in black and white; there was no room for the nuances of reality in his view. Something she remembered Elania complaining about when discussing Paladin Anton, too.

Her eyes slid to the monk, even though it was the Lightbringer who stepped into her cell. What alliance had the Conclave to with the Lightbringers that they were allowing them to kidnap members of the City Watch? The Conclave was one of the most powerful organizations in the city, although it didn’t have its own Magister. Much like the Syndicate.

“Give me your ankle,” the Lightbringer spat at her. He grabbed the chain and yanked.



The force was sudden and pain flared through her entire body, but especially around her foot. It was impossible for her to hold back the scream.

“Shut up, whore,” the man cursed.

He raised his hand to hit her, but the monk intervened by grabbing the Lightbringer’s wrist.

“She’s already beaten badly. If you thrash her further, she won’t be able to answer anything. I need to heal her foot and jaw at least.”

The Lightbringer relented with a curse.

Despite the tears in her eyes, she got a good view of him waving a small stone—a frequency resonance stone—by her ankle bracelet, and the metal parted. It was definitely an artificed restraint.

He moved away and let the monk inside. The man’s orange-hued robe and bald head were typical for the more senior monks in the Conclave. He knelt beside her.

“This will only take a moment. Try to close your eyes and not move. The pain will be gone once it’s finished,” he said.

It wasn’t the first time she’d been magically healed, although it was the first time by a monk and light based spell. She followed his instructions. Even with her eyes closed, she could see the light turn the inside of her eyeballs red as a warmth seeped into her skin.

Almost immediately, the pain in her jaw disappeared—so did the pain in her foot. When she opened her eyes, she poked at the skin of her face to confirm that the damage had disappeared.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

The monk didn’t smile or acknowledge her words; instead he pulled her to her feet. “Let’s go.”

He followed behind her, pointing her out of the cell and to follow the Lightbringer, who was waiting in the hall. She froze when she

stepped out and had a better look at Henri—even in the dim light, she could see he was badly injured.

“Move,” the monk ordered.

“What about him?” she asked, desperation seeping into her voice.

The Lightbringer glanced back at Henri with indifference. “He will be interrogated when he wakes—if he wakes.”

Yolani turned to the monk. “You can’t just ignore him. He has much worse injuries than I did. The Conclave and the City Watch aren’t enemies... you can’t just leave him there to die.”

The Lightbringer turned and grabbed her arm and yanked her away, but the Monk didn’t follow, instead he held out his hand. “The key.”

“You’re going to heal him?” the Lightbringer asked, the question almost an accusation.

“He looks like he won’t survive the night if I don’t,” the monk replied.

The hand around Yolani’s arm tightened painfully. “He killed my man,” the Lightbringer replied.

The Monk raised his chin. “Not my problem.” The tone of his voice echoed the Lightbringer’s earlier usage of the phrase. “The key.”

A curse followed the thin piece of metal through the air. The monk caught it easily, then turned to open Henri’s cell.

Relief flooded through her even as the soldier yanked her down the hall. “You had better answer our questions, whore.”

Tears trailed down Yolani’s cheeks as she followed his direction.

She did her best to memorize the layout as he pushed her through the dungeon, past multiple blocks of empty cells. Counting the turns and making note of the security gates would help her find her way back if she needed to try to rescue Henri.

The relief from pain made that much easier, and she felt her head clearing as they went. The monk had healed more than just her ankle and jaw. She felt 100% better—physically at least.

A small stone staircase led to a better lit section of wherever she was being held, the corridors reminding her of some of the stonework of buildings in the Conclave district—hinting that she was indeed in some place controlled by the monks. A few more turns led to a door that was guarded by two more Lightbringers, who saluted as soon as they appeared.

“Sir,” the guard said as they approached. “The interrogation room is secure.”

“Good work, initiate,” her captor replied.

It sounded dumb enough that Yolani thought they might have been putting on a show for her or something. The room was bare except for a table with chairs, with a high ceiling with a single out of reach artifice lantern to provide lighting. She was shoved to the far side of the table and towards a chair.

“Sit,” the Lightbringer commanded.

She complied quickly, wanting to get away from him. He turned and left the room; the door slamming shut with a resounding thud. That brought relief, even if it felt like it sealed her fate somehow.

Her throat was parched, but she pushed the feeling down. She had to survive this somehow. She could only hope that the monk would help Henri enough for him to pull through.

Rescue would come... she knew Elania would, at the very least, be looking for them. Likely with Gaston's help. Henri's uncle was probably the only high-ranking member of the City Watch she would trust.

They just needed to somehow hold out long enough for it to arrive.

The monk helping Henri made her hope that it wasn't as bad as it felt.

# CHAPTER 28 - THREADS OF TRUTH

The silence in the room was heavy, each minute feeling like it wanted to stretch far beyond its welcome. Yolani sat motionless, her eyes fixed on the table. Her hands lay folded in her lap in an attempt to calm the tremors that had started as her anxiety built.

When the door finally opened, she recognized the monk who brought in a small ornate box he carefully placed on the table. He sat down across from her.

“How is Henri? Did you finish healing him?” she blurted out. Maybe questioning her captor wasn’t the best approach, but she couldn’t stall her concern.

Joren looked at her, then nodded. “He’ll live. He likely wouldn’t have survived to morning without assistance, so it was good that you brought it up.”

Relief warred with indignation that they might have actually left him to die in the cell. She swallowed the emotion down her throat. “Thank you for healing him. Can I ask your name?”

“Joren,” the monk answered. He opened the box and revealed what she had suspected it contained: a truth stone set in a velvet cushion.

Recognition dawned on Yolani; she knew the name. She remembered Elania telling her about the monks that had accompanied her when she had made her journey to Neftasu.

Joren was one of her companions back then, and although Elania had little good to say about him, she had said he had been better than Taniel at least.

“You should know that Elania isn’t what the Lightbringer is trying to make her out to be,” she replied, keeping her voice earnest.

He ignored her as he pulled out a small metal stand from the wooden case and set it on the table. The truth stone settled into the wire frame.

“Do you know how to use this?” he asked, gesturing to the device.

Yolani nodded, her throat tight. “Yes,” she replied. Her mind began to race, trying to anticipate what they would ask her. What could she say to convince them to let Henri and her go? She wasn’t sure there even was anything that would placate them.

Joren fixed her with a steady gaze. “You and Elania have done a terrible thing,” he said with a fatal gravity that chilled her blood. “Lightbringer West and his men are here to right it.”

She wanted to correct him. She opened her mouth to challenge the accusation, but the door swung open before she could speak.

The Lightbringer from earlier entered, his chainmail clinking softly as he moved to the table. His eyes narrowed at Joren. “You told her my name?” he asked, obviously unhappy.

Joren ignored the question entirely, his focus remaining on Yolani as if the other man hadn't spoken at all. "Lightbringer West, the truth stone is ready," he stated with an air of formality.

West huffed but settled into a chair beside Joren, his attention shifting to Yolani. The air in the room was thick, and Yolani found herself unable to sit still as her foot began to tap.

The Lightbringer needed something from her—information, a confession? She didn't know exactly what it was, but it was obvious from the way they were going about things.

"Activate the stone," West ordered.

She reached out and linked her mana to the stone, a small diamond-like light lit up inside the stone. If she expressed any lie, the light would disappear. She would have to be careful with what she said.

"Let us begin," West said, his voice cold and expectant. "Did you and the demon Elania engage Paladin Anton in combat at his mansion in the Mercenary District?"

Yolani swallowed. "Yes."

"Why did you attack the Paladin?" he asked.

A frown appeared on her face. "We were searching for the mana shards that Elania had seen in the Black Candle's dungeon. Since he made it back from there, we suspected he defeated them, and he wouldn't leave the shards behind."

West smiled. "So, you went there to rob him?"

Yolani tensed in her seat. "The shards didn't belong to him in the first place. The city desperately needed them because of the crisis, his hoarding them was hurting everyone."

"How noble," West sneered. "I'm sure it had nothing to do with the recent murder of your uncle and wanting to purchase your way out of your impending indenture for contract failure."

She bristled at how he worded it. If Relain's contract had been fair, or her uncle hadn't been a despicable man...

West waved his hand. "Never mind. Answer me how you found the Paladin."

"We gathered information on his general location through the City Watch. Later, when we were in the district, we spoke with locals who pointed out his mansion. When we scouted it out, I could detect the concentration of **[Power]** from the mana shards with a tool, so we knew we had the right place," Yolani stated simply.

The truth stone's pulse remained steady and white, the glow illuminating West's face as he leaned in. "During your attack, did you steal the holy sword?" His words were almost a whisper, as if mentioning the sword was a secret.

Yolani met his eyes unflinchingly. "Anton was repelled by Elania's attack while Tessa fled with the shards. Had the Paladin not been so quick to engage us, it's possible we could have worked together."

West's reaction was immediate and violent, his hand striking across her face with enough force to send her head snapping to the side. Pain exploded across her cheek, her ears ringing with the impact.

"Answer the question!" West demanded, his voice rising. "Did you steal the sword?"

Yolani turned back to face him with a glare, her hand coming up to hold her throbbing cheek. "Elania recovered the sword while I was incapacitated from the confrontation," she said through gritted teeth.

West's face twisted into a sneer, "So you admit it—you stole the holy sword."

Her response was immediate, fueled by his accusation. "It wasn't theft. The sword was left behind in the aftermath of the battle. It wanted to come with us, it wanted away from Anton because the man



was an asshole as much as you are. If anyone is to blame for its loss, it is you and your stupid order!”

She tried to scoot back in the chair as he rose and raced to her. Too late, she realized she should have held her tongue.

His fist smashed into her nose and sent her to the floor. A kick to her middle doubled her over, then came a series of screeches and kicks while she held her arms over her face to protect it.

“West, stop!” Joren shouted.

The kicking stopped, and the two men argued. She didn’t pick it all up.

There was a slam of the door before a hand helped her up to a sitting position. A second flare of magic covered her middle—healing magic that soothed the pain away.

“You shouldn’t have provoked him like that,” Joren told her.

She looked up at him with a glare, then bit her lip and looked away. The truth stone was still glowing. She sat back down in her seat while Joren left her alone with her thoughts. After another wait, the two men returned.

West didn’t acknowledge her as he sat down. Instead, he launched right back into the questions. “After you stole the holy sword, what did you do with it?”

She looked to Joren, who just waited for her answer. Yolani sat straighter in her chair, doing her best to not be cowed by the Light-bringer’s aggression.

The truth seemed to matter little to West. He was looking for something to fit his narrative—whatever that was. It seemed like he wanted to paint Elania and her as thieves.

“Elania carried us to safety. Then she used the sword to heal me,” Yolani replied.

West's hands clenched into fists, his anger barely contained. Any thought of the sword working with them was best avoided. "And then you took the sword to the Magistry?"

"We went to confront Relain and Tessa, to recover the mana shards," Yolani explained, her voice steady somehow.

"How did you get inside the Magistry?" West demanded.

"We... broke into the building," Yolani admitted. She remembered the urgency of that night, of their mad rush up the tower, barely staying ahead of events. Just thinking about it reminded her of the drowning feeling she had felt.

"You found them. Tell me about the fight with Relain," West pressed.

Yolani drew a shaky breath. "Relain used willcasting against us. Tessa was there as well. I was severely injured... The Paladin showed up to fight as well... it was all chaos. Elania got me away and then we escaped to the Engine with the mana shards."

The memory was a jumbled mess, and she did her best to touch on everything, despite how compressed the retelling was. "Elania healed me again, but I was really out of it. All the Magisters arrived, and Elania ended up overwhelmed by their combined efforts, and then she fell into the Celestial Engine."

West was silent for a moment, his eyes boring into her. "And what happened to the holy sword?"

"Eziel... fell into the Engine with her. They were both disintegrated and consumed by it," Yolani said.

"And yet Elania fell in as well, but came back alive," West stated, his tone laced with skepticism.

"The sword sacrificed itself to save her," Yolani replied.

West reached out and slapped the truth stone, sending it flying off the table. It hit the wall with a sharp crack and shattered into pieces.

He stood up. "It's clear the Magisters stole the sword and are keeping it in their vaults in the Magistracy. I'll report to the order."

The man turned and left. Joren stood and began to gather up the broken shards on the floor, leaving her alone to consider what had happened. When he was finished, she looked at him.

"Does the truth not matter? What was the point of the interrogation?" she asked. "Why bother when he'll make up whatever he wants?"

Joren stared at her with a frown. "I'll report what was said here, and what the truth stone reported to the elders."

"The Conclave is supporting..." Yolani's words faded out as the gears in her head began to work. The riots, the unrest at the new reforms and orders from the Magisters...

"The Lightbringers are behind the riots," she whispered. "They're stirring up the people. Are they somehow responsible for the bread shortage, too?"

"The Magistracy has more enemies than just the Lightbringers. They've turned over a century of tradition in the last few months," Joren stated. "They've embraced the demonology and are addicted to the fruits of temptation the Dungeon provides to fuel their machinations."

"Artifice isn't a machination. It's a science, with predictable inputs and outputs," Yolani countered.

Joren frowned at her. "The input is human souls harvested from the dead. It's evil. You should understand, from what we know, your father was a victim as well."

Yolani swallowed and looked down.

"Someone will be here soon to take you back to your cell. Don't anger them because no one might be around to heal you again," Joren warned.

Yolani nodded weakly. “Thank you for healing Henri and me.”

# CHAPTER 29

## - DUBIOUS MISSIONS

Gaston's pace was brisk as he led the group back through the maze of the Mercenary District. Multiple times, groups of angry citizens rushed past them on the main street, ignoring the group. Elania trailed behind, barely keeping up as her turbulent thoughts and numb mood brewed like a forming storm.

The guards at the main gate opened for them and she missed the fact that they had arrived at the City Watch headquarters until the group came to a stop inside of its main courtyard. Most of the men broke off and headed back to their barracks to change equipment and gear.

This wasn't the right place. Elania turned and started toward the gate, but Gaston's hand caught her arm.

She turned to look at him; he stared at her with a worried frown.

"Where are you going?" he asked, his voice a mix of concern and command. "We need to go speak with Magister Bannon."

“We need to go rescue Yolani and Henri,” she replied.

“You need to calm down,” he said.

“I am calm,” she lied.

“You’re letting your demon nature take over. What Yolani needs is for you to be in control, not barely contained, and going wild.” He watched her for a reply.

She swallowed and nodded. He wasn’t wrong. “You’re right,” she conceded, her voice quieter now. “This isn’t easy.”

Gaston nodded, seemingly satisfied. “Important things are often hard. I know how much you care about them, but you need to keep it together if you want to be able to help them.”

She followed him inside. It would be a good idea to speak to the Magister and get assistance. She repeated that like a mantra in her head. Dealing with the monks wouldn’t be possible for anyone to do alone.

Men stopped their conversations and stared at her. Whispers of ‘unbound’ were unmistakable, but no one challenged them as they passed by. No one was actually hostile—was that because she was known to them more, or because of Gaston escorting her?

Probably both. It was another prickle at her, but one easily discarded as unimportant.

The elevator was torture, restless energy coursing through her, urging her to... do something. Anything. The working part of her brain told her going off without a plan or anything wouldn’t help Yolani or herself. It would make the situation worse.

It was hard to explain that to the **[Darkwalker]** portion, though. Shoving her angry kitty instincts down took effort. But it became quieter as she tried to put the things she’d learned together.

The Lightbringers had framed the cult, and were working with the Conclave. Anxiety pulsed through her as she thought about the

evidence of which there was very little. What had felt like a concrete thing to act on suddenly felt like they were grasping at straws.

There was the fact that the Lightbringers were staying in the Conclave District, but that wasn't hard evidence either.

As they reached Bannon's door, Gaston placed a hand on the wood but paused before knocking. He turned toward her.

"Remember, we're here for Yolani and Henri. We need the Magister's support," Gaston said.

Elania met his gaze and nodded once, firmly. "I got my head on."

He nodded and knocked. A few seconds later, Bannon called for them to enter. The ornate doors opened quietly, revealing Bannon seated at his desk, which was littered with parchments and various city reports. His eyes were weary, but he beckoned them in with a hand.

Gaston did not sit, instead giving a concise and factual report that had Bannon's expression turning more and more serious. He recounted the information about the kidnapping, the events in the Mercenary District, the ambush at the Black Candle's clinic, and the ensuing chaos that nearly led to them being caught up in the rioting on the streets.

Elania waited until he paused to add her piece, starting with the Lightbringers' involvement in stirring the unrest that had caused the riots. She relayed Darius' information regarding the Lightbringers and Conclave's potential collusion and their increased presence in the Conclave district. That seemed to catch Bannon's attention.

The Magister crossed his fingers. "I've been wary of the multiple groups of Lightbringers coming down into the city," Bannon admitted. "Normally, worrying about small groups of them coming down isn't much concern, but after events... It's possible the Paladin only pretended to be placated about the loss of their artifact and retreated to gather forces."

“He was gone before I woke up, but from the times I met him he didn’t seem reasonable at all,” Elania said.

Bannon’s gaze hardened as he came to a decision. “I’ll order the guard to prevent further Lightbringers from coming down the city elevator. We can’t allow their numbers to swell unchecked, especially if their inciting unrest.”

“That should help with keeping the problem from getting worse, but what about Yolani and Henri? We need to rescue them!” Elania urged.

Bannon looked between her and Gaston, his eyes sharp. “What proof do we have of their location?”

“What?” Elania blurted.

“From what you’ve both told me, we don’t have any hard evidence that it was, in fact, the Lightbringers that took them—and even more that they’re being held by the Conclave. Filling the city with militant groups is one thing, but where is the proof of the kidnapping?” Bannon asked.

“Darius... Darius said the Lightbringers were impersonating the Black Candle cultists and sowing unrest,” Elania offered.

“So, I’m to take the word of a man who claims to be leading a cult that tried to destroy the city to the Conclave, who have considerable clout and pull among the nobility and a small army defending their fortress?” Bannon asked.

Elania’s hands clenched at her sides, but he continued.

“If we go to them directly, they will just deny it. Storming their cloister fortress inside the Conclave district is out of the question as well—they have hundreds of monks inside, many of whom are powerful combatants in their own right. Even if we form up the entire city guard to attempt something, they could likely withstand a siege indefinitely.”



Her heart fell at the man's estimates of what could be done.

"If what you say is true, then the Conclave has overstepped, but we cannot be rash in our actions. First, we must convene the council and inform the other Magisters. Steps can and will be taken, but a frontal assault to attempt a rescue is out of the question," Bannon declared.

"What about applying pressure? If you inform the Conclave Elders that we know they have them, and are demanding them back, won't that force their hands?" Gaston asked.

Bannon frowned. "That will need to be calculated. If we demand for them back that could backfire. They might want to get rid of them to hide any evidence of wrongdoing."

"So we can't force the issue," Elania whispered. "What about... sneaking in and finding them and getting them out?"

"It's a fortress," Bannon stated dismissively.

"It might be possible," Gaston countered. "We have a few contacts inside. Some junior monks that have been passing information, nothing decisive or that useful, but they might be able to help us infiltrate the place and locate where they are being held."

"And get them out," Elania added.

Gaston eyed her. "It would depend on where and how they are being held."

"If such an attempt was made, we couldn't ask for your release if you're detected and captured," Bannon said.

Gaston nodded. "I know a few who will be willing to take the risk of helping Henri, and..." He turned to look at Elania. "I know someone who has some abilities that would be very useful for the attempt as well."

"I doubt the girl can fight her way through a fortress of monks if they're caught," Bannon replied.

Well, he was probably right about that. Although there were things she could prepare to help with the odds. She just needed to ask... The loss hit her in the chest again. She'd have to figure things out on her own without Yolani there to help.

"Regardless, we'll need a few days to prepare," Gaston stated.

Panic filled her. "A few days?" she hissed.

"At least. There isn't any way we can speed up contact with our men inside. They have strict schedules and the Conclave doesn't allow its lower-ranking members free rein to go as they please," Gaston replied. His expression told her he didn't like it either.

Elania frowned and looked at her lap. Days. She wasn't sure she could wait that long.

"Very well," Bannon said after a moment of silence. "Lieutenant, coordinate with your contacts. Elania, prepare yourself for what you might face in there. I'll inform the council and we'll see if there are any official and direct channels or pressure we can use to request their return."

"You said we can't let them know that we know they have them," Elania replied.

"I said we can't accuse them of holding them prisoner or kidnapping them. We can let them know we are searching for them, and their safety and health is very important to us," Bannon answered.

Gaston grunted. "If they are working with the Lightbringers to sabotage and stoke the unrest... it could be that won't matter. They might be seeking to overturn the authority of the Magistracy and replace it."

"If it comes to that, it will be a war, Lieutenant," Bannon said, deadly serious. "Inform Harik that we will not be accepting any more groups down the elevator except the Syndicate's standard caravans."

"Yes, sir." Gaston saluted.

Elania stood up. "I'll... I'll get ready. But if this delay causes Henri and Yolani harm..." She paused and frowned. "I don't know what I'll do," she whispered, the vulnerability in her voice obvious.

"If needed, we can set up a contract for you. To reduce the backlash from you appearing un-contracted," Bannon said.

Elania tensed. "I don't know how long it will take for them to return to gold. It's probably best to not have a contract to increase the rate of divinity replenishment and not dilute it further."

The mention of divinity made Bannon twitch, but he acquiesced.

Not that making a contract was out of the question if needed, but for some reason, she felt hesitant to make one with anyone—except Yolani. Maybe it was the fact that the connection it had provided had felt special.

Bannon stood up and stared out the window of his office as she and Gaston left. The trip down the elevator was silent until they were near the bottom.

"I'll have a new squad to escort you. We'll provide an artifice carriage, so there won't be any problems," Gaston declared.

Elania nodded, not interested in rejecting the offer. She had learned her lesson during the riot. Although that had been partly to blame on them, just not being aware of their surroundings.

He froze just as he turned to step away and frowned at her. "I forgot to ask about this, but do you have a way back into the shop? If you don't have access to the wards, we don't want you to have to try to break them. We can provide housing."

Elania shook her head. "The wards are keyed to me and Yolani, so I can get in."

"She keyed them to you specifically? She must trust you a great deal," Gaston remarked.

Elania nodded quietly. "We get along well."

She waited alone near the external gate for nearly ten minutes before a group of men approached. They exchanged pleasantries, but her mind was already running ahead.

There were a lot of things she had taken for granted with Yolani doing the work.

How did she order chickens?

She was going to have to ask one of the other artificer shops.

Because there was no way she was going into the Conclave without as many full mana shards and things as she could carry.

# CHAPTER 30 - INFILTRATIONS

E lania glanced through the shop, having finished most of her preparations. The shop was painfully quiet. She'd ended up transforming into a **[Darkwalker]** and sleeping on the bed in a ball. Otherwise, her nerves and lack of need for much sleep would have made it impossible.

**[Crisis Management]** seemed to be past its limits, or maybe it was less effective the longer one relied on it... she wasn't sure. She certainly wasn't going to pulse **[Power]** into it, not when the effects were so numbing it turned the world into a haze.

She'd actually unslotted it in favor of **[Presence Concealment]**, so when she did especially need it, the effects would be more effective without the problems that came with it.

The entire day before had been spent preparing, gathering gear, and ensuring she was as ready as she could be. Packing Yolani's tools along with healing potions and then fitting all of their spare mana shards into a leather band had allowed her not to think about things.

Elania cinched and tied it around her upper arm. She had considered turning it into a collar or necklace but didn't want it to be visible, so those ideas had been discarded.

None of the mana shards were super-high quality, but altogether there were enough of them that they would more than double her total power capacity. Making sure they were all filled to the brim had been a lot of work and required a lot of chicken snacks, thankfully her new **[Soul Management]** perk prevented any side effects.

If the Magisters wanted their golden goose to lay more eggs, they needed to prioritize resolving her issues.

The workbench in front of her held the last set of items: the firearm Yolani had made for her, the two round drum magazines plus two more—she'd worked for several hours to finish the extra round drums. She'd almost given up—it had been Yolani that had made the working ones—but there were enough schematics and such that she'd been able to figure it out.

A brace of healing potions that had been stashed away in the bottom of a cabinet for emergencies, and her **[Vorpal Dagger]** that glowed crimson when held under a certain light. The amount of usage and channeling of **[Power]** through it in fights had worn away whatever rapid poison death magic it had once held, but it was still sharper and more durable than steel.

Whatever disguises they ended up wearing, she was really counting on them to be able to conceal everything.

She checked it all over before sliding the gun into a holster that went around her waist. The magazines went into a large pouch on her other side. Not having to worry about reloading crystals and whatnot made things much simpler.

A few food rations went into her potion pack. They were hardened bars of bread, and weren't really anything to write home about, and

she didn't really even need to eat anything, but if Yolani or Henri needed them...

Okay, well, maybe it was just extra stuff she didn't need. Food rations probably weren't critical, but she packed them anyway. They were almost hard enough to hit someone with, in any case.

As she tied the packs closed, she shook her head and pushed away the melancholy. She couldn't be distracted by her emotions—she needed to save her friends.

A knock at the door pulled her from her thoughts. She straightened up, and pulled on her belt and made sure the pouches and bags were firmly attached. Her hand went instinctively to her [**Vorpal Dagger**] as she pulled the shop's front door open.

She nodded to Gaston, who was flanked by two men. All three of their faces were etched with the same seriousness that had been present since they'd learned of the kidnappings.

"Are you prepared?" Gaston asked, his voice low.

Elania met his gaze, her own eyes hardening with resolve. "I'm ready. Let's go get them back."

The streets were quiet, despite being in the middle of the day. When they reached the Conclave District, things had picked up, but even the market bazaar's enthusiasm was muted. Half the once vibrant stalls were empty, and the chatter of merchants and energy of children running amok was gone.

Gaston led them to an inn that seemed to cater to a more discerning clientele, its façade adorned with ornate symbols. The innkeeper waved them by as they made their way up to the second floor and into a bare meeting room that only held a table and some wooden chairs.

"I'll be waiting downstairs for our contact, but you should stay here and keep out of sight," Gaston said.

She nodded, agreeing that was probably for the best. Even with her **[Presence Concealment]** it would just take one good use of **[Identify]** to betray her race. Gaston had assured her it wouldn't be a problem, but she was still waiting for an explanation for that.

The other two guards took up seats at the table and pulled out a deck of cards as soon as Gaston was gone. One man looked at her appraisingly. "Care to join?"

Elania shook her head and grabbed one of the chairs, dragging it toward one of the windows. "Sorry, I don't think I could focus on a game."

"Suit yourself, lass. But waiting can be worse than the action if ye dwell on it," the man replied.

She didn't think he was wrong, but watching the bazaar through the cloudy glass would give her enough solace, and she didn't really feel like socializing.

The wait was agonizing, each tick of her HUD clock stretching longer than the last. The muted life of the bazaar below made a suitable backdrop for her mind to run around with everything that could go wrong. Or worse, what had already gone wrong that she couldn't do anything about. What if they had...

No, it was best not to think of that possibility.

Time continued to pass. After the two guards finished a few games, there was a knock at the door before it creaked open. Gaston entered with a man clad in a large gray robe that resembled the garb the Conclave monks favored. His head was shaved, and his eyes held a quiet intensity.

She glanced at Gaston and wondered just how much they could trust the man that was going to betray his fellow monks.

**[Spiritual Monk - Human - Level 142]**



He moved to the table and set out a bundle of gray robes that resembled his own. That was good news. If they had been wearing the battle garb she'd seen Taniel wearing, it would have been hard to conceal her stuff, but with this...

Gaston detailed the plan to get inside the fortress as they donned the disguises. Elania listened intently, committing things to memory, but there was one thing she didn't like.

"Can you draw us a map?" she asked the monk. "It would help visualize our path."

He shook his head. "I know the way well enough, but I've nothing to draw with."

A small smile appeared on her face as she pulled out a rolled piece of parchment and drafting pencil from a pack. "Will this do?"

The monk accepted with a nod and began to sketch what looked like a top-down overview of the inside of the fortress. He drew a line through the turns they'd take. Her eyes narrowed at the sight of multiple checkpoints marked along the route.

"It's deep inside, with no side exits or alternative paths," he explained. "The checkpoints will be our biggest problem—each one is guarded by monks who will be more skeptical of our presence as we get deeper."

"It doesn't look like there are any other ways out?" Elania asked.

He frowned. "There's only one way out—the same way we got in. We'll have to fight."

"Once we have Yolani and Henri, I can always make a new way out." Elania said, tracking her finger right through the side of the drawn wall.

Gaston gave her a look of worry. "We brought sleeping stones for the exit."

“Yeah, well... we’ll try those first, of course,” Elania agreed. But in her experience, things never went to plan.

Which was why she had brought a dozen extra gadgets to blow the monks up with if needed.

# CHAPTER 31 - DESCENT

Yolani's breath came in ragged gasps.

Joren's promise of someone coming to take her back to the cell never materialized. Instead, West had returned with bindings and a whip.

The ropes bit into her wrists as she was tethered and then hung from the ceiling, the scent of sweat mingling with her fear.

She screamed at the first lick of the lash, but now everything was hazy and muted in her mind, the pain having turned into a numb throbbing.

She'd lost track of time, but the pain had begun to ebb, leaving her feeling a mounting anxiety. He'd strike again, soon.

Her fears materialized with a slap across her face, jolting her from her grim reverie.

"Repent," West demanded, his voice as cold and unyielding as the stone walls encasing them. She didn't answer. She'd already pleaded with him to stop, having been willing to answer or do whatever he wanted to make the torture stop.

That had only encouraged him to try harder, so she'd become mute.

She knew she had passed out several times already, each time being splashed awake by a bucket of freezing cold water.

The dried blood that had smeared down her arms was joined by fresh rivulets when the man decided to beat her more thoroughly.

Once she'd been healed by one of West's men, although she had wished they'd left her to pass out.

West slapped her again when she didn't answer. She inhaled and sucked the blood in her mouth into a ball and spat it in his face.

It was a bad choice. He would hurt her more for it.

West calmly stepped back, walking to the table where he had laid out his tools and picked up a white linen already stained with various stripes of her blood to wipe his face.

He was still looking over the tools when the door to the interrogation room burst open. For the first time in what felt like forever, Yolani's blurry vision cleared enough for her to see. She recognized Joren.

Confusion appeared on his face as he took in the sight of her, and it slowly morphed to horror. Surely she didn't look that bad?

Well, maybe she did.

"Why is she still being interrogated?" he asked, his voice strained.

"H..help," Yolani croaked.

The monk winced.

West's eyes were hard, unforgiving. "She's still connected to the demon," he said, gesturing with the crop in his hand. "I'm severing that connection."

She wanted to blink, but the blood crusting her eyes made that painful. Not once had he mentioned severing the contract with Elania. He'd lambasted her for her sin of murdering one of his men and

for consorting with demons plenty, but her contract had never been mentioned.

It wasn't something she wanted to do, but she wasn't going to be able to handle any more 'attention' or correction. She could barely even speak.

"I end the contract, amicably, with no penalty," she croaked out, loud enough to be heard clearly.

Both men froze and stared at her.

A magic circle flashed into existence in front of her, a whirling clockwork of blue runes and light. There was a sensation of warmth and then a presence before an audible click filled the cell.

The contract magic ignored the suppression wards and magic defenses the monks had built into their fortress and made its determination. The contract, and Elania, had been a centerpiece of her life since they'd connected and the circle spun for almost ten seconds before it made an audible and visible proclamation.

**[Contractee Initiated Contract termination.]**

**[Contract Completed]**

**[No violations have been assessed.]**

**[All clauses fulfilled. System-termination of Contract completed.]**

The circle vanished, and Yolani's body sagged in the ropes, her head lolling forward. She could feel the little tug of mana that Elania had been draining steadily suddenly rebound back to her, making the pain of her injuries more... vivid.

West snarled and stepped toward her, raising his crop to strike her, but Joren's hand shot out and snatched the Lightbringer's wrist.

"She has done as you asked. The contract is broken," Joren insisted.

"She deserves it," West spat venomously. His leg lashed out, and he delivered a kick between her legs.

Pain lanced through her groin and middle, all the way to her wrists where the ropes cut deeper into her skin. She choked on her own breath and whimpered.

Joren's words cut through the air with a hostile authority. "No more. She's under my care."

West's laugh was devoid of humor as he grasped Joren by the robe, his words a poison-laced whisper. "Your precious elders don't care if the whore lives or dies, only whether you make us happy. Me, happy."

With a forceful shove, he pushed Joren aside and stormed out of the cell.

Her eyes fell on the tools still sitting on the interrogation table. He'd be back for them. She needed to be gone.

Sucking in a breath, she drew Joren's attention. "Please. H..help."

That broke Joren's shock, and he approached her. It took several minutes for him to figure out how to undo her tether. When her feet finally touched the floor, she collapsed into a heap.

Healing magic seeped into her back, but she didn't respond to his words, she needed a moment of rest. At some point, the monk took off her restraints and healed her wrists.

Yolani sat up. She realized her hair was matted with her own blood.

Joren smiled at her. "There, you're looking better. We need to get you back to your cell and then I'll find something for you to clean up with. I'm sorry this happened."

She smiled back. "Thank you. You're a good man."

She'd never spoken a lie so convincingly before.

Even if he was seemingly nice, even if he'd got her away from West, and helped her... he was still her captor. He was partly responsible by association, and she'd never forget that.

Joren led her back to her cell, and she was surprised to find that he didn't bother to secure her with the artifice chain. She didn't know if it was a small mercy or a cruel joke.

"It will take some time, but I'll find some cleaning supplies and fresh clothes for you," Joren promised. "It might take a few hours, but I'll be back before the noon-day meal."

Yolani nodded absently... then stood up and hugged him. "Thank you," she whispered.

He blushed and patted her back awkwardly. "You're welcome."

He left, and she sat down on the straw pallet.

Across the hall, Henri's voice broke the silence. "Yolani? You're back."

She looked up to see him gripping the bars of his own cell, his face bruised but his eyes alert. Relief flooded through her, warming her despite the chill of the dungeon. "Henri, you're alive," she blurted.

"Yeah, the monk healed me," Henri replied. She could almost hear the grimace in his voice.

"We're in the Conclave Fortress," Yolani replied. "I don't know what the Lightbringers and Conclave are doing working together, but they've got us."

There was a minute of silence before she asked a question she already knew the answer to. "Can you contact the Guard?"

"No," Henri replied. "No connection... everything's silent."

Yolani bit her lip and then closed her eyes. "I was afraid of that. I think the others will know we were taken. Elania... I had to break our contract. I couldn't take any more."

There was a creak, and she saw that Henri had stood up and come to the bars of his cell, gripping them with both hands. "What... what did they do to you?"

She shook her head. "I don't want to talk about it."

“I’ll kill them,” Henri’s voice was low and dangerous.

She shook her head. “We need to focus on getting out of here.”

“Nothing in my cell for that. Even if we get out, we’re in the middle of a fortress,” Henri pointed out.

“I have a plan,” Yolani stated. “But it’s going to rely on our monk friend.”

Henri’s eyes narrowed. “What are you thinking?”

“He has the keys to our cells,” Yolani replied.

\*\*\*

Elania tightened the strap of her pack and looked up at the stone staircase that zigzagged up the side of the cavern wall. The Conclave fortress was built into the side of the city-cave, the opulent district thinning out into larger open areas until all the approaches to the fortress were easily watched.

She’d seen the area from across the city, but she’d never realized what it was.

For all the wealth and luxury on display in the district, the fortress was almost nondescript, as if the Conclave didn’t want to draw attention to it.

It made more sense why Magister Bannon and the others hadn’t been eager to consider attacking it.

Heck, it was right there in the name. Fortress. She’d not really processed that until now.

There were multiple entrances, and their guide picked one that she hoped wasn’t at random for them to ascend. The stairs reminded her



of the ones that had once led her out of the deepest caverns and into the Mushroom fields, but these were much less ancient.

And much more often used.

When they reached the top of the climb, there was a small landing with two monks on guard in front of a small portcullis. The long hallway behind it was lined with dim torches.

“Brother, state your business,” one of the guards demanded. The wary look on the two men’s faces made Elania wonder if they were even going to make it inside.

The other guard spoke first. “You know the rules. No general entry by the port gate.”

The guide nodded, then pulled out a parchment. “Elder Gant had several... special requests. We have his seal and approval for special entry. So it’s not... commented on.”

One guard took the parchment and looked it over, while the other stepped forward to examine them more closely. His gaze settled on her and she felt a mild panic as he walked right up to her.

His hand went to her hood, and she had to forcibly keep herself still as he pulled it back. “Special requests, huh? Can’t believe Gant is being so brazen.”

“The seal is legitimate,” the other guard said, handing the parchment back to their guide. “You may enter.”

The man touched a stone that lit up with magic, causing the portcullis began to rise. She wondered how it was keyed or locked; she doubted just anyone could press it and get through.

Gaston reached over and pulled her hood back up, and the small party of spy, lieutenant, demoness, and guard entered the fortress.

It was too easy. She didn’t like it. Didn’t trust it. She tightened her hood around her face and then let her hands fall to her sides, the

comforting feel of her dagger at her hip and latent energy in her worn mana shards reassuring her.

She was ready for things to go sideways.

And there was no way she would be retreating out of the fortress without finding Yolani and Henri first.

No matter how many monks she had to kill to manage it.

# CHAPTER 32 - THE FORTRESS

Yolani's eyes flicked to the door as it creaked open. Joren stepped inside, carrying a small bucket of water and a bundle of clothes. He set them down and then looked at her with a frown.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you," she lied, suppressing her hatred for him. She didn't want him to know how much she despised him.

He might have helped her, saved her even, but he was working with the people who had taken her and Henri in the first place. Worked with the people who had tortured her.

His help didn't absolve him of his part in her suffering.

"You need to let us go," Henri called out from his cell.

Joren frowned and looked over his shoulder. "The Elders will decide what to do with you."

"I'm a member of the Guard. You're going to start a war," Henri warned.

Joren shook his head. "I don't want a war, but I can't help you."

Yolani wiped her face and hands with the water, turning the water crimson with her dried blood. She didn't want to think about what West had done to her, or what he might still do.

She needed to focus on what she could do. Standing up, she took a step toward Joren. "Thank you."

He tensed as she hugged him. "You saved me."

"I'm just doing my duty," he replied, patting her back awkwardly, clearly seeking escape.

She let him go and stepped back, her eyes meeting his. "I understand, but you saved me from him, anyway."

Suddenly, the prison shook, and the sound of distant shouting filled the air. Joren's eyes widened, and he started to slip away, but she held onto his arm.

"What was that? Is something wrong...?" she asked.

"I don't know," Joren replied, hastily leaving the cell and sliding the door shut with a locking click.

"I'm sorry I have to go. I'll be back later," he called out as he hurried away.

Yolani stepped up to the bars with a frown, looking for any sign of what was happening. Henri's gaze was fixed on her.

"What was that?" he asked.

"No idea. But it's a distraction," she replied.

"I meant with the monk," Henri clarified. "You hugged him."

She shot him an annoyed glance. "I was trying to get him to let his guard down."

Henri's eyes narrowed. "You're not going to try to seduce him, are you?"

She held up a key that she'd taken off the monk's belt. "I don't need to."

Henri's eyes widened. "You stole that?"

“I don’t know what that was, but it might be our chance. We need to get out of here,” Yolani replied.

\*\*\*

Elania followed Gaston and the monk through the fortress, her eyes scanning the hallways and rooms they passed. The inside was a maze of rough stone, with narrow hallways and cramped rooms. The monks they passed were all clad in the same gray robes, and they all gave their small group wary glances.

Most of those settled and lingered on her. At least no one seemed to be able to tell what she was. **[Identify]** was a thing, but maybe her **[Presence Concealment]** was doing well enough of a job to prevent anyone of thinking to use it?

Anxiety tightened in her chest as they continued further, regardless. It warred with anger and frustration. It felt like the whirlpool of emotions was going to flatten her.

She had **[Crisis Management]** slotted alongside **[Presence Concealment]**, **[Mana Manipulation]**, and **[Improvised Combat]**. She was ready to swap out **[Presence Concealment]** for another combat skill when things hit the fan, and she had all her cooldowns available.

So that was ready.

The group came to a second checkpoint. This time, the monks guarding the gate were wearing more ornate robes and were undecidedly unhappy to see them.

“What do you think you’re doing?” one of the guards demanded.

**[Martial Monk - Human - Lvl 162]**

Their guide stepped forward and wielded his parchment with the elder's name affixed to it. "Special instruction from Elder Gant. We have his seal and something he requested."

The guard took the parchment and looked it over, then gave it to the second man. "Elder Gant might want it, but no one gets through here without following procedure. Elder Winx does not take kindly to people trying to bypass the rules. Especially here," the second guard said.

The first guard nodded. "You can wait here while we send for Elder Gant."

Gaston stepped forward. "We don't have time for that. The orders were explicit. Can't you send us ahead while you get the Elder?"

Both of the monks stared at him, their expressions suddenly flashing to shock. "You're not a brother."

Elania tensed, her hand going to her dagger. Gaston was faster and struck first, slamming a length of metal between the first guard's ribs. The second guard didn't waste any time drawing a weapon and simply struck out with a kick, sending the Guard lieutenant flying back into the wall.

The stabbed monk fell to the floor silently, going limp--Gaton's strike had been lethal. That didn't stop the second one from raising a shout, which was answered from behind them in the distance.

A flurry of exchanges between their guide and the guard erupted, but Elania stepped forward and struck the remaining guard with a slash of her dagger. Hot **[Power]** laced across the metal, leaving a sizzle of red light in the air as it blurred.

There was a screech as the blow narrowly missed the guard's throat and took off his ear instead. He stumbled back, but she pushed past their guide and slammed him into the wall and then punctured his

chest like Gaston had. Just a bit more brutally since his chest caved from the pressure of the **[Vorpai]** dagger's hilt.

Elania glanced back at Gaston, who was getting back to his feet.

"Are you injured?" Elania asked, mostly to know if he could continue or not.

Gaston nodded. "We're in it now."

"Yeah." Elania turned to their guide. "Where is the key to the gate?"

The man swallowed. "I'm not sure. It'll be keyed to one of them. We need to find--"

Elania stared at the bars and then reached out to grab them. There was a visceral pulse of energy that flowed over her in response. The sensation was strange, and although she never thought of **[Power]** as a living thing... it seemed angry at her presence.

Like it wanted to reject her.

That was fine. She hadn't wanted to absorb it, anyway. They just needed through.

A mental push filled the air with a thunderclap and the rest of the group's hands went to their ears in pain. The gate shuddered and then the stone where the bars were inset began to crumble; the metal turning a blazing red.

Her hands burned with the **[Power]** flowing through her, but her own sheen of protective energy encased her skin and protected her from the worst of it. That was an improvement from before, at least.

The metal gave way and began to liquefy, and a second pulse of **[Power]** sent it splattering away from them deeper into the fortress as she stomped her foot onto the stone.

The path was clear, except for a few puddles of cooling metal. She stepped through the new hole and looked back at the rest of them. "Let's go. We need to hurry."

"The alarm..." their guide mumbled weakly.

“It’s already been raised,” Gaston replied. “She’s right. We need to move.”

“This is fucked!” one of the Guards muttered, but they followed along.

Elania shook her head. She didn’t disagree with him, but somehow, she had known it was going to end up like this. The main reason she hadn’t expressed her skepticism was because that would have meant waiting for a new plan... or never coming at all.

And that was not something she had been willing to consider.



# CHAPTER 33 - OUTRAGE (PT. I)

The raised shouts of monks sounded behind and in front of them as the group followed the direction of the guide.

Two guards appeared around a corner, but they were at a low level and the sprinting party slammed into them like a hammer, shouldering them aside and knocking them unconscious.

“How much further?” Elania shouted, pulling the bindings on her monk robe, and discarding it. The others followed suit.

Disguise wasn’t needed anymore, and easy access to their weapons and gear was.

Plus, running in the robe was annoying. She wasn’t sure how the monks managed it while fighting.

Probably why on the journey through the Depths they had been wearing much more reasonable clothing and gear compared to the monks she’d seen in the fortress and city.

Still, that didn't answer why the guards were wearing robes that would make fighting harder. Maybe they had grown complacent enough to think no one would dare try to fight them in the fortress?

The guide pointed to a door at the end of the hallway. "Through that and then two more hallways and we'll be to the dungeons. They should be there."

Elania nodded. She really hoped that was the case. She didn't want to have to search the entire fortress for them.

The door was locked, but it wasn't a gate, so she just kicked it open. It resisted, but a second **[Power]** enhanced kick sent it flying off its hinges into the next hall's wall.

A flurry of nearby shouts inside erupted, and she stepped through right into the waiting monks' attack. A sphere of **[Power]** formed around her, and the magical energy sparked and arced through the surrounding air without touching her. The rest of the group hesitated, but they weren't needed for her reply.

She folded the sphere of energy into a flat disk, then launched it down both sides of the hallway in two deadly arcs.

There were a half dozen monks in both directions, but only one dove to the floor in time to avoid being cut in half. The rest were struck as they tried to block or dodge, and the energy blade cut through them like a scythe through wheat.

The survivor screamed at the top of his lungs, "D... demon!"

The showers of blood and viscera flooded the hallway, and even Gaston winced as the rest of the group stepped into the hallway to follow her.

A sick expression appeared on the guide's face as he pointed in the survivor's direction. "That way."

The man turned and scrambled away, leaving bloody footprints behind as the group followed. The next hall held another gate, with

two determined monks guarding it. If the noise from the earlier fights hadn't alerted them, the terrified screams of the survivor rushing toward them, then down a side hallway would have.

Elania didn't want to give them time to react, so she launched a strike of **[Power]** at them. The first placed his staff into the ground and chanted something, and the second raised his hand, a wall of golden light forming between them and the strike.

There was a clash as her **[Power]** collided with the magic of the monks. Lighting sparked with a sizzle as the crackling energy arced between the strike point and the nearby stone.

The stonework began to crumble and crack, but the barrier held before the entire thing shattered into golden and red motes of light.

Elania tsked and checked her HUD.

**[Power: 1356/1544]**

She had gotten better at launching **[Power]** strikes, having spent less than two-hundred points so far, but they were still a long way away from being out of trouble. She had to be mindful of her backup mana shards and conserve her energy.

She scanned them with **[Identify]** immediately.

**[Martial Monk - Human - Lvl 158]**

**[Martial Monk - Human - Lvl 163]**

They were something like Taniel's level, then. He'd hurt her in the sewers, but she'd not been prepared or at full power at the time.

Before she could launch another attack, Gaston pulled out a length of steel. At first, she thought it was an artifice musket, but two arms popped out, revealing a metal crossbow.

He slapped a bolt into the groove, the string already being locked. He aimed and fired, his target moved to block the shot with a magic shield, but the length of metal punched through the barrier without slowing down, leaving a lazy rippled through the magic behind.

It struck the monk in the neck, sending him tumbling to the ground, the other monk's eyes widening before he cursed. A golden bell formed in the air in front of the man, and then it shot forward, flowing through the barrier and towards her and the rest of the group.

Their monk stepped forward, raising his hands together and then launching into a prayer. A copy of the bell formed in front of them and launched itself at the other, the two magical manifestations clashing together with a resounding gong that sent the golden energy scattering in long showers.

A litany of shouts sounded from behind, adding another surge of urgency to hurry.

The guard looked accusingly at their guide. "Why, brother?"

"I only have two bolts left," Gaston said, turning his gaze onto her. "Can you break through?"

Elania nodded, drawing out her [**Vorpal Dagger**], and then launching herself forward in a sprint. She moved fast enough that the hallway blurred around her, and she was almost to arm's length before the blue protective field of the monk formed between them.

The tip of her dagger struck the barrier with a sizzle of red light as she shoved another chunk of [**Power**] through the blade. The energy crackled and sparked, but then the tip of the metal slid through the field ever so slightly.

That was enough, because then a piercing beam slid through the hole and plunged through the monk's chest.

He stumbled back, his eyes wide with shock, but that ended abruptly when she raised the weapon, cleanly bisecting his torso to his head.

The field vanished, letting the spray of blood land on her, but her anger made it sizzle and evaporate off of her in a thin cloud of ash.

“Done. Is this one locked, too?” Elania asked, ignoring the fact that she had just cut the man in half. Had cut a dozen men in half. The only thing that mattered was getting Yolani and Henri back.

The guide nodded. “It’ll be stronger this time. We’ll need--“

His words were cut off as Elania grabbed the bars and then pulled. The same angry resistance met her. This time it was like a dragon instead of a snake, roaring at her to leave.

It didn’t budge as she pulled, and then she poured **[Power]** into her limbs at an alarming rate. It didn’t matter; she had to get through.

When she hit half power, she tugged on her first mana shard, draining it completely to refill herself.

The gate resisted still, her strength inadequate as the metal somehow channeled her **[Power]** through it and away.

That would not do. She had to get through.

So much for conserving her energy.

She glanced behind her at the two guards. She ignored the looks on the faces of her party as she touched the bodies and transmuted them into **[Power]**. That put her well above her limit. She stopped the flow into her at 2154/1545 and instead directed it like a spike into the gate.

The enchanted metal screamed in protest before the central bars shattered. She could tell that whatever it was, it wasn’t destroyed. The gate was only a small part of it, but they had an entrance.

Puffing heavily and wiping the sweat off her forehead, she looked at the others. “Okay, it’s open. Let’s go.”

Gaston shook his head, a grim look on his face as he glanced at where the monks’ bodies had been. Now there wasn’t even a stain of blood on the floor.

Well, he could judge what she did all he wanted, but she wasn’t going to let that stop her.

Gaston halted the other guard. "You stay here and watch. Soon as you see them, come warn us. Don't fight."

The man nodded. "Yes, sir."

Pushing into the dungeon section, the lighting abruptly changed to a weak, dim flicker from widely placed sconces. The air turned damp and cold, and she could feel the roar of one of Neftasu's waterfalls rushing downward through the stone nearby.

That and the angry glare of something she couldn't see, but she was sure it was related to the resistance of the gate. Whatever enchantment had been on it was still active and was trying to push her out.

Except she was in, and it didn't have a means to touch her. At least, that was the feeling she had. "What kind of ward is in here? It's trying to get rid of me."

"I'm not sure, but my telepathy just cut out," Gaston replied. "We knew they had something like that. That's why I had Nevin wait back there."

"Oh. I thought it was strange you told him to come warn us instead of just telling you..." Elania said, trailing off as she looked down the hallway. She raised her voice. "Yolani?"

There was a weak response from a few of the cells, but each one she checked as they pushed deeper was a disappointment. All the cells were empty or held some very sorry-looking prisoners.

But no Henri or Yolani.

Two cells near the end were sitting open, their doors ajar, unlike the others. A bad feeling settled into Elania's stomach. Where were they?

"They... aren't here," Elania whispered.

Gaston cursed and then turned on their guide, grabbing him by the front and slamming him into the wall. "Where are they? You swore they would be here."

The guide grabbed the lieutenant's wrists and shook his head. "They should be! There's no reason they wouldn't be here at this time of day!"

Elania's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, 'at this time of day'?"

The guide swallowed. "They're usually brought out for questioning in the morning, and then returned in the evening."

"Questioning... what kind of questioning?" Elania asked. "Where?"

"Upstairs in the interrogation rooms," the guide replied. "But there will be Lightbringers there. We won't be able to break through. Not with just the four of us."

"Three." A voice interrupted.

Elania, Gaston, and their guide all ripped around to face the newcomer. Elania recognized him immediately. "Joren."

The monk tossed Nevin's limp body to the floor, his neck broken at a sickening angle.

"Please surrender," Joren said, his voice strained. Behind him, a dozen more monks filed into the corridor, leaving them trapped at the end of the dungeon hallway. "You can't win in here."

Elania took a breath and then flared her energy through her body, but the **[Power]** bled off and evaporated before it could fully form. Her eyes widened slightly. "What did you do?"

Gaston drew his sword, and the monks behind Joren readied their staves. There were far too many of them to fight in a melee.

Joren shook his head. "Unholy powers don't work in here, Elania."

He pointed his staff at her. "Surrender or be purged."

Elania shook her head. "That's not the choice you think it is."

"So be it." Joren's staff glowed dimly, and then he pointed at them. "Take them down!"

The monks charged with an angry chorus.

# CHAPTER 34 - OUTRAGE (PT. 2)

The others braced themselves, but Elania's hand went to her pack, and she pulled it to her front.

Reaching inside, she pulled out the artificed rifle Yolani had made for her. She'd not had time to really practice with it, but with her **[Power]** blocked, they didn't seem to have any other options.

The magazine was wrapped around the stock, and she pulled it free with a quick motion, then shoved it into the receiver with enough force to make sure it clicked into place.

The first monks were already halfway to Gaston and the guide when she took aim, stepping forward.

"What?" the guide asked, his expression full of confusion as Gaston saw her weapon and pulled the man out of the way.

The hostile drain that sapped her **[Power]** out of the air wasn't able to stop her from generating it inside of her own body—if had been



able to do that she would have fallen over dead after walking inside, she was almost sure.

Almost was a real piss poor thing to stake your life on, but there was no way they were going to out staff and sword the dozen monks.

**[Identify]** painted them between one and two-hundred levels, but none of them moved to use any of their monk-type magic at least.

Whatever was hindering her **[Power]** was stopping their magic, too.

The first bead of **[Power]** she forced into her rifle's crystal fizzled out and a misfire rolled out of her barrel. She pulled the plate, hiding the mana shard inside open and jammed her finger into it and tried again.

A single loud crack sent the monks skidding to a halt in shock. The man in front stopped completely, looking down at the massive, bloody hole in his chest before crumpling to the floor.

Elania winced. She'd never really had experience with shooting another person before. The bullets that her rifle shot had more in common with American Civil War minié balls than modern cartridges.

She watched the entire gamut of grief play over Joren's face as he took in his dead brother, before the look turned to fear.

He shouted at her. "Elania! Wait—"

She pulled down the trigger and kept it held down.

The hallway offered little cover or place to hide. Two tried to continue the rush and were pulverized first. She calmly walked her line of fire while managing the rifle's recoil, keeping the stream of bullets flying neatly down the hall and into the backs of men.

She did her best to ignore the gore and carnage, focusing on eliminating the enemy. Her shots weren't all that accurate, but they didn't need to be considering the rate of fire.

The ones who were hit went down almost immediately. Even grazing shots were enough to blow chunks of flesh off of men and send them to the ground, opening the line of fire for the next.

Joren fell backwards as he turned to scramble away as she released the trigger. He was the only monk left moving, although she really hadn't purposefully avoided hitting him.

"Stop there or I'll shoot you," Elania warned, her voice cold and hard.

He froze, his eyes wide with fear. "What have you done, Elania?"

She glared at him. "What have I done? What have you and your people done to Yolani and Henri?"

The guilt on his face told her she wasn't wrong. Travelling through the mess left the bottom of her boots slick with blood, and she didn't want to think about the men she had just killed.

Even **[Crisis Management]** and whatever predatory instincts she had from her Darkwalker core had their limits.

Gaston stepped forward, his sword still in hand. "We need to go. We can't stay here."

Elania came to a stop out of reach of Joren and leveled the barrel of the rifle at him. "Do you know where Yolani is?"

"She... she's supposed to be in her cell." Joren's voice was weak, and he stared at the bodies of his brothers. "I don't know where she is."

Elania's eyes narrowed. "You better think quickly, then, or you're going to be joining them."

Joren swallowed. "If she's not in her cell... the Lightbringers might have taken her to the interrogation room again."

"Again?" Elania's voice was a growl. "You let them take her 'again'?"

"I didn't know," Joren protested. "I stopped them the first time. West, he's the one who—"

"Take us there." Gaston's voice was hard. "Now."

Joren scrambled to his feet and nodded.

The guide frowned and looked at her and then at Gaston. “The interrogation rooms are on a higher level. They’ll be guarded.”

“We’re not leaving without them,” Elania replied harshly. She looked to Gaston. “I am pretty sure you knew things would end up like this. There wasn’t a real chance of us getting in and out without a fight.”

Gaston frowned, clearly unhappy with her statement. “The magister forbid a direct assault. We could have gotten in and out without a fight.”

Elania blew out her breath.

Gaston looked to the guide, then to Joren. “You first monk. If you try anything, you’ll be the first to go down.”

Joren nodded quickly and then they hurried through the way they had entered the dungeon.

Elania paused as they stepped through the destroyed gate. There was an almost audible pop in her ears, and her skin tingled. Almost as if she’d been in the belly of some kind of beast that was trying to eat her, and now she had stepped out into the open air.

She shook her head and hurried after the others. Whatever the monks’ ward was, it was strong, and she didn’t want to go inside of it again.

\*\*\*

Yolani cursed under her breath and turned around, shoving Henri back around the corner and back into a recess in the wall where a torch sconce was inset.

The trio of monks appeared upset and looking for something. She was fairly certain they weren't their targets, though. They just needed to avoid being seen.

"They're coming our way," she whispered. She pressed in tightly, and Henri's arm went around her back, pulling her in close.

Both of them were panting from the running through countless stupid Conclave corridors that seemed endless, with random twists and turns that made no sense.

"This was a bad idea," Henri whispered.

She couldn't argue with him, but the alarm had allowed them the chance to use Joren's key to get out of the dungeon and then into the fortress itself. It was just that was as far as they had got.

Guards were posted at multiple gates, and they had been forced to hide and wait for the right moments to move. Now they were nearly at a dead end, and there were monks in both directions and scant cover.

Whatever, or whoever, had caused the alarm, it had only gotten louder and several times the entire fortress had shaken.

When the sound of distant gunfire had erupted, she realized her mistake and had tried to lead them back toward the dungeons.

That hadn't worked out.

"Don't talk," she whispered. The warning wasn't really necessary, but Henri nodded.

The monks were in such a hurry that they didn't look to the side and notice them.

She let out a sigh of relief and stepped back. That was great, but the monks had rushed in the direction of the dungeons and gunfire.

She was more and more certain that was the direction they needed to go, too.

From the rate of fire, the only thing—and person—she could think of was Elania. If her friend had come to rescue them, hopefully it hadn't been alone.

“We need to follow them,” Yolani said.

Henri gave her a sharp look. “What? We just came from there and you want to go back?”

She nodded. “I think Elania is here. That sounded like the artifice firearm I made her.”

Henri looked at the wall, his gaze going distant. A grimace appeared and his hand curled into a fist. “I still can't contact the Guard. I can't contact anyone.”

Yolani placed her hand on his shoulder. “That's alright, it isn't your fault. Let's keep going.”

A prickle of worry and uncertainty joined the much greater urgency she felt. When they had stepped out of the dungeons, the magical resistance that had been blocking her from using her spells vanished.

For Henri, though, his **[Telepathy]** was still blocked. That was worrying and hinted at long-term implications, although she couldn't figure out why or how it could be different for him.

They'd both spent almost the same time in the cells, hadn't they?

She shook her head, and they headed down the hall quietly. There wasn't time to think or worry about it.

They had to get to Elania.

The next two halls were empty, but they were forced to avoid another group of monks in the third. They did so by slipping into an empty room for a few minutes.

The end of the fourth hall had a shut door. They'd been through it before, and it connected directly to the hallway beside the dungeon security checkpoint.

Checking carefully inside, she led the way in, but as soon as she could see the entire room, Yolani froze.

Lightbringer West, several of his men, and a group of high-ranking monks were there, staring at her.

Panic gripped her chest instantly, and she started to shove Henri back out the door, but behind him two monks appeared to block the way.

“So good of our little demon lover to join us,” West said, his voice a sneer.

# CHAPTER 35

## - OUTRAGE

### (FINALE)

E lania watched Joren closely as she, Gaston, and the guide followed him up the circular stairwell. The monk was clearly upset, and the guilt in his eyes stoked the anger in her chest.

He had once helped her on the way to the city, keeping the inter-party conflict muted, but what had the monks done to Yolani that she could see the shame in his eyes?

Torture came to mind first, but that threatened to make her lose her focus. There were shouts and vibrations echoing through the fortress behind them, and she needed to be ready to react if someone came up behind them.

The stairwell opened into a wide hallway, and Joren led them to a door at the end. He hesitated and then stepped inside.

The room was large; there were already a dozen monks inside, all of them looking at the door with surprise. Yolani and Henri were kneeling on the floor, their wrists bound and tied behind their backs.

Both of them had a gag, and Yolani tried to struggle to tell them something.

For all her mental preparations and telling herself that she was ready to act without hesitation, Gaston moved first. He grabbed Joren and shoved him into the room, using the monk as a body shield as he led the party inside.

Elania bit her lip as her rifle came up but held off firing. The weapon wasn't nearly accurate enough to ensure she didn't accidentally hit her friends.

As she examined the group waiting for them, she realized they weren't all monks.

There were several Lightbringers as well, and then her gaze settled on one man in the back. He was wearing a robe, but it was a different color than the standard gray of the monks, a beige with yellow embroidery.

**[Elder Winx - Human - Lvl 412]**

The memory of one of the monk guard's words came back to her. Here was the 'Elder' that was in charge of security.

The man oozed presence and power like the Magisters.

"Release them," Gaston ordered, his voice hard but strained.

Elder Winx's eyes narrowed. "It seems our intruders have come to us."

Elania's eyes flicked to the sides. The monks and Lightbringers all seemed to ready their weapons at once. She wasn't sure what array of spells and abilities they had, but she was certain that this wasn't going to be as 'easy' as the dungeon had been.

"It's the demon," West hissed, his eyes settling on her. "Look at her eyes, she's been supping on the engine."



It wasn't like she had a mirror to check out the varying state of her eye color, but it was a guess that they'd shifted towards being gold again. She hadn't been keeping track of her essence distribution.

**[Soul Management]**

**[Darkwalker Core - 33%]**

**[Divine Core - 33%]**

**[Human Core - 34%]**

**[Essence Distribution]**

**[Darkwalker - 25%, Divine - 33%, Human - 29%, Other - 13%]**

When had it worked its way up so high? It seemed like it had jumped up suddenly after remaining low since she'd fed the Celestial Engine. She'd need to revisit the Magistry soon.

There was a sudden shift in the air, and she realized she had zoned out. The monks and Lightbringers were all looking at her, ignoring Gaston and the guide.

"Demon, surrender yourself," Elder Winx ordered. "Your friends will be spared once the Guard pay for their heavy-handed acts of depravity."

Elania shook her head. "I was raised to believe in never making deals with terrorists."

Confusion ran across their faces, and that was just fine with her.

She took a heavy drag on her mana shard that was partially drained, pushing her past her normal limit high enough to set her nerves on fire. Then she tugged on another, clearing it out as well.

It was far, far more **[Power]** than she'd dared to use before, but her capacity had been rising steadily.

She only had two mana shards left, and she needed to finish things before they ran out.

Then again, there were a lot of free energy sources in the room, if she could get to them. That was a kind of thinking she had always shied away from, but that was a luxury she didn't think they could afford.

**[Power: 2937/1544]**

Her skin felt like it was on fire, and the sweat that seeped down her forehead glowed with a golden hue, evaporating into a thin sheen of glowing steam.

Okay, she hadn't meant to go super-saiyan-ish. At least her hair hadn't turned into golden spikes.

An updraft around her blew her shimmering ruby hair until it was floating. Gaston and the guide looked at her in alarm and scooted away from her.

Well, their plan had been shit from the start. Why bother working things out now, in the face of the enemy?

"You two should go back down," Elania warned.

"Elania! I don't know what you're thinking, but Henri and Yolani will be caught up in your attack!" Gaston shouted at her.

Joren started to speak. "Elania, please. Obey Elder Winx..."

She grabbed his arm. "Why is his name his literal class?"

He didn't get a chance to answer. There wasn't really time for it. The Lightbringer nearest to Yolani stepped toward the Conclave's two captives.

She had absolutely zero interest in hearing an ultimatum backed up by the threat of murder, and they had made the mistake of not having their blades at their captive's throats.

Joren weighed nothing to her, and he screamed as his arm dislocated as she pulled him closer so she could pick him up and throw him as a missile at the Lightbringer.

It wasn't quite possible to keep up behind him as he flew, but her sprint cracked the floor with each step as she flung herself forward.

The monks reacted immediately, but that wasn't fast enough to stop Joren from slamming into the first Lightbringer and sending them into several others like a tangle of bowling pins.

"Kill it!" Elder Winx shouted. Golden light flashed down into the room as chants erupted. A golden bell slammed into place in front of her.

Elania wasn't sure when her Vorpall dagger ended up in her hand, but she poured power into it and slashed horizontally. A wave of vicious red energy flowed off the blade like a rope, hitting the bell with enough force to wrap around it.

The bell groaned, then cracked. She flew through the exploding shards of golden light.

Despite using Joren as a projectile, she barely arrived in time as one of Lightbringers that had avoided being knocked over stepped over them. She reached out with her palm and blasted him away with a thump of kinetic **[Power]** as he slashed at her.

Yolani looked up at her with panic in her eyes. Well, that was fair. They were in the middle of a dozen attackers, all focusing their precious 'holy' magic on them.

"Don't worry. I came up with a plan." Elania's voice was strained, the crackling energy around her making her feel like she was about to explode. She wasn't even lying. She'd come up with it on the spot.

The little wrist band she'd made for the mana shards pulled off with a snap and she held it up in the air. Three of the five shards were already drained, but that left two full ones.

Her capacity was already at its limit and beyond, but she didn't intend to drain them into herself.

She's learned a lot about **[Power]** and how it worked, most importantly the amount of power used resulted in an exponential increase in the amount of energy released.

What they needed were two things: a nice protective shield and a big explosion.

That sort of sucked for Gaston, but he'd just have to understand. The good news was the enemy was right in line with the center of the city. She pulled the two mana shards apart on the bracelet, letting the empty ones fall and spread her arms out and then crushed them in her hands.

Outrage filled Elder Winx's face as he finished his chant.

Elania pulled her internal energy into a small sphere around Yolani, Henri, and herself. Then the room exploded in a blinding flash of light and heat.

The only thing separating them from it was a thin blue bubble formed from her own internal **[Power]** store... it included the stone under their feet, too. That was a good thing, because it looked like the rock outside was melting. The good news was the directional strike she had envisioned seemed to work, leaving everything behind her intact.

Kneeling down, Elania removed the gags from her two friends.

The expression on Yolani's face morphed between a half dozen emotions instantly. "Elania what have you done!"

Elania furrowed her brow. Wasn't that obvious? "I'm rescuing you!"

The blast light slowly began to clear. The energy had pulverized everything that there wasn't even a lot of smoke. There wasn't much left of anything—there was a triangular cut from the room they had been in that had grown like an inverse pyramid until it had cleared the entire fortress, deleting it from existence.

Unfortunately, it looked like it had blasted into part of the Conclave district as well, and left a deep, still burning gouge in the city cavern's ceiling. Several hanging light stones looked like they had half their chains snapped and were about to plummet, too.

Worst of all, Elder Winx was floating in the air on a golden disk a stupid golden monk bell thing surrounding him.

Fuck.

# CHAPTER 36 - CIVIL WAR (PT. I)

Elania winced as she checked her remaining **[Power]**.  
**[Power: 1899/1559]**

The magical bubble had drained off a considerable amount of it to block her own blast.

That Elder Winx was floating there, doing his best to imitate the avatar of an angry god as the air started to clear... was not a good sign.

Glancing behind her, the room was charred. There was a slant to the floor where stone had melted forward from the energy, and Elania wasted no time in picking Yolani and Henri up under her arms and leaping off the small pillar that had been spared from the cataclysmic release.

It crumbled and cracked and fell into a giant slide into the city's abyss of deep lakes far below.

The explosion might have been a bit overdone.

“Elania!” Yolani shouted, protesting about being handled.

“Sorry! Didn’t want us to fall,” Elania replied.

Gaston and the guide stood looking back at them from the staircase, both had burns on their arms and faces, and the expression Gaston gave her was of shock and horror.

A lance of golden light slammed into the wall near the exit.

“Henri, take Yolani!” Elania shouted. The young man looked at her dumbly, but she shoved them toward the staircase. It was the only real cover in the room, and she wasn’t sure what the Elder was capable of.

“Go!” she shouted again. This time, the order seemed to cut through the shock. Henri grabbed Yolani’s arm and tugged her back to the others with a nod.

Elania whipped around to face Winx just in time to witness another chant finish. A golden lance struck the ground in front of her, casting rock shrapnel into her.

That hurt, but [**Regeneration**] patched the scrapes and holes in her almost immediately. She didn’t have time to be impressed, though, because the Elder was already chanting again.

He paused during each chant. She wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad. She wasn’t sure what a melee would do, but at least she had some ranged options.

She dodged back and forth as the golden lances struck the ground, before she finally landed on a small ledge that was still intact and closer to the elder.

Her rifle banged against her side on its strap, and since he was doing the floaty-flying thing, it seemed like a reasonable response.

She raised the weapon and used the iron sight to aim at him, pushing a bead of [**Power**] into the weapon’s internal crystal. She fed the familiar tug, the steady pulsing drain turning into a hail of projectiles.

She wasn’t sure what she had expected, though, as she reviewed the results.

The bullets shattered in the air, a golden aura surrounding him and turning them into a rain of metallic shavings.

Elania's eyes narrowed as he began a rapid descent toward her and swapped in her spare magazine and opened fire again. The strain on his face was apparent. Shooting him seemed to be doing something. So she kept up bursts of projectiles.

"Fucking hell," Elania cursed. Nuclear blast proof, bullet resistant? Suddenly, the existence of the Conclave and the reason for the Magisters to allow them free rein in the city became a little more apparent.

It wasn't that they allowed the Conclave to exist, they didn't have a choice because depending on how many 'elders' there were...

A thread of light appeared in front of Elania's nose. Instinctively, she crouched and pushed back, flinging herself away from it before a solid pillar of energy smashed down into the spot like a massive, oversized log.

Stone crunched, and shards and fragments flew in every direction.

Before Elania could take aim and open fire again, he was on top of her after suddenly closing the distance with a rush.

She blocked his punch with the rifle; that was a mistake, as the artificed metal Yolani had painstakingly crafted ruptured and bent turning it into a paperweight.

Winx followed up with a round kick that she blocked with her elbow. The blow was heavy and sent her feet skidding on abused stone, but she struck back just as fast with her newly inert chunk of ruined metal.

He caught it with his hand, then twisted it out of her grip. Before losing it Elania realized what she could do and poured **[Power]** into the crystal, then jumped back.

The rifle exploded in his face.



This time, whatever magic he'd used to protect against the bullets didn't work, or wasn't active.

The shrapnel and explosion tore into his skin and left him looking like someone had taken a cheese grater to him. Several bleeding wounds on his limbs looked deeper, and his robe had several spots that seemed to be soaking up a lot of blood.

Elania opened her mouth to say something snarky, but ended up coughing up a lungful of her own blood.

Turning her rifle into an ad hoc pipe bomb while standing next to it had drawbacks. She choked out the piece of shrapnel and then her wounds began to knit themselves back together.

She'd endured the pain of [**Regeneration**] so many times that it barely bothered her now. She pushed away the familiar half dozen system messages and inspected her opponent.

The Elder was clearly on his last leg.

It looked like he was using the last of his energy to remain standing.

She skipped the impulse to shout at him as she kicked him in the chest, sending him flying out into the dark.

There were a few seconds where she worried his body would magically reanimate and float back up to shoot more light beams at her, but he disappeared into the dark without further pomp.

Elania took a deep breath and took a second to look out at the city. She hadn't meant to re-arrange the infrastructure, and the damage looked... bad. The section where the city connected to the fortress had completely fallen into the dark. It had been mostly empty space anyway, but the damage reached all the way to the buildings and houses, and several had been shaved in half where their foundations had slid out, leaving half the building behind.

A numbness filled her, and she realized there had likely been people in the buildings. She'd killed them. She'd killed a lot of people. Even if she discounted the monks and lightbringers...

The dark thought that people were right to hate demons and that she was exactly what they thought she was wormed its way into her head.

Especially since she didn't feel nearly as bad as she thought she was supposed to for what she'd done during the fighting.

She shook away the thoughts and looked back at the stairwell. The others were gone. That was good. The fight had been destructive. She started to head toward where her friends had disappeared to, when the distant crack of muskets filled the air.

She turned and spotted a line of guards with their weapons in a street, opening fire on the Conclave fortress. Spread out amongst the still standing buildings, others popped up to fire in ones and twos from the roofs as well.

They were shooting at monks that had begun to pour out of the last remaining arch that connected to the city.

Spells and holy magic shot out to meet the musket fire, and she could see men falling on both sides.

The chaos only seemed to grow as a stream of lightbringers poured out of a tavern to join the fight.

Elania turned and hurried after the others, jumping between the few stable flooring sections until she reached the relatively solid ground near the staircase.

Taking stock of her resources left her feeling pinched. All her mana shards were gone. She'd gone into the mission expecting that, so it wasn't a shock. Mana shards, while not rare and rather expensive, were expendable.

Her rifle being exploded wasn't great, but Yolani could make new things as long as she was alive and safe.

Her power reserves...

**[Power: 1499/1559]**

They weren't terrible, but not being supercharged wasn't great.

Especially since...

She'd started a war.

# CHAPTER 37 - CIVIL WAR (PT. 2)

Distant musket fire and the crack of spells became a constant backdrop as the group picked their way through the empty hall. Elania frowned at several sections where spiderweb cracks had formed in the stone. The air was filled with the smell of burnt magic.

They paused at a shut door, Gaston leaning against it with an ear to determine if it was empty or not.

For the dozenth time, Elania glanced at Yolani, making sure she was still there and okay.

Well, nothing was 'okay', but the other girl was alive and still there.

"We need weapons," Henri whispered. "One sword between the five of us isn't going to get us out."

"I can cast acid arrow," Yolani said. "But only three times with no gear."

Elania nodded. Lacking the artifice stuff limited their options greatly. She had brought a ton of things she had thought they would need, but...

During the fight with Elder Winx, she'd lost the bag of extras she had brought. Packing it all had been a waste of time.

"I'm mostly charged. As long as we don't run into another Elder, I can handle a few martial monks," Elania said.

"Good. There are some on the other side," Gaston replied.

Everyone tensed automatically. Elania slowly nodded. "How many?"

Gaston frowned. "Not sure. More than two. Less than a dozen."

"That's not very helpful," their guide muttered.

Henri tightened his grip on the piece of wood he had picked up, then glanced at Yolani. "I'll cover the rear."

Gaston grunted. "Elania, you're up front. I'll be right behind you to support." His gaze slid to Henri. The young man nodded.

The Lieutenant's eyes finally landed on Yolani and the guide. "You two, stay with Henri. Keep your spells in reserve unless someone is in trouble."

"Got it," Yolani answered. The guide nodded quietly.

Elania released a steady breath as Gaston appraised her. She nodded, and he opened the door and she slipped inside.

A half dozen monks were facing away, but the sound of the door opening had drawn the attention of the closest one.

She wasted no time in leaping into a sprint, letting her **[Power]** flare into her arm and hand while spreading her fingers into four glowing claws of energy.

Who cared if she had finally lost Marcus' dagger? There was still enough Darkwalker affinity floating around in her for her to know how to use her claws.

The monk finished his turn and shouted a warning just as she reached him. Gaston pounded into the corridor behind her, sword in hand, but still so very far away.

Her fingers dug into the hot flesh of the monk's neck, and it took **[Power]** to keep her grip from slipping. She tossed him into his companion before striking at the back of the next man.

His spine slipped out of his back with a sickening squelch. The burst of speed had drained some energy and his death was fast enough that she initiated the essence transfer without even having to think about it.

The dead monk was still dissolving into a spray of golden light motes as she attacked the third monk.

His staff was already coming down at her, but she slid to the side and slashed his arm as she passed by to attack the rest of the group that still hadn't focused on her presence.

She wasn't worried about him striking her from behind because the scream behind her preceded his arm falling off.

The sound moved faster than her feet, and the monk in the center was practiced enough to raise up a large golden bell around him and two of his companions.

Her claws struck the bell with a clang before bouncing off, the energy she'd pulsed into her hands fizzling out. The defense was strong, but she'd already learned how to deal with it when fighting the Elder.

Thrusting her arms wide open, she released the wave of **[Power]** that was flooding into her from her first kill and spread it from one palm to the other.

Then slapped her hands together as hard as she could.

Her own energy crushed through the bell's resistance like a battering ram against a thin wall of bricks, sending golden energy shattering in every direction.

A staff flew for her head, but Elania ducked under it and took out a leg, then bounced onto another man's shoulders and grabbed his jaw and twisted. His body thudded to the ground as she pushed off of him to slam her shoulder into the lead monk.

He went down in a tumble with her, and she made sure she ended up on top, straddling him before linking her fists and thumping them into his chest. There was a crack as his sternum collapsed and blood exploded from his mouth in a spray that left her drenched.

Elania stood up to check the rest. Gaston finally arrived, shoving his sword into the still screaming monk that had lost his arm. The rest of the monks were down.

Everyone stared at her with varying forms of shock and fear, except for Gaston, whose expression never wavered from a stony determination.

**[Power: 1542/1598]**

It was low enough to handle absorbing another monk. Not having any mana shards to shove the excess into was a problem, but she didn't have to leave the entire group behind either.

The first time she had set herself on fire and been coated in a flurry of excess **[Power]** motes had been before she'd learned to manipulate things effectively.

She had much finer control now.

There was enough blood from the dead monks to make absorbing the group of them easy enough without having to go to each body. The sudden shimmer of flesh into light took the others by surprise.

"Elania? What are you doing?" Yolani asked, a tinge of worry in her voice.

Elania flicked her eyes to her friend. "I'm recharging."

Yolani frowned. "You have a mana shard to handle the excess?"

“No.” Elania said. It was a bit more curt than she intended, but the edge of the fight hadn’t disappeared. Energy flooded through her. A small realization hit her as the **[Power]** gauge on her HUD ticked over her limit and the excess began to burn inside her.

“They don’t give skills,” she said.

“What?” Gaston asked.

Elania glanced at him. “Normally, I get skills from absorbing things. Monsters. People. The monks aren’t giving me any. No system message. Just energy.”

Yolani looked at her with a frown. “They should have skills just like everyone else.”

When more excess **[Power]** filled her than she thought she could stand easily, Elania raised a bubble around herself. The energy motes flickered and adhered to the thin layer of willpower she had put around her to block it.

The others kept a bit of distance. That was a good idea. She wasn’t sure what would happen if someone else touched the roiling energy.

“It’s going to be hard to sneak around if you stay like that,” Gaston said.

“I know,” Elania replied. “But this way we are way better armed.”

Wood clanked as Henri tapped three staves the monks had left behind on the ground, passing them to the guide and Yolani. “At least we have something now.”

Elania glanced in the direction they were supposed to be going, in what they hoped would take them to the last remaining bridge. There were going to be more monks and maybe lightbringers. She was going to kill them.

The others just didn’t have the same combat capability she did at the moment.



A frown creased her lips. She should have felt something about that, but didn't.

It was just something she needed to do, so she'd do it.

What was wrong with her?

Was her Darkwalker affinity affecting her more than she thought?

When she brought up her status to check, her eyes widened slightly.

**[Soul Management]**

**[Darkwalker Core - 33%]**

**[Divine Core - 33%]**

**[Human Core - 34%]**

**[Essence Distribution]**

**[Darkwalker - 15.76%, Divine - 63%, Human - 16.24%, Other - 5%]**

The monks weren't giving her skills, but they were pumping her full of **[Divine]** essence.

She was becoming more divine. That would make Keswick happy, she supposed.

Why did she feel more like a monster?

# CHAPTER 38 - CIVIL WAR (PT. 3)

The intensity of the sounds of fighting and the density of hostile monks increased as they pushed through the fortress toward their goal.

Several more groups went down in a whirlwind of **[Power]** infused fingers. Elania looked back at Yolani, who looked at her with a worried expression.

“Your robe looks good. They won’t notice,” Elania said.

Yolani nodded. “Same.”

Elania let out a tense breath as Gaston and Henri finished putting on the robes they’d picked out from the pile. It had taken several tries before she got the knack of taking out some monks without ruining their clothes.

Or getting them excessively bloody. She could have absorbed the dead to solve that part; but part of the disguise required her not to be glowing like a yellow orb of raw **[Power]**.

Disguises were necessary. There was no way that they could make it through the single chokepoint without them. They'd tried and been forced to retreat; there were just too many monks rushing across the bridge.

It was a bit of a shock. The Fortress was large, yes, but she had no idea that there was essentially an entire district worth of people living inside of it.

That would be their way out, though. With the chaos, no one was going to notice five more monks charging into the battle.

Gaston hid his sword, and each of them carried one of the staves the monks favored.

A distant explosion powerful enough to shake the chamber they were in sent a spike through Elania's core. If the bridge went down, they would be trapped inside with the enemy.

"We should hurry," Gaston said.

No one objected to that.

They made their way through several corridors they had scouted before and then they arrived in a chamber with a large, open archway overhead.

Overhead, two high-ranking monks were watching and directing the groups filing into the room. One pointed at Gaston and gestured toward the massing group of monks.

The five of them obeyed silently. That was in line with expectations, Elania realized.

The other monks that had already gathered were silent, eerily so. All of them were facing away, so they slotted into the mass.

More monks followed them in, producing a claustrophobic feeling as they were surrounded.

Elania let out a quiet breath. Were they really using human wave tactics to assault the city? How had they had things organized so quickly?

The longer they waited, the more her mind raced with questions.

The door everyone was facing finally cracked open, and the first of the monks began to file out. That took longer than she expected, and Elania's mind wandered to tune into the distant sounds of spells and gunfire.

Yolani tugged on her arm when it was finally their turn to move.

"Thanks," Elania mumbled, before offering a grateful glance.

When they passed through the door, the bridge came into sight.

It was a long, solid stone arch that was wide enough for two dozen people, and it was clear what was causing the slowdown: there were multiple gathering rooms that were releasing monks onto the bridge at the same time.

They all moved in a slow shuffle until they reached the neck of the bridge, and then it was a mad rush, like someone pumping water through a hose that was too small.

The reason for that was obvious as a cannon erupted from far away, the solid stone ball slamming into a group of monks and sending stone and bodies flying out into the abyss.

Smaller firearms continued a constant beat of smaller eruptions, and the chokepoint was a bloodbath.

Yet, the fight wasn't completely one sided. Magic flashed in the air, disrupting most of the musket fire, and everywhere Elania could see there were monks claiming more and more buildings on the other side.

There were far too few guards for the human wave washing over them, and the reason for that, she could only imagine, was the other series of explosions flashing in the distance on the pillar that housed the noble district. And the lift to the surface.

“Attention!” Gaston hissed at her as he grabbed her arm and pulled her forward. “We need to stick together.”

Elania nodded and slapped her cheeks. “Right.”

Grabbing Yolani’s hand, the five of them pushed forward with the wave. No one paid them any heed. That was good.

When it was their turn to begin to sprint, Elania moderated her footsteps to keep pace.

They were going to make it out of the wasp nest!

A distant echo heralded an incoming ball of metal. It moved faster than a normal human eye could track, but her senses were vibrating with contained **[Power]** just below her threshold.

Fuck.

No golden bell popped into place to protect them.

A glance told her the bridge was too crowded for her to find a way to throw her group out of the way. There wasn’t time to save anyone other than Yolani, anyway.

The “cannonball” was far larger than she realized, at least a meter in diameter. Maybe it wasn’t actually made of metal?

She almost stumbled on a body. The man hadn’t been dead for long, and she triggered her absorption ability and jumped forward.

“Elania!” Yolani shouted after her.

She didn’t look back; and instead channeled the additional source of **[Power]** into her fist.

Just before impact, she jumped up to meet it.

There was a resounding crack at the impact. A disc of energy spread out from her knuckles to redistribute the force more evenly, but even physics protested at what she was asking of the magic.

The giant sphere split down the middle in a jagged line and then exploded into two shards diverting to the left and right.

She’d been right; the cannonball was made of stone!

One shard dug a line into the monks behind them while the other flashed into the abyss below to strike the cliff face.

Then Newton took back control, and she slammed into the bridge with enough force to crack the stone in a circular spiderweb.

It felt like her bones had shattered; actually, that was exactly what had happened.

**[Regeneration]** kicked in with a series of warning messages she dismissed as normal before pushing herself back up onto her feet.

Yolani and Henri had stopped and were watching her with wide eyes. Gaston and the guide didn't pause until they were further ahead.

The herd of rampaging monks in front of them had continued without missing a beat.

Behind her...

The flow had stopped; all of them were staring at her.

They raised their staves and began to chant together.

She turned back toward her friends. "Go! I'll catch up!"

There was a single moment of hesitation, which she was grateful for, before they turned and did exactly that.

A wave of musket balls sent a spray of stone shards into the air as they impacted into the thickening mass of monks.

**[Power: 1591/1623]**

She was going to need a lot more than that to deal with the monks in front of her.

The first wave of spells came forward at her like a wall. She jumped back and grabbed a body and held it up as a shield, the **[Power]** motes forming into a ward before she could even absorb them properly.

The onslaught lasted for far longer than she expected, and she was slowly driven back by the sheer volume of golden light pouring onto her.

When it finally abated, her hand was smoldering, fingers blackened and charred. The edges of her clothes were smoking as well.

The shock on the monks' faces was evident, and she took advantage of it to charge forward before they could blast her in unison again.

Her lips twitched into a grim smile as soon as she reached the first man.

Some of them seemed to realize the mistake because they tried to flee. Except there wasn't anywhere to go, because the mass behind them was still pushing forward.

Wood snapped and cracked as staves were broken and she tossed bodies into the air off the bridge with concussive force. Wherever she could, she absorbed the dead to keep her **[Power]** up.

They finally realized the only escape was pushing forward past her.

That was not acceptable.

She was going to kill them all.

**[Power]** motes formed blades around her, allowing her to slice through flesh with ease, and that made her grim harvest even easier. A pressure began to build in the back of her neck as the field of light from the dead began to thicken into a mist.

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

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

She'd collected too much, and it was nearing her limit to hold it all back from crushing her.

She realized the tide had shifted; the mass of humanity was fleeing back into the fortress.

Unacceptable.

**[You have achieved maximum Divine Affinity. Would you like to attempt Seraph Transformation? Y/N]**

# CHAPTER 39 - CIVIL WAR (FINALE)

Elania read the message again, the words glowing with a soft, peaceful divine luminescence that contrasted with the chaotic battle around her.

**[You have achieved maximum Divine Affinity. Would you like to attempt Seraph Transformation? Y/N]**

The last time she had transformed, it had created a permanent change in her along with the permanent Darkwalker core.

This time though, didn't she already have a Divine Core from the engine?

Transforming into a Darkwalker under the current circumstances wasn't going to help her in the battle, and she needed an advantage.

"Sure, why not," Elania murmured, her voice a mere whisper against the cacophony of battle.

The pressure in the back of her neck vanished, and she felt a surge of energy that was almost overwhelming.



Around her, the air shimmered with incandescent brilliance, casting an ethereal glow that painted stark terror on the faces of the fleeing monks.

Her entire body felt lighter, and then the floating motes of **[Power]** flowed toward her back. There were two pinches of pain as her own **[Power]** sprouted out of her backs near her shoulder blades.

Gravity suddenly declined to hold her, and she floated up several feet into the air.

Oh. She'd grown wings. Or rather, her power had coalesced into two wide arcs of energy that were embroidered with feathers of light.

The first thing she wanted was to check her status, but the **[System]** declined to respond.

That was just like when she transformed into a Darkwalker.

That wasn't helpful.

One thing she felt that the transformation confirmed: **[Divinity]** certainly was the element that had been affecting her emotions so much.

Everything felt distant and unimportant, and she was filled with a sense of... detachment. Like she was looking at things through the lens of an analytical observer.

She didn't like that. At least she still remembered what her purpose was.

Punishment. The word resonated within her, a clarion call that pierced through the fog of detachment.

She would punish them again.

A musket ball tumbled through one of the ethereal appendages but evaporated into a spray of light motes. The spray slowed and then reversed, flowing back into her wing.

Elania took a deep breath and focused. She was still in a battle, and getting used to her new form was going to have to wait.

Gesturing toward a lump of bodies on the bridge, an application of **[Soul Siphon - Visible]** was trivial. Her vision had shifted and she could see the coalescent sparks of lingering soul energy. They would give their last vestiges to her now, rather than dissolve into the backdrop of the Engine's cradle.

All the dead monks began to dissolve into a spray of light as she willed it.

Raising her hand, the **[Power]** flowed into a growing golden orb that floated in her palm.

A wave of holy bells and other light spells struck her, but they did nothing but dissolve and add to her **[Power]**.

When she had enough, she finally spoke.

The voice that came out of her throat wasn't hers.

"Mortals should fear to tread where angels' gaze," she intoned. The words reverberated deeply, echoing off the distant walls at a volume that was far too loud.

She gestured toward the fortress, and the orb of **[Power]** shot forward with a comet's trail.

It was halfway to her target when a figure appeared in front of it. Flanking the shape were two others, and a harmonious chant erupted, sounding as if it was coming from every direction.

There was the sound of a gong, and then the orb of **[Power]** stopped in the air and began to evaporate into an expanding mist.

Elania activated **[Identify]** immediately.

**[Elder Winx - Level 412]**

**[Elder Eidan - Level 420]**

**[Elder Gant - Level 415]**

Winx wasn't dead. That was unfortunate. She'd heard the other one mentioned before, but just how many of these Conclave Elders were there?

Rather than wait for the massive orb of energy to disperse, Elania angled her wings and flashed forward. When she reached it, she punched it with her fist.

The manifestation of **[Power]** rippled and then splashed over an invisible barrier in front of the Elders. The energy had to go somewhere, though, and suddenly spikes of light slashed out in every direction, carving lines of fire into the stone walls and fleeing junior monks alike.

She went to strike again, when the Elders began a second chant.

Before she could react, an invisible hand surrounded her and squeezed. Her wings folded inward, and she slowly floated to the ground.

The pressure was immense, and she felt her bones creaking under the strain.

Divinity. Light Magic. The monks... holy powers.

A whirlwind of thoughts spun through her head as she tried to piece things together in a way that would let her escape.

The monks' power was related to **[Divine]** essence and energy, and she had stolen their power and turned it into her own.

But here were three Elders, masters of its manipulation, and they were using it against her.

**[Soul Management]**

**[Darkwalker Core - 33%]**

**[Divine Core - 33%]**

**[Human Core - 34%]**

**[Essence Distribution]**

**[Darkwalker - 4%, Divine - 91%, Human - 4%, Other - 1%]**

The chanting grew stronger, and the crushing sensation began to increase.

Maybe if she reduced her **[Divine]** essence, it would reduce their ability to affect her?

She tried to force some of the **[Divine]** essence through her other cores, but it was like trying to push a boulder through a keyhole.

The monks walked closer, holding up an ethereal golden bell and ringing it calmly as they approached. The ringing in her ears became deafening.

Elania landed on her knees, the stone cracking under the weight.

A nearly transparent series of massive chains floated out of the fortress toward her.

A cold realization that she was going to be bound filled her. Whatever that meant, she knew that they'd already done it before.

The presence in the dungeon.

That had been something angelic siphoning her **[Power]**.

Her **[Divine]** essence dropped a percentage, but it was much too little, much too late.

The chains were almost to her.

A blue form flashed over her shoulder and straight for Elder Gant, a thin sword glowing with an ethereal blue fire.

It was Magister Bannon!

The elder stopped his chant to deflect the attack with his staff.

The pressure on her lessened, but more importantly, it was lopsided. With their triangle formation broken, their containment was incomplete.

She flexed a wing, and the chains shattered a few meters from her body.

Elania stood up and faced Elder Winx and Elder Eidan.

The two of them began to chant again. She wasn't sure what they were doing.

But she knew what she needed to do.

A predatory instinct filled her. So what if she was pumped full of **[Divine]** essence? She was still a Darkwalker, and prey that intended to kill her was still prey.

The ground cracked as she kicked off to launch herself straight for Elder Winx's throat.

# CHAPTER 40

## - DIVINE

### SIMULACRUM

E lania's vision blurred as she shot forward, her wings trailing behind her like a shimmering comet tail. Whatever they were chanting, she could feel a slight pressure growing now that she knew what being restrained felt like.

Letting them finish would be a mistake.

Before she reached Winx, Elder Eidan broke his chant and threw a wave of golden needles at her.

Angling her wing sent her into a roll that dodged the first wave, and then she flared to raise up into the air to dodge the second.

Despite Eidan stopping his chant, the pressure continued to increase. A hiss escaped from her.

Whatever they were doing, they hadn't needed both of them!

She curled her wings and dived toward Winx. Eidan continued his attack, and needles stabbed into her side, but she ignored them.

The energy from the attack absorbed into her on its own, and that fueled her **[Regeneration]** enough to heal and close the wounds.

Elder Eidan stopped his attack and began to chant again.

She needed to take out one of them or she was going to end up in a game of tag-teaming that she couldn't win. Assuming that whatever chant they were doing would imprison her again.

She couldn't risk that being the case.

Nearby, a whirlpool of water exploded into a geyser, as Magister Bannon dueled with Elder Gant. The Magister's sword traced a line of mist that formed into slashes of water that the Elder deflected with his staff.

Each exchange added to the water floating in the air, and in the churn, spears and blades began to form.

Elania turned her attention back to her own fight. A second before she reached Elder Winx, he opened his eyes and a golden spear formed in his hands. He braced it against the ground and aimed the tip at her chest.

There was a split second for her to decide to dodge or block.

She decided to do neither.

There was a flicker of shock on the Elder's face as she impaled herself on the construct like a rampaging boar. Blood and light motes sprayed out of her back as it punched out of her back between her wings.

The weapon didn't have a proper point guard, so she slid right down the shaft and closed the distance and grabbed him by the arm.

"Got you," she hissed at him, a thin spray of blood and light motes spewing into his face.

He let go of the summoned weapon and punched her in the face.

That almost hurt more than the impalement.

But not enough to make her let go.

She twisted as her feet touched the ground and yanked, but it felt like she was trying to move a mountain. She turned it into a hug.

He found ways to pummel her anyway, but as she got a better hold, she found that as strong as he was... she was stronger. The golden spear began to melt as her own **[Power]** began to absorb it into her. The wound closed.

She wrestled him to the ground. Elder Eidan was still chanting in the background. A clock was ticking in time with the digital counter she'd built on her **[System]** HUD.

He head-butted her, but she blocked with her own forehead. Both of them were bleeding and bruised, and she'd win any contest of attrition.

But this was a battle against time.

She needed to end this before Eidan finished his chant.

Her eyes fell on the Elder's throat. A bestial memory filled her.

She could end this now.

Sliding forward, she bit down on his throat where she knew the important artery was hiding. His skin was like rock, but a surge of **[Power]** and will preceded her teeth sharpening into Darkwalker fangs.

When blood filled her senses, she ripped her head back and spat out a chunk of flesh.

She contorted, both of their bodies straining in an attempt to break the other. His pulse had reached a frantic pace. She could tell because the powerful sprays of blood had turned into a nearly constant stream.

The liquid turned things slippery, and he twisted away onto his knees, moving to escape.

She landed on his back and wrapped her legs around his middle and grabbed his head and twisted.



The sound of his spine shattering and then flesh ripping was grotesque.

Winx's body went limp.

This time, he was dead.

Her heart was racing as she stood up. It felt like doom was approaching and she realized Elder Eidan hadn't paused at all.

He was nearly done with his chant.

She needed a weapon.

Winx's head flew like a cannonball but before it struck the other Elder it smashed into an invisible barrier and splattered, skull and all. Eidan didn't even flinch or pause his chant.

Elania glanced at the ground. Elder Winx's staff was laying within reach of his body. She knelt down and picked it up, triggering the cascade of absorption of the Elder without even having to touch him thanks to the coating of blood.

It didn't matter whether she was an angel, darkwalker, or a human. Why did she always end up covered in blood in a fight?

The staff was heavy and felt like it was made of solid lead. It flexed slightly as she swung it around experimentally.

Then she tugged on the floating morass of **[Power]** that had once been Winx and condensed it into a thread.

Something fought her as she tried to mold the power to her will.

She realized it was Elder Winx's own lingering will. The Elders certainly didn't go down easily.

But he was dead, and she was a demon, transformed into a seraphic form.

Essence, **[Power]** and **[Energy Manipulation]** were her domain.

The light formed into the bowstring she desired and the staff creaked as she pulled it back. A golden arrow formed in place and she released the shot.

The pressure reached a peak as the arrow slammed into the same shield that Winx's head had. White spiderweb cracks formed on a transparent surface, and then it shattered.

The chant broke as the arrow took Elder Eidan in the chest. He spewed blood, hinting that she'd hit something important, maybe a lung.

That was good enough. He wouldn't be chanting any more.

The Elder's staff began to dissolve in her hand as its cohesion disintegrated from the **[Power]** she'd forced through it.

Suddenly, the oppressive feeling vanished, and it felt like she was free. A short spear of light formed in her hand as she slowly approached the wounded Elder.

He reached up and yanked the arrow out of his chest. The gesture wasn't entirely required. The projectile began to evaporate into the air as it clattered to the stone.

"Demon. Fraud," he coughed out, "You show why your kind are an abomination."

Elania didn't respond. That was a lot of painful words for a dead man to cough out before he died.

Elder Eidan opened his arms wide and leaned back. "Behold your doom! Relea—"

She didn't want to know what he was trying to do, so she made sure he never finished his sentence. The spear of light punched through his chest on the opposite side of where the arrow had struck.

"Try choking out a holy-condemnation-whatever with both lungs full of blood, asshole," Elania muttered.

A reverberation ran through her spine as the emotion rebounded through her. It was like her entire being was a tuning fork and any emotion was a hammer.

That was an odd sensation and pushback, and she analytically examined her thoughts.

She'd never experienced something like that while transformed into a Darkwalker, and she'd had plenty of Darkwalker-esque bleed-through to her before without issue.

Was it the fact that she was pumped full of [**Divine**] essence, or was that a ramification of being transformed into a Seraph?

Were angels not supposed to have emotions at all?

An orb of water exploded as spears of light jutted out of the spinning waves like a holy porcupine.

As the water cleared, Elania headed that way, pulling free Elder Eidan's essence into her spear.

When Elder Gant spotted her, he began to make space between them, then raised a hand. "Release the first threshold!"

Was he doing some kind of stupid limit break dance or something? The feeling she should kill him before he could do anything troublesome was strong.

Before she could raise her spear for another throw, the entire cavern began to shake, and then a gout of flame exploded from the fortress.

The sound of chains snapping and stone crumbling filled the air.

It was all very dramatic, but she couldn't see anything happening other than the pyrotechnic display and minor earthquake.

Magister Bannon had a grim expression on his face and nodded to her as they spread out to come at the Elder from both directions.

They rushed forward at the same together; Gant would only be able to block one of them.

Her charge was cut short by a sudden slash of light from above, sending her skidding to a halt and jumping back.

Above the fight, there was a new form.

A figure of light, with wings of fire and a sword of shimmering divine essence.

Suddenly, she understood why Eidan had called her fake.

The seraph was much larger than her.

# CHAPTER 41 - A SERAPH

The figure of light descended, and the surrounding air shimmered with an oppressive pressure of **[Divinity]** as if it was a physical force.

Elder Gant threw himself to the ground and began to prostrate, while Magister Bannon fell to one knee, barely propping himself up with his rapier.

The crushing feeling ran through her wings and she felt like her entire body was made of lead.

A red glow formed in the shadow of the seraph's hood and she could feel a spike of **[Power]** that was almost overwhelming in its intensity.

The seraph lowered the point of its sword toward them.

There was only a second to react, and she launched herself toward Bannon. Her HUD **[Power]** gauge was missing, but if it had been visible, she knew it would be spinning downward rapidly just from the expenditure of flying under the weight of the seraph's presence.

**[Guilty.]**

The seraph's voice was a deep, resonant echo that filled the chamber.

Elania scooped up Bannon and then kicked backwards just in time as a narrow red beam lanced the spot. The ruby wave carved its way toward them and the bridge in an expanding straight line.

Bending a wing banked them to the side and out of the way of the beam, but the force of the updraft sent them tumbling up and over the edge of the bridge.

And then everything exploded.

That was the only way she could think to describe the release of energy.

There was no way they could fight against whatever that was... not with how strong the magister and she were. Even if all four of the Magisters were there...

The chaotic air currents and the shockwave made flying impossible and Elania curled her wings around herself to protect them from the heat and stone shrapnel shooting out in every direction.

Bannon clung to her middle like she was a life preserver and cursed as he lost his sword into the tumult.

When the force finally abated enough for her to flare her wings and slow their descent, they were far, far below the city. Above them, the remnants of the bridge were crashing downwards nearby.

The stone hit hard enough to send a dirty spray of cold water up into the air.

They'd almost hit the bottom.

"What was that?" Elania asked, her voice still taking on the reverberating tone of a seraph.

"Take us back up," Bannon said, his voice strained.

The light of the seraph was still visible, even from the distance they had fallen. Another red light flashed out from it and slashed outward across the city.

There was a minor earthquake and the water below roiled and splashed angrily.

Was whatever the monks unleashed going to destroy the entire city?

“It’s a long way back up,” Elania said emotionlessly. “It would take you a long time to climb if I left you down here.”

She felt his shock more than saw it as he tightened his hold on her. “You wouldn’t dare.”

She focused on the light above, her wings slowly flapping to mimic the motion of a bird while they hovered.

“You didn’t answer my question. I don’t like that,” Elania said, leaving the threat hanging.

“It’s a seraph. The Conclave have had it bound in their hall since the city was founded,” Bannon answered. “It’s their source of power, and their guardian.”

Elania’s eyes narrowed. “It’s a prisoner. Why does it help them?”

“I’m not sure it is,” Bannon said. “It’s a divine being. It’s likely not sane and wants to punish the city.”

“Eziel wanted to save the engine,” Elania said. “Maybe this thing can be reasoned with?”

“It’s not going to listen to reason,” Bannon replied. “I don’t think they can let it run free for long, or it will escape.”

That seemed accurate, because the golden light above winked out.

The pressure had vanished when they had fallen, so she wasn’t completely sure if it was gone, but Elania flexed her wings and they began to rise quickly.

“Don’t take us back to the Fortress. We need to regroup,” Bannon ordered.

Elania grunted but then nodded, turning down a canyon to turn their path away from the cliff holding the Conclave Fortress. Even moving away from there, the sound of gunfire and spells slowly began to grow as they approached the city.

She needed to find Yolani and the others.

A spike ran through her, and her wings actually flickered as she realized she didn't know if they had made it across the bridge. The fighting, the detachment and **[Divine]** essence had blocked out her worries for them.

"If you're out of energy, use this," Bannon shouted. He held out a ring with a small gemstone in it.

Not a gemstone, a small mana shard. She plucked the ring from his hand and held it in her hand.

She didn't feel the need to correct his misconception about the reason for the flicker. "I'll put it to good use."

She could feel the depth of the shard. It was a decent one. About average, and it solved the problem of her destroying all the ones she had during the escape.

Not that detonating the shards had been as effective as she hoped. Actually, from what she could tell, it had done a tremendous amount of collateral damage while not even finishing Elder Winx.

She wondered if he had been able to save the other monks with him at the time.

Eh, probably not.

The smell of smoke hit her nose long before they reached the city level, and the evidence of the seraph's attack was horrific as she picked up altitude high enough to see the city.

It had not just severed the bridge from the Conclave to the city, but also carved a line of fire across the more distant districts. A fiery line made a nearly perfect crescent from one side to the other. Where the



noble district's pillar met that line, there was a deep gouge that looked like it had tried to cleave the entire mountain in half.

Smoke billowed from the destruction, and not just from the seraph's ire. Combat spells and gunfire were still being exchanged, although she saw that most of it was coming from the noble district now.

"They're coming down the lift?" Elania asked.

"Lightbringers," Bannon said. "I'm not sure how they seized it, but their paladins were already here and then more from the surface have been arriving."

Elania's eyes narrowed. That definitely spoke to a larger conspiracy.

"Magister Roland is leading the defense," Bannon said. "We need to get to the guard."

"You can go. I need to find Yolani and the others," Elania said.

Bannon shook his head and pointed toward the Guard fortress in the distance. "That's not important right now. We need to plan—"

"Not important to you," Elania said. She cut their ascent and slowly turned around toward the Conclave district. "I can drop you here."

Bannon's grip tightened. "On the ground!"

"Of course," Elania agreed. She curled her wings, and they descended rapidly toward the street. She flared out and came to a stop just above the ground, then landed gently on her feet.

Bannon released her and stumbled before catching himself.

"The Magisters were supposed to be the ones to lead the city," Elania mused. "The five of you were supposed to be strong enough to protect it."

Bannon dusted himself off and eyed her warily. "I'm going to assume that's the indifference of the seraphim talking. You've shattered centuries of balance in the city like an earthquake through a mountain."

Elania's eyes narrowed. "Things already weren't going too well when I arrived. Do you have any idea on how I can find Yolani? Can you use your telepathy?"

Bannon frowned. "When the attack started, our connection was severed."

"So the barrier in the fortress did more than just mess that up temporarily..." Elania muttered

"No. You don't understand. Everyone's link was severed. From what I can tell, the Conclave or Lightbringers somehow disabled the way stones function throughout the entire city," Bannon said.

Elania's eyes widened. No wonder the defense was so chaotic. She had expected the guards would be more disciplined and fight in groups, like she'd seen during the riots. Not having any of their magical communications would have definitely thrown a wrench into that.

A crack of a musket sounded nearby, and Elania flexed a wing to slap the projectile out of the air. It had been aimed at her. "They aren't going to think I'm friendly..."

"I'll pass the word about your new form, but I can't promise it will help right away, unless I can find a way to get the way stones working again," Bannon said.

Elania nodded. "How many Elders do they have left?"

"If Gant survived, then there are still three," Bannon said. "But I don't know if they are still in the fortress. You need to avoid them."

"I'm aware," Elania said. "When I find the others, we'll head back to the Watch fortress."

"Or the Magistry," Bannon said. "Magister Keswick is tasked with guarding it. I'm assuming you have more essence to repair the engine with."

"You're thinking about something like that now?" Elania asked, an incredulous tone entering her voice.

“Especially now. If the Celestial Engine wasn’t damaged, we’d be able to use it as a weapon against the seraph if they released it again,” Bannon said.

Elania looked down at her hands, clenching and then releasing her fists. “I’ll need to figure out a balance. This form is powerful... but vulnerable.”

Bannon nodded. “They’ve had a long time to perfect their manipulation of holy magic.”

Another musket ball slammed into the stone wall behind them, this shot taken from much farther away. She stood out like a flaring light beacon.

“I need to go,” Elania said.

She didn’t wait for his answer, instead she kicked off the ground and opened her wings, skyrocketing back into the air.

Flight felt liberating. It was a shame she couldn’t feel enough to enjoy it.

# CHAPTER 42

## - SEARCHING FOR HER

**E** lania's wings beat against the air as she ascended high enough to touch one of the light stones that illuminated the city. The glare from up close was strong, but she avoided looking at them in favor of scanning the city below.

As high as she was, it was hard to make out individual people, but that also meant no one was shooting at her despite her being in the open.

The other thing the position gave her was a view of the trauma the city had suffered. Was suffering.

The noble district was a war-zone, and the spiraling avenue that led to the top had been severed by the seraph's attack. That was of lesser concern to her, however, since she doubted Yolani and the others would have gone in that direction.

The Conclave district was the second worst off area. The large clear gap between the buildings and the fortress had saved a lot of people,

but the fighting itself seemed to still be ongoing, with smoke and fire erupting from the streets at random.

It hadn't been long since the attack had demolished the single bridge that connected the Conclave fortress to the district, and there had been a lot of monks that had crossed over into the district. She wasn't sure how many Lightbringer had hidden in the district, but it all came together to paint a negative picture.

She doubted her friends had made it out of the district.

That they crossed the bridge in time, and that they weren't in the path of the seraph's destructive beam attack... she'd just have to take for granted.

Anything else was just too much for her current form to handle, emotionally.

She got the feeling that she'd transform if she meandered too far from her emotionless state, and neither Darkwalkers nor humans could fly.

Elania shook her head and focused on the Conclave district. A change in the angle of her wings set her on a wide spiral downward toward the city.

Getting close enough to see individual people would put her at minor risk for being shot at, but the only thing that would likely hurt her badly was if one of the cannons took her by surprise.

And she didn't think they had enough accuracy to hit her while she was on the move. Maybe Bannon's promise to inform the crews at the fortress about her being friendly would help with the aspiring snipers, too.

The spells she just ignored. The light bells and spikes that had been dangerous to her before were blown away by the flap of her wings or absorbed into the aura of divine **[Power]** that followed her like a mist.

Seraphs really did get some overpowered abilities when it came to 'light' or 'holy' magic.

Elania buzzed by the bazaar she remembered from when she first arrived in Neftasu. There were all kinds of stalls laid out, but they had been trampled and abandoned in a hurry. Wares and goods were scattered everywhere. She spotted a few people crawling between the piles of stalls, grabbing what they could.

In one corner, there was a fight between several guards firing from second and third-story windows while monks below flung light at them.

The monks' spells weren't directly related to fire, but if the buildings had been made of wood, she was sure they'd have caught flame, as evidenced by the charred and red-hot stone surrounding some of the impact points.

She didn't see any of her friends, so she continued on.

A thread of dread began to form in her chest as she continued the search despite the transformation. With the contract with Yolani broken, she couldn't even tell if the other girl was alive or not.

Their connection had been completely broken.

Or...

Had it?

She banked between two buildings and then flared her wings to stop just in front of a window. No one appeared to be inside, and she pulled herself through. The room was furnished like a bedroom, but it was dark and she didn't sense anyone nearby.

Moving out of sight, she stood in a corner and closed her eyes to focus.

**[Essence Management]**

**[Essence Distribution]**

**[Darkwalker - 6%, Divine - 87%, Human - 6%, Other - 1%]**

She only had 6% human essence, and certainly almost all of it was from her own core that generated it constantly. It had been days since Yolani had broken the contract, and she'd been using her **[Power]** constantly.

But... Yolani had been donating her own essence as part of the contract. Not a huge amount, but it was more than enough to form a bond.

And unlike all the other 'donors' of essence that contributed to her **[Power]**, Yolani wasn't dead.

She wasn't.

Searching through herself for the vestiges of her friend's essence was like swimming through the ocean to find a single fish. A small, probably fast fish. While everything else was screaming for attention.

And her human and Darkwalker forms weren't good at sniffing in the morass and **[Divinity]** was good at presenting itself before the others, like a blustering peacock.

Elania felt a wave of incredulity as she realized she was anthropomorphizing the essences floating around in her... soul? She wasn't sure what to call it other than that. She was sure the monks would have objected to that term.

The perception of time disappeared as she sunk deeper, but then, just when she was about to give up, she found it.

It was the faintest of whispers, but a small mote fluttering around on its own at the edge of her perception touched a finger.

It was warm and felt like a hug. There wasn't really that much difference between it and her normal human essence, except that it radiated a sense of her friend.

Elania latched onto it and shoved everything else away as best she could.

The essence pulsed slightly, and then the feeling of a response thumped in the back of her mind.

Yolani was alive!

Like a compass pointing her in the right direction, the thin connection gave her a sense of where to go.

Pulling herself out of the room, she took off into the air again, this time streaking between the buildings straight toward where she had felt the connection.

When she reached the end of the district and hovered over a cliff, she felt confusion. Somehow, she'd passed the position by.

She flew back to the building that she had searched from... another fruitless pass.

It was accurate enough to know Yolani was somewhere on the line, probably hidden in a building, but not enough to know where she was.

Frustration began to rock her core and made her wings flicker.

"Elania! Down here!" a voice called from below, a melody of sound that she recognized.

Elania looked down. It was Yolani waving at her. Gaston had hold of the neck of her shirt and pulled her back inside.

Relief washed over her strong enough to send her tumbling to the ground as her wings flickered out. The landing turned into a rough skid, but by the time she came to a stop, she was calm again.

There were sounds of fighting nearby, but she ignored them as she walked to the building.

Gaston, Henri, and Yolani were all there, even the guide whose name she still hadn't learned was sitting in the back of the room.

They'd been separated for only an hour or so, but it felt like much longer than that to her.

"Elania, are you alright?" Yolani asked.



“Yes. I’m fine,” Elania said. “I’m glad you’re all okay.”

Yolani pulled her into a hug. If her wings had been out, they’d have turned into another mess.

“What happened to Magister Bannon?” Gaston asked.

“I dropped him off. He told me we should meet up with him at the Watch, or find our way to the Magistry and Magister Keswick,” Elania replied.

“Did he say anything about the seraph?” Henri asked.

Gaston shot him a look that said that it wasn’t a question to ask, but Elania shrugged.

“He said it was a divine being that the Conclave has had imprisoned the whole time,” she explained. “I think it’s one of their sources of power... they certainly are adept at using **[Divinity]** and that’s not good for me right now.”

“What about Magister Roland, and the fighting in the noble district?” Gaston asked.

Elania shook her head. “Nothing good there... it looks like the Lightbringers are bringing down reinforcements somehow and Magister Roland is supposed to be fighting them.”

“How did you get that form? I thought it was taking a long time for your essence to build up with the other cores?” Yolani asked.

Elania bit her lip. “The monks... when we were fighting them and I absorbed them... they give **[Divinity]** instead of human essence and skills.”

They all stared at her for far too long.

# CHAPTER 43 - WARTORN

Yolani peered at the small mirror they had found in the burnt-out building, holding it around the edge of the alley to scout the street.

Nothing moved, except for a few spots of smoldering debris that had burnt itself out. It had been a while since they'd heard any gunfire or spells, but the smell of smoke was pervasive.

The group had remained hidden for hours instead of trying to make a break for it, much to her disbelief. Henri had obviously been overly worried about her safety, and Gaston had listened to him.

It was true they weren't well armed, but Elania was with them. Except her friend went silent and just nodded along with what Gaston had ordered.

It was like she was a different person.

Yolani frowned and rotated the mirror, scanning the opposite direction.

Maybe the thought wasn't fair. Elania's transformation into a Darkwalker always had a big effect on her personality, so why would it be different for her seraph form?

It was just that the emotionless stoicism on display was so different from the Elania she knew.

"It's clear," Yolani said, before looking over her shoulder. The others were watching her intently... except for Elania. She was staring at the cavern's ceiling.

Gaston nodded. "Alright, let's go."

Yolani folded the mirror back into her pocket and then followed Gaston out of the alley. There was still a long way to go until they reached the dividing wall between the Conclave district and the Watch Fortress, and they were going to have to pick up the pace if they wanted to make it before the light stones went out.

A frown crossed her lips, and she glanced up. Would they work normally now, actually? The artificed constructs relied on the way stones for their dimming function, and if the Guards' telepathy was nonfunctional...

There was a real possibility the city would remain under constant daylight conditions until things were fixed.

That wasn't really the end of the world, but it meant that sneaking around at night was going to be a lot harder. She glanced at the back of Gaston's neck. Maybe the lieutenant had taken that into consideration when he finally agreed that they should move.

The street was empty, and the only sound was the echo of their footsteps. It was eerie, and the feeling of being watched was strong.

The entire avenue was fire-blasted. The seraph's attack had come close but not actually dug into the area. That just being near the destruction had set stone to flame was terrifying.

Yolani shivered and then looked at Elania. She didn't seem to be paying attention, and her wings had shrunk down to a small size that wrapped around her like a cloak. But they still glittered.

Was she okay? The question had been asked, but it felt like it was dumb.

Were any of them really okay?

"Wait," Gaston said, holding up a hand as they reached an intersection. He peered around the corner, then looked back at them with a frown. "People."

"Lightbringers?" Henri asked.

Gaston shook his head. "No, looks like civilians."

Yolani moved up to look for herself. There was a half-dozen men carrying bodies and setting them out in rows while throwing cloth over them.

"It's the fastest way to the Watch," Yolani said. "We can't avoid everyone forever."

Elania suddenly stepped out from behind them and walked toward the group without a word.

Panic filled Yolani for a half second as she thought Elania was going to slaughter them, but she shut the uncharitable thought down. Elania was still Elania, and she wouldn't do something like that.

Before Gaston or Henri could react, she followed Elania and caught up to grab her arm.

Two golden eyes casually glanced at her. "Are you alright, Yolani?"

Yolani blinked. "I'm fine. Just following you."

Elania nodded and continued without missing a beat.

Henri followed next, and then Gaston and his monk friend.

The group of people handling the bodies jerked to a stop when they saw them approaching, but when they realized they weren't under attack, they went back to their work.

It was freakish at how fast things had changed in just a few hours of conflict. It was far, far worse than the riots had been.

There were undoubtedly far more people dead and missing...

Her grip on Elania's arm tightened slightly. She needed to avoid thinking about everything until they made it somewhere safe.

Maybe the nervous thought somehow transmitted itself to Elania because she glanced at Yolani and then paused.

"Let's reform a new contract," Elania said matter-of-factly.

Yolani blinked. "What?"

The rest of the group came to a halt and their reactions ranged from frowns to Henri spluttering an objection.

"Let's make a new contract," Elania repeated like the question had been because she hadn't heard.

"Do you need energy? Are you low on **[Power]** right now?" Yolani asked.

Elania shook her head. "I'm fine, and Magister Bannon gave me a new mana shard, so we have that. I just want to be able to find you if we get separated again."

Able to find her? Yolani blinked. That wasn't something she knew that the contract could do.

It had taken them hours to make their first contract, and they had spent a lot of time making sure it was safe and equitable. "Are you sure this is the time and place to do this?"

"Yes," Elania said. "I'm sure."

Yolani hesitated, looking at the heat crisped streets and the people working to clear the bodies. "Alright. Maybe let's find some cover first?"

"I have it ready already," Elania said. "You just need to agree."

That redoubled the hostility of the others, but Yolani ignored them as she read the shimmering words that appeared in front of her.

**[Contract With: Elania Reyes]**

**[Contract Essence Draw: 0.0]**

**[Configuration: Custom]**

**[(Contractor: Elania Reyes), (Contractee: Yolani Aetherhart), (Duration: Indefinite)]**

**[Requirements/Contractor: Contractor is Contractee's friend.]**

**[Requirements/Contractee: Contractee is Contractor's friend. Essence draw provided to Contractor is variable and may be modified by Contractee.]**

**[Penalty/Contractor: Contractor waives any rights or penalties related to the contract. Contractor may terminate the contract at any time.]**

**[Penalty/Contractee: Contractee waives any rights or penalties related to the contract. Contractee may terminate the contract at any time.]**

It was very barebones and probably had only taken Elania a few seconds to set up. She wasn't sure why Elania was insisting on it now, but she trusted her friend.

"Agreed," Yolani said. There were a series of muted protests from Gaston and Henri as she reached out and touched the shimmering words.

The contract vanished, and Elania nodded. "Thank you."

Yolani arched an eyebrow. "You're welcome?"

"I hope you know what you're doing, Ms. Aetherhart. Demons can play tricks. As much as you trust her..." Gaston said, his words trailing off.

Elania's wings suddenly flared out of her back, the shimmering energy coursing over them as she turned around. It felt warm and

tingly, and Yolani felt it cling to her skin gently, like it wanted to protect her.

The others shuddered and took a step back. Maybe not receiving the same sensation? Yolani shook her head. She wasn't sure.

"I have no use for souls, and I'm Elania, not some random demon. I'm mostly concerned with making sure Yolani is safe, and to a lesser degree Henri and then you," Elania said. "I'm not going to do anything to harm her."

"You blasted the city and likely killed hundreds, and started this entire mess," Gaston muttered. "You're dangerous."

Elania tilted her head, and Yolani was afraid she was going to lash out, but that didn't happen.

"I don't think I started this mess. It was already brewing long before I arrived. I just accidentally lit the wick to the powder-keg someone set out in a bad spot," Elania replied flatly.

"I know people died because of the fighting, and that my powers can be dangerous for those around me. I don't intend to hurt or kill anyone by accident or otherwise, but I don't intend to let anyone hurt or kill me or the people I care about, either."

Yolani felt her cheeks heat slightly. Despite the emotionless delivery, the words 'people I care about' had been said with a certain amount of emphasis... and she was sure that Elania meant her, specifically.

"Even if it means killing innocents?" Gaston asked.

Elania's eyes narrowed. "Don't give me that self-righteous bullshit, Gaston of the Guard. I've seen what the Watch does to innocents that get in their way. I've seen them beat and kill people for no reason other than they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. There's not black or white in this entire cursed city."

Gaston grunted. "Fair enough, but many won't see it that way. They will only see the scale of damage you're capable of causing, and have caused and it will be put on you."

"Fortunately, I'm very strong," Elania stated.

"We need to keep moving," Yolani muttered. She grabbed Elania's arm and pulled. The other girl followed, and then the rest of the group did as well.

The civilians had all stopped to stare at what she realized was a very public argument, and Elania's wings weren't helping, either.

"Why are they out again? They're making us visible," Yolani asked. "The cloak was better."

Elania glanced at her, slightly confused. "What?"

Yolani pointed. "Your wings."

Elania blinked and looked back. "Oh. Sorry, they have a mind of their own."

"Can you make them go away?" Yolani asked.

Elania frowned and bit her lip. They shrunk and became less visible, but there was still a faint golden outline in the air. They curled around to tuck around the both of them. "That's the best I can do, I think. It depends on how much **[Power]** I'm holding on to."

Yolani nodded. "Alright. Let's keep moving."

Despite how dangerous walking through the streets felt, they only encountered small groups of people who had been caught in the fray.

Corpses were everywhere, along with damage and rubble. They found a squad of guards that had been ambushed and killed, along with a half dozen monks that looked like they had been shot down from a distance.

When the gate to the Watch Fortress finally came into view, Yolani felt a surge of relief.

They were almost there.



The nightmare that had started in a little sandwich stop was going to finally come to an end.

There was no sense of falling as she realized Elania had caught her before she hit the ground.

She was just so tired.

# CHAPTER 44 - AT THE WATCH

Yolani let out a weak groan as consciousness returned to her slowly.

A scent of cinnamon infiltrated her senses. Her head and ears were cradled on something soft and warm.

Her whole body felt light, like she was on a cloud, and waking up felt like the last thing in the world she wanted to do.

Recent memories caught up to her quickly, though, and she cracked an eye open.

The sleeping angel was a sight to behold. Little lines of glittering light trailed out of her hair and down to reach the protective wings that were wrapped around the entire bed.

She realized the soft, warm thing she was laying her head on was Elania's lap.

The rhythmic breathing told her that the other girl was fast asleep, and she didn't want to wake her, so she stayed still and enjoyed the moment.

Somehow she nodded off again to sleep a little longer...

Until the urge to pee interrupted and she didn't have a choice.

Elania's eyes came open the moment she moved, and she pulled back her wings. "Feeling better?"

Yolani nodded. "Yeah. I think so."

"You were out for a while," Elania said. "The medic said it was soul exhaustion. You were healed multiple times in quick succession."

Yolani winced. They had figured out what Lightbringer West had done to her. "I'm sorry."

Light flared in the room as Elania's eyes lit up like golden lamps while her wings flickered out. "You're sorry for what they did? I'd kill them, but I can't a second time..."

Yolani shivered at the intensity of the declaration. She wasn't sorry for what they did, but for the worry and trouble she caused... but maybe that was the same thing.

The anger in Elania's eyes evaporated into something more vulnerable, and then she leaned in to crush her in a hug. "I'm so glad you're okay, Lani."

Yolani hugged her back.

They stayed like that for a moment before Elania pulled back and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm not supposed to be like this."

"What do you mean?" Yolani asked.

"Emotional. It weakens this form for some reason. I'm not sure why," Elania said. "And right now, I'm worried about returning back to human."

Yolani stood up. "Sorry, I need to..." She made a gesture to the corner of the room and Elania nodded and turned her back.

That didn't stop the explanation for what had happened during the last day or so since she had passed out.

The Watch had been in a state of chaos when they had arrived, and the guards had been in the process of fortifying the Watch's

Citadel and administrative buildings when they had arrived. The Lightbringers had secured the noble district somehow, and Magister Roland was dead.

Magister Keswick wanted them transferred to the Magistry immediately, for Elania's divinity. Gaston had informed Bannon of what she'd discovered about consuming the monks, and the three remaining Magisters had been very interested in that.

The Monks seemed to be attempting to re-bridge across the chasm to their district from their fortress, but several cannon attacks had put a stop to any bridge building.

There had been no progress in restoring the Guards' telepathy channels, and the Lightstones were definitely stuck on their daylight setting for the duration.

It was a lot to take in, and it was impossible to not feel a little overwhelmed.

Finished, Yolani turned around. "All that, and they have you locked in here with me?" She gestured toward the window, which had bars instead of glass.

Elania's eyes slid to the window, a small frown appearing. "We're not prisoners. I think those are more for our protection, rather than to keep me from flying out... Like, what if ninja monks or something climbed up here? The bars might help."

Yolani blinked. She was never sure what was going on in the Earth girl's head. But thinking about it a little harder, she was probably right. If Elania had wanted out, she probably could just remove the wall.

"Besides, I told Magister Bannon to stick his boot up his ass and that I was staying with you until you were better," Elania added.

A slight heat filled her cheeks, and Yolani looked away. Sometimes the things her friend said made her feel good, but they were very, very wrong.

Wait. No. There was nothing wrong with her friend wanting to make sure she was fine. Friends did that, right? Just friends. Good friends.

Her eyes slid down to Elania's legs, and the memory of how nice it was to sleep on her lap made her cheeks heat back up. Okay, still nothing wrong with that either.

Like sharing a bedroll on a cavern run. Totally platonic and normal.

The flick on her forehead hurt. "Owh! What was that for?"

"Are you sure you're okay? Did you hear what I asked?" Elania said.

Yolani blinked. "Uhh, no. I was just, uhh, thinking about things."

"Magister Bannon asked us to come see him and help with things once you woke up. If you're feeling up to it, we can get ready and go see what's happened in the meantime," Elania explained.

Yolani nodded and then looked at the folded clothes. Then herself. She wasn't dirty at all despite all the debris and... stuff they'd climbed through. Now that she noticed, Elania wasn't dirty either. "Did you wash us up?"

Elania's face turned red, and her wings disappeared completely. "Uh. Not exactly. The seraph aura thing just tends to... clean things. On its own. I think. Uhh... your body is a temple and all that."

What? Yolani blinked. The first part made sense, but she didn't follow the rest of it. Another Earth thing? She nodded anyway. "Okay. I'll get dressed and we can go."

Elania shot up and headed for the door. "I'll give you some privacy!"

Yolani stifled a giggle and rolled her eyes at the how fast Elania had moved. Really, she didn't get it at all. She was just changing her clothes.

The way she was acting was cute, though.

Like an embarrassed boy who liked her.

Her hand froze halfway to the pile of clean clothes.

Like a boy who liked her.

No. That was definitely impossible. She'd seen Elania naked before; and there had been more than a few times they'd been pressed together in a tight spot. Elania was definitely a woman.

Why did she feel a little disappointed at that?

It took her twice as long as it should have to get the clothes on. They weren't anything really special, a unisex shirt and pants that needed a belt to stay up. Perfect for general Guard use, but not really tailored or fit for her.

What they needed was to get back to the shop and get their own things. When she stepped out of the room, Elania was waiting with her wings back in existence and fitted around her like a cloak.

That was probably the only way they really fit in the hallway, now that she thought about it.

"All good?" Elania asked.

Yolani nodded. "Let's go see the Magister. I want to know what's going on. Do you... do you think the shop is alright?"

Elania frowned. "There is a lot of damage in the Artisan district, but from what I could see, I don't think it touched Artifice Row. I think it's okay."

Yolani nodded. "Good. I hope so."

"You want to go back there?" Elania asked.

"We need to get some things for sure... I need my wands. Do we have any mana shards left?" Yolani asked.

Elania winced. "I... used all of them up in the rescue. Also... A bunch of those wands might be destroyed. Or, well, sitting in the abyssal lake now."

Yolani's heart sank, but only for a second. There were so many things that she'd still be able to use, and it was very unlikely Elania had lost all her wands; they wouldn't have fit in a single pack.

“There is one mana shard I got from Magister Bannon. It’s a medium-strength one. It’s enough for me to use as a repository for excess [Power], but it’s almost empty,” Elania continued.

“I don’t think we’ll be getting shipments of chickens for a while. I should set your essence draw higher,” Yolani said.

Elania glanced at her and nodded as they continued down the empty hallway. “That’s a good idea. I have been churning through [Power] really fast. This form is using at least ten times as much just to maintain itself.”

Yolani eyed the glowing cloak around Elania’s shoulders. “Well, it’s pretty showy.”

A guard on patrol turned the corner and came to a surprised halt when he spotted them. It looked like he was frozen with indecision, not knowing whether or not to raise an alarm.

“Don’t I know it,” Elania muttered.

It took a few words before the guard calmed down and then confirmed that the Magister was in his office with several other officers organizing the defenses. They continued that way, and Yolani couldn’t help but think they were out of their depths.

That wasn’t anything new...

When the door to the Magister’s office opened, and Keswick and Bannon dropped their conversation with several other men to focus on Elania, that feeling only intensified.

“So, have you figured out what’s going on in the Noble district yet?” Elania asked.

Yolani tensed at the question. Here were two people who had been essentially the supreme rulers of the city for longer than she had been alive.

Maybe they hadn’t done a great job, but it wasn’t too long ago that their word was essentially law.

And Elania was the one asking them questions. Demanding them.

The thing that surprised her the most, though, was that they actually answered her.



# CHAPTER 45 - RETURN

Elania folded her arms. It just so happened that her wings did the opposite, lifting off her shoulders and standing vertically, like a starry peacock's tail. It was an involuntary form of body language, like when her ears twitched in Darkwalker form.

It also scared most of the people in the room and even had the Magisters drawing back.

“Sorry, they have a mind of their own,” Elania said.

Magister Keswick cleared her throat. “As I was saying, we need to go to the Magistry immediately and begin the process of transferring your new **[Divinity]** stores into the engine.”

“How much will it take to actively repulse another seraph?” Magister Bannon asked.

Keswick frowned. “As much as possible.” The woman looked back to Elania. “How old a corpse can you absorb?”

The room went silent, and Elania felt herself tense up. “Why?”

Bannon cleared his throat. "Lieutenant Gaston reported what you found about the monks, that they provide [**Divinity**] instead of human essence and skills."

"I am not sure of the exact cause, but I believe it's due to the Conclave's use of the seraph as a source of power," Keswick said. "They likely have been using it as part of an initiation rite of some sort. It's likely all of them aren't actually human anymore."

Elania's eyes narrowed. "You want me to absorb the old corpses for the engine?"

"We have plenty of them. If it isn't enough, we have prisoners as well, in various conditions. If things are bad enough, we can work on capturing more," Keswick said. "Do the Lightbringers have the same effect?"

"You want her to absorb the prisoners? Eat them?" Yolani blurted out. "That's... that's..."

"Make no mistake, we are at war," Bannon said without emotion. "We've lost the noble district, and the Lightbringers have been fortifying the entry points. We have the advantage in artillery and firepower, but they are bringing down thousands of men every hour to reinforce."

Elania bit her lip. She did not like the idea of industrial [**Divinity**] production, but she had to admit that she had no qualms about absorbing the monks during the battle.

The prisoners, though... she didn't know if she could do that.

"We need to go to Aetherhart's Artifice and get some things before going to the Magistracy, regardless," Elania stated. "I checked, and the attack didn't reach Artifice Row and the items will be needed, especially if we are going to be gone for a while."

Magister Keswick's expression turned sour, and it looked like she was going to argue when the woman deflated. "Fine. I need to return

to the Magistracy immediately, though. Magister Roland is dead, and Magister Astolf is acting as a reserve for the defenders encircling the noble district.”

“We can’t leave the engine unprotected,” Magister Bannon said with a nod. “I’ll remain here and continue to organize the Guard. We still have men and units slowly trickling in from the other districts. That the way stones have been disrupted is a major problem.”

Everyone, including Elania, turned toward Yolani.

The artificer suddenly tensed up. “Uhh. I’m not sure what’s gone wrong. I’ve never worked on the way stones before. I know how the light stones work and react to the signals to turn on and off.”

Keswick grunted. “Astolf would likely know more, but with him locked in place halting the light bringers, you’re our only Artificer at hand.”

“Why... me, though?” Yolani asked.

“Your class says, ‘Master Artificer’ and we have... experience working with you, young lady,” Keswick said. “Or do you believe you know someone who can do better? If you could fetch them from Artifice Row, that would be acceptable.”

There was a second of trepidation and Elania reached out to touch Yolani’s arm supportively. The other girl finally nodded. “I can see what I can find out. I need to get my tools, though.”

“I will be sending several Magistracy guards and an artifice carriage with you,” Keswick said. “Bring whatever you need, but don’t take too long and don’t expect that you’ll be able to return, at least until things calm down. We don’t know how long the Artisan District will remain safe.”

Bannon shook his head. “Nowhere is safe. While there hasn’t been any direct fighting there, the Conclave has been a part of the city for a

long time, and we haven't been able to lock down movement between the districts at all."

Elania wanted to say she could fly them there far faster than a carriage, but she realized they wouldn't be able to carry all the things easily. Yolani's weight reduction bags were nice, but where was the dimensional storage video games had always promised?

"What about the Ironfist mercenaries?" Elania asked. "Can't we hire them to help?"

Bannon frowned. "I already approached them. I didn't get a reply. They're likely trying to gauge who will win before committing to either side."

Elania grunted. That wasn't what she wanted to hear... simply because of her relationship with Harlock and the others. But it made sense in a way. They were mercenaries, and Harlock had never tried to hide that.

"Let's go," Yolani said. "I don't want to wait and risk something happening to the shop."

Elania nodded slowly. She still wasn't sure about the idea of using prisoners for **[Divinity]** but leaving that unsaid for now was probably for the best. Actually, she hated the idea, and the prospect of arguing about it at the moment really didn't appeal to her.

There were a few more details to iron out, but it didn't take long before she and Yolani were on their way to the shop with a small group of guards and a carriage.

The streets were more deserted than they had been after the riots, and the only people they saw were guards and the occasional group of workers that were doing their best to clear the streets.

Everyone was battered down, huddling in their stone homes, and probably praying that the seraph didn't strike them next.

A pang of guilt hit her and caused her **[Power]** to flicker. She'd done what she had to do, though. Elania glanced at Yolani sitting beside her, then to the other girl's hand and took it with a gentle squeeze.

Yolani looked at her with concern, then smiled and squeezed back. "We'll be okay."

We will be okay. Elania tasted the words in her own head. Not 'things will be okay' or 'the city will be okay.' We will be okay.

They didn't talk for the rest of the trip, but the feeling of Yolani's hand in hers was enough to keep things calm as they sped through the empty streets.

The checkpoint to Artifice Row was abandoned, with no Ironfist guards in sight. Whatever the Artificers had been paying them probably didn't cover hazard pay or civil war. There weren't any customers or wagons passing by, either.

The carriage took the slight hill up to the end of the street with aplomb, and when they reached the shop, Elania felt a surge of relief.

She'd mostly been sure that it was still standing, but even with her enhanced site and ability to check the district from high up, that hadn't been one-hundred percent.

"Half of you stay and guard the carriage. The rest of you come help us pack things," Yolani ordered. Four of them followed inside while the others took up positions near and around the carriage, but not necessarily in plain sight.

Elania nodded. That was smart of them. No need for everyone to get caught in a single spell blast or ambush.

"We should get your crystal racks first," Elania mumbled. "Even if it's a pain, it'll be some **[Power]** storage."

Yolani nodded and pointed toward a shelf in the back. "Weight reduction bags and backpacks. We'll take all of them."

The guards began to pull those out and set them out on flat surfaces while Elania and Yolani went into the back room and began to pull out crystal racks.

There were a lot of the small mana crystals, each one holding a small fraction of what a mana shard could hold.

Now they represented the reusable ammunition the Guard used to power their muskets and cannons.

Elania pointed to the rows of artifice muskets that hadn't been serviced yet. "Might as well take those as well."

One of the guards grunted and grabbed an armful of the things to take out to the carriage. It was going to be a crowded trip back. Maybe they'd be riding on the outside like the guards.

As Yolani began digging out things and tossing them in quickly, she adjusted her approximation. They'd definitely be riding on the outside.

"Slow down. We can carry more if we pack it neatly," Elania muttered. She moved to catch the things Yolani was finding and fit them neatly into the packs.

Plus... the longer it took them, the more time she had before having to consider what Keswick was going to ask of her at the Magistry.

# CHAPTER 46 - ROADBUMPS

A pounding on the shop door made Elania almost jump. She maintained her composure and crossed the bedroom to the balcony to inspect the street. There was an invisible shielding ward, but she still felt conspicuous leaning out in the open considering the events in the city.

One of their escorts was making the noise.

“What’s going on?” Elania called down to him.

He stopped pounding and looked up at her. “We’ve been out here an hour, and we need to get moving.”

Elania suppressed an eye twitch. Who was in charge here? “We’re almost done, but we are still packing.”

“We need to get moving,” the guard repeated.

Elania considered telling him they would hurry, but decided that she didn’t like to be given orders. “We’ll be done when we are done.”

She started to pull back inside when the guard started pounding on the door again.

Yolani came up the stairs with a worried expression. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Elania said. “Just a guard being impatient.”

Leaning back over the balcony, she reached out a hand and dropped a chain of weighted **[Power]** onto the ground. They exploded into small puffs of light, with a correspondingly loud series of cracks.

The guard ran and jumped behind the carriage, and the others looked around in confusion.

“Don’t bother us unless you’re under attack!” Elania shouted. “Or next time it’ll be serious!”

The other guards laughed at the man, while he glowered.

Yolani just stared at her. “Did you just... prank a Magistry guard?”

Elania shrugged. “He was being rude?”

Yolani let out a breath, then seemed to relax. “I guess so. Before all this, those Magistry guards could haul you to prison with just a word.”

Elania frowned. “I don’t think they can do that now.”

“Well, no. Not when their Magister is your peer,” Yolani said. “But they could still cause trouble. Maybe.”

“You think Magister Keswick is my peer?” Elania blinked. She really hadn’t thought of that, but when she thought back to their interactions...

She certainly had treated them as such. It hadn’t stood out to her at the time, because... well, she was Elania. She was used to being treated as an equal by people who were older and more experienced than her.

And **[Power]** and levels and aristocratic rank and whatnot hadn’t really been something she grew up with. Oh sure, maybe a lawyer or a judge, or a police officer was someone who you deferred to, but...

Well, considering it like that, she’d been a bit of a brat...

Somehow, she felt like they deserved it, though.

Respect the badge, but not when they are an asshole?



Yolani reached out and flicked her forehead in a copy of the gesture that Elania often used when the girl was stuck thinking about some artifice thing.

“Elania? You still with me?” Yolani asked with a smile.

Elania blinked and shook her head. “Yeah. I’m here.”

“They are right. We shouldn’t take too long. Let’s go through things again and make sure we leave nothing important behind,” Yolani said.

Elania nodded and checked out the bedroom again. Their clothes hadn’t been a critical item, but they had stuffed one bag full of an equal amount of things for the both of them.

Having dirty underwear would have been a disaster, even at the end of the world.

The vast majority of what they packed were Yolani’s tools, though. Stripped down from cabinets, desks, and workstations, and neatly wrapped and packed into the weight reduction bags.

That proved necessary. Otherwise, she felt that the bottom of the carriage would probably have fallen out.

As it was, they’d be riding on the side doors with the guards since the entire inside was going to be packed full.

“It’ll be like an armored car, full of goodies,” Elania mumbled to herself.

“A what?” Yolani asked.

“Nothing,” Elania said. “Just thinking about how we might need to defend the carriage from looters on the way to the Magistracy.”

“That’s not funny. There shouldn’t be any looters,” Yolani said.

“It’s not been long, but things can fall apart pretty fast,” Elania said. Not that she had experience with that, but she’d read enough news articles to know that not everyone was as lucky as her.

Well, she was in the thick of it now, so maybe she was the unlucky one.

One of the guards came up to them. “There really aren’t any more of the things you had us looking for, Ms. Aetherhart.”

Yolani nodded. “Alright. Let’s pack it all up and get out of here.”

In the back, Yolani pulled out a pair of distinctly old-timey looking pistols. “I’ve been working on these. They’re not as good as your magazine musket from before, but they should be better than nothing.”

A close examination showed that the thing had four barrels, and the hammer was a little more complicated than usual. Honestly, it reminded her of something from a steampunk novel.

It had a hook on it, and it slid nicely into the empty holster on her belt.

Elania offered a smile. “Thanks. The musket probably saved our lives in the fortress, so even if it’s not a super weapon or anything, I’m sure it will be useful.”

Yolani nodded, but didn’t smile. “I hope so. It uses the same ammunition as the Guards’ weapons, so we won’t have to worry about anything special.”

There was a moment of silence between them, and the only sound through the shop was the boots of their escort tromping in and out.

Elania glanced at the shower station. “Wish we could take that with us, too.”

Yolani shook her head. “Impossible. But your new magic seems pretty effective for cleaning.”

Elania grunted. “Still nothing like a hot shower.”

When the guards inside began to haul out the packs, the irritated guard ushered the ones that had been on sentry duty inside to hurry things along.

“Seriously, what’s the rush?” Elania asked, as she and Yolani followed them out.

The guard looked at her. “You might be a seraph, but we’re still human. They could attack again at any time, and Magister Keswick was clear that they already infiltrated every district. The Artisan District isn’t safe. We need to get back to the Magistry as soon as possible.”

Elania frowned, but nodded slowly. She wasn’t entirely convinced, but it made a sort of sense. It was just the man’s urgency that was getting to her.

Yolani was solemn as she pulled the shop door shut and then sealed it with the young wards they’d set up. “I hope the shop is still here when we get back.”

There were a lot of things that came to mind, but Elania didn’t feel saying any of them were right. Instead, she put her arm around Yolani and gave her a side hug. “It’ll be okay.”

The carriage doors didn’t want to close, and the guards had to push and pull to get them to latch. For a moment, it had looked like the frame was going to crack, but it held.

Elania made sure she was on the same side of the carriage as Yolani, mostly just so she could catch the other girl or protect her. The guards were all armed with swords and muskets, but she was the only one with high-powered magic in the group.

Although she had seen Yolani slip a few different wands in her belt...

They’d need to coordinate again later, so she’d know what her friend was packing for combat and utility.

The carriage took off with a jolt as the driver had to adjust for the heavier than usual load. The artifice engine didn’t seem to mind too much other than having a slightly slower start, but that was easily mitigated by the downhill slope of Artifice Row.

They were moving so fast that by the time they neared the checkpoint, they nearly didn't break in time to avoid running over a small group of people that had formed in the middle of the street.

"Stop! Stop! We need help!"

"What's going on?"

"You need to explain!"

The guards at the front waved angrily at the people, while shouting for them to get out of the way. The ones on the flanks pulled their swords while the two on the backseat drew their muskets.

Elania fingered her new pistol to make sure the leather wasn't going to catch if she needed to draw it quickly.

What was she thinking? It would be more effective to blast away with her magic, at least in this case.

Yolani already had a wand slip out of her pouch and into a hand.

The group refused to disperse, and then Elania recognized some of them. They were artificers they knew.

"Mira! Finn!" Elania called out. The two older artificers filtered through the crowd to speak with her and Yolani at a safe distance.

"Elania! Yolani! What's going on? We heard the fighting, and the guards told us to stay inside," Mira said.

"Is it safe? Should everyone evacuate to the Guard Fortress or Magistracy?" Finn asked just as quickly.

Elania shook her head. She didn't think that anyone who didn't have a very good reason to be allowed in would receive shelter, at least not anytime soon.

"You really should go inside. It's probably the safest," Elania said.

Yolani's conflicted expression said volumes about the option, considering the state of things. "I would put everything you have available into your wards and defenses. It'll be safer than just about anywhere else you can go."

The two artificers looked at each other and then back at them. “We’ll do that, then. But I don’t think you will get that lot to cooperate.”

Elania glanced at the slowly growing crowd. They were drawing more and more attention. They were sitting ducks for an ambush.

She turned back to the two artificers. “Hurry. This really isn’t safe.”

The two nodded and then turned to go back to the shop.

A guard at the rear fired his musket into the air and the guards shouted for the people to disperse again. That just set them off more. The only thing keeping them at bay were the drawn swords.

Elania grabbed Yolani and jumped up onto the roof, then released the reins on her **[Power]** and flexed her wings.

“Disperse.”

The entire crowd went silent at the proclamation. It had been **[Power]** enhanced with as much authority that her **[Divinity]** and seraph transformation carried.

Of course, when they actually started to retreat was when the first pillar of light turned a half dozen of them into ash.

# CHAPTER 47 - SALT

The screaming and panic was immediate.

For half a second, Elania thought that somehow, she had unconsciously called down permanent judgement on a bunch of innocents on accident.

The shock mirrored on their escorts' faces seemed to fall in that direction as well.

The only one who didn't think so badly of her was Yolani, who grabbed her arm to get her attention before pointing at a distant building.

A man in monk robes was standing on the roof, doing his best to mimic a golden lighthouse beacon.

Elania's eyes flickered to the fleeing crowd. They had no regard for their fellows and one man was pushed to the ground and trampled by the others escaping.

A second pillar of light erupted halfway between the first and the carriage, neatly consuming his lower half. Wind whipped up and the taste of salt filled her senses.

Elania mentally corrected herself.

Not ash. Salt. The people had been turned into salt.

A third pillar began to form, this time directly above the carriage, just as the driver realized they were under attack and activated the artifice engine.

The vehicle was capable of accelerating quickly, but not faster than the speed of a **[Divinity]** powered attack.

Elania grabbed Yolani's belt and solidified her feet on the roof of the carriage, then spread out her wings and projected a hemisphere of **[Power]** around all of them.

Little pillars of light connected the construction with the ground and the attack slammed into the shield, dumping all the energy into melted spikes in the ground.

A smell of ozone filled the air as Elania pulled back her ward to recoup the **[Power]** cost and then the carriage finally kicked forward. That would have flung them off the roof if not for her earlier precautions.

They ran right over the small piles of the people that had been obliterated, and nearly slammed into several people who ran through their path.

"Not that way!" Elania shouted at the driver. "Turn around!"

The man looked back at her with confusion writ on his face, but even that momentary distraction nearly caused him to swerve into a building. "What!"

"They are herding us closer!" Yolani shouted.

A pillar slammed into the ground nearby.

A musket went off behind them, but predictably the shot went off into who knew where and not even close to the monk on the roof. She wasn't sure how the man had held on and braced for the shot, but now he had to reload.

“Hold your fire until you have a chance to hit!” Elania shouted.

Just because they couldn't reach the target, didn't mean the same for her, though.

Elania reached up above her head with her free hand and formed a mental construct of a spear. Well, a javelin, really.

Her [**Throwing**] skill was still S+ rank and the [**Divinity**] she used to form the weapon was more than happy to be guided by her aim.

Physically, mentally, and... spiritually.

The entire carriage lurched as she threw it forward with enough force to nearly rip the top of the vehicle off.

A series of curses filled the air, but Elania focused on her target. Her aim was slightly off, but she willed the projectile to arc in a way that made impact inevitable.

But that didn't make it effective.

The spear slammed into a golden barrier and disintegrated.

From what she understood of the powers involved, that wasn't possible for a normal monk.

Elder.

In front of them, she could feel the workings of another light pillar forming thanks to her familiarity with the repeated attack.

“Turn!” Elania shouted.

The driver angled the carriage to the right, but he most definitely did not turn the way she wanted.

She formed a second shield above them, this time a mobile version.

That made it weaker, but it was the best she could do while they were moving.

When the pillar slammed into the ground, the shield held. The same could not be said for the surrounding cobblestones, and the ride suddenly became extremely turbulent.

“Stop!” Elania shouted.



The driver didn't listen, and the carriage continued to speed up.

Elania picked Yolani up into the air with a resulting yelp.

"I'm not a bag of parts!" Yolani shouted.

Elania reached down and sat her beside the driver. "You drive, this idiot is going to get us killed!"

"What!" the driver shouted.

Yolani reached for the reins to the artifice engine, but the man didn't let go. "I'm not letting you take over!"

Elania slapped him.

He sort of flew off of the carriage, which wasn't entirely her intention, but effective as Yolani grabbed the leather control straps as they flew up into the air.

Before another light pillar could target them, they skidded in a sharp right turn.

They were going to flip!

Elania reached down and grabbed the roof and shoved her weight down to counterbalance. It wasn't like she was heavy, but the intention and force of **[Power]** she pushed with was more than enough to keep them stable.

"Careful!" Elania shouted.

"Why don't you drive if you're going to complain!" Yolani shouted back.

Elania grunted. She was not a backseat driver! "I'm not complaining!"

The buildings obscured them, and they were on a roughly correct track to take them toward the Magistracy, but Elania felt like their escape was not going to go unchallenged.

She wasn't wrong.

A trio of monks appeared on the street in front of them. No Elder in sight, though.

They each raised a golden bell and began to make their chant and hand gestures without hesitation.

Before Elania could plan a response, Yolani raised up a wand with one hand and held it forward like a sword.

Blue bolts began to explode from the crystal tip, arcing around to smash into the bells like an artillery barrage of arcane missiles.

The bells took the hits at first, but then they began to crack and then shattered.

Elania readied a ranged strike of **[Power]** to finish them, but the Monk scattered before the carriage could come closer.

“Can you create a shield to block the light pillars?” Elania shouted. Yolani didn’t look back to answer her. “Only a few times!”

Elania grunted. “I’m going to go up into the air.”

“I’m not sure that’s a great idea!” Yolani shouted back.

“We don’t want to run into another ambush or let the Elder cut us off!” Elania shouted.

Elania flared out her wings as wide as she could, air rushing through the ethereal appendages and feathers like they didn’t exist.

Until she willed them to do so.

The speed they had already built up launched her as she jumped, and then the angle and **[Power]** assist shot her upwards like a rocket, clearing the rooftops in a few seconds.

A few things quickly became apparent.

There probably had been little fighting going on in the Artisan District because there weren’t any Guards to fight back.

There were groups of monks lining the streets ahead of the carriage as far as she could see.

They’d probably spent the entire time they were in the shop preparing to ambush their departure!

That, and she could clearly see the Conclave Elder jumping from roof to roof, outpacing the carriage and getting ready to cut it off.

“We’ll see about that,” Elania muttered.

# CHAPTER 48 – AMBUSHES

E lania soared high above the rooftops, keeping pace with the carriage below. Her wings cut through the air effortlessly as she scanned the streets for any signs of danger.

They were there alright, moving into position at the intersections as the carriage blew past them. Yolani was preventing them from surrounding her thanks to the mad rush, but if the carriage stopped...

Things were going to be dicey. It felt like every monk that had crossed over before the bridge to the Conclave Fortress was destroyed was here.

And after them.

The guard had been right, they really should have moved faster in the shop. Neither Bannon nor Keswick had really warned them about this being a possibility, though.

She focused her senses, trying to locate the Conclave Elder she knew was still pursuing them. That didn't take long.

Elania glimpsed movement on the rooftops, a figure leaping from building to building with inhuman agility. He wasn't making any attempt to cloak or hide the powerful aura that stood out, either.

Now that she had a sense of him, she could almost feel him in the air, like if she had been holding her hand near a hot surface. Or the heat of a campfire on her face...

Except this one was a person and wanted to murder her and her group.

He was catching up fast, and it was obvious he was positioning himself to cut them off. Elania gritted her teeth. She was going to have to do something about that.

She glanced down at the carriage, ensuring Yolani was still in control. The carriage made a sharp turn, and then another. It was a good attempt at trying to forestall the incoming ambush, but it made anticipating the Elder's next move difficult.

Worse, with there being monks everywhere...

A wrong turn put Yolani on a narrow street, with a group of monks already in place on a rooftop ahead of the carriage. They were watching the carriage, and a few were already chanting something.

Elania's heart raced as she realized the danger. If she wanted to even have time to deal with the Elder, she needed to stop them.

Immediately.

Adding **[Power]** to her wings provided a burst of speed that left a crack of wind. That got their attention, but she folded her wings and dove toward them without hesitation.

A series of half-formed workings flew up at her, but she easily rolled out of the way.

She didn't want to spend more time than necessary dealing with them, but she held back her most powerful attack.

Obliterating them wouldn't give her a chance to recharge.

She broke her momentum as soon as her feet hit the stone roof. They began to surge forward to attack.

With a single motion, she spread her wings out as wide as she could and then spun while giving the glittering appendages **[Power]** fueled weight.

Her feathers were sharp when she willed them to be, and the monks had no time to react. They all were neatly bisected through the middle. The spray of blood let her trigger her ability to absorb.

Without wasting a beat, Elania jumped back into the air and spun, looking for her real target, the golden motes of light from the monks slowly chasing after her.

She quickly regained altitude and spotted the carriage.

The Elder was almost to it.

Yolani was doing her best to urge the artificer engine to go faster, but it wasn't working. The carriage lurched and swayed as it navigated the narrow streets; the wheels rattling against the cobblestones.

The guards were holding onto the handles and grips with white knuckles, unable to do anything but hold on for dear life.

But it wasn't possible to outrun the groups that were already placed ahead, and the Elder started cracking the rooftops with each leap.

Worse, Yolani made a turn for some reason, and now there was an entirely new row of monk ambushes on the ground that she needed to deal with at the same time.

Launching forward, she made a wide arc ahead of the carriage. A flurry of divine light spears began to form around her in rings, each one crackling with energy as they materialized.

Without bothering to slow down, she made a simple gesture, and the spears threw themselves toward the visible targets. She wasn't sure whether **[Throwing]** helped with the accuracy, but that didn't really matter.

Each one slammed into a street or rooftop and then exploded. The stone shrapnel and energy were more than enough to flatten the junior monks.

Each projectile cost her a considerable amount of **[Power]** but that was mitigated by the light motes that were slowly catching up to her.

The ambush teams quickly got the hint and disappeared into buildings.

By the time she nearly reached the carriage rushing in the opposite direction, she got a clear view of the Conclave Elder. It wasn't one of the ones she had fought or seen before.

Elania gritted her teeth, realizing the Elder was closing in on the carriage. She had to act fast, had to keep him away from Yolani and the others.

With a burst of speed, she shot forward, her wings propelling her towards the Elder. A quick thought sent her remaining dozen spear projectiles flashing forward at him.

The Elder sensed her approach, his head snapping in her direction. His eyes narrowed, and he raised his hand, a shimmering barrier materializing around him.

Her spears struck the barrier, shattering into countless shards of light.

The counterattack came instantly as the Elder hurled a divine golden bell towards her.

She twisted in mid-air, her wings propelling her to the side just in time to avoid the bell's trajectory. The bell whizzed past her, leaving a trail of sparkling motes in its wake.

Gritting her teeth, Elania summoned a larger spear of light, much denser than the smaller projectiles. **[Power]** followed an exponential curve, and this one was far more potent.

Dangerously so.

But that didn't matter right now.

The spear thrust forward, aimed directly at the Elder hiding behind his shield.

The Elder's eyes narrowed as he began to chant, his voice rising in a melodic incantation.

Her attack struck the shield, but the expected detonation never occurred, leaving her hovering in confusion.

The energy simply winked out of existence, and the golden dome was still in place.

What?

The elder began another chant and almost immediately she felt a drain. On her **[HUD]**, the power counter began to tick down rapidly at an alarming rate.

That wasn't good.

She threw more strikes at the barrier, but they evaporated as well.

It was literally an anti-**[Divinity]** cheat barrier.

Which meant she should have been able to wrest control of it from him, but when she tried to envision that, it just seemed like a polished shell with no holes.

But clearly that didn't stop things inside from effecting the stuff outside.

Golden tendrils began to visually flow off of her, and then she really began to panic.

What hadn't she tried?

Folding her wings, she slammed into the shield physically. She didn't disintegrate, so that was good.

The barrier seemed to shrink slightly.

That was even better.

She began to hammer the thing with her fists. There wasn't any proper form, and Sergeant Harlock would have been aghast.



But the barrier shrunk rapidly.

It stopped and solidified when she was only a few feet from her target. He wasn't even looking at her. His eyes were closed, and he continued to chant.

It felt like her whole body was wrapped in chains. This elder was stronger than the others.

She raised her hand and a ridiculously sized axe of **[Divine]** energy formed. Slamming it into the barrier just made it puff into light motes.

**[Power: 877/1688]**

She was fading fast.

Frustration welled up inside of her.

Yolani was still dashing away into danger, and she was stuck, about to lose.

A possible solution blossomed in her mind.

She pulled out the prototype pistol Yolani had gifted her earlier in a smooth motion. The weapon felt cool and heavy in her hand, the thick quad barrels forming a heavy lump of metal.

She flicked the hammer into the 'fire all' position, aimed for the elder's chest and pulled the trigger.

It didn't even need any input from her. The energy certainly wasn't divine.

The shield didn't even register the four lead balls as they tumbled through.

The Elder's eyes finally opened in shock as his chant was abruptly interrupted by four large holes appearing in his torso.

Elania surged forward, a sword materializing in her hand as she closed in on the Elder. No reason to give him a chance to heal or something.

With a swift thrust, she plunged the weapon into his chest, the radiant energy piercing through robe and flesh. Then she slashed upwards, slashing him nearly in half.

A triumphant smile spread across Elania's face as she watched the Elder crumple to the ground. Blood covered everything, but when she tried to trigger her absorption ability, nothing happened.

The body suddenly shimmered and then exploded in a cloud of thick mist.

Her heart sank. Illusion.

She whirled around, searching for a sign of the real Elder.

What if he had left this as a distraction and went after Yolani? Fear stabbed at her, and for the first time in the battle, her wings flickered. She started to search for the carriage to rush after it when a searing heat slammed into her back.

She screamed. The attack was nothing like the insidious lethargy and drain of the chain chantra. It was a pure, soul searing poker driven through her wing and through her torso. Something about it ignored the pain tolerance she had developed since arriving in Neftasu.

**[Regeneration]** fought it anyway, but there was a lot of damage and it took **[Power]** to remain conscious.

**[Power: 611/1688]**

Which was rapidly running out.

The world spun as she hit the ground, and then something like a massive hand slammed into her from above, driving her through the roof.

Rubble and debris rained down around her, the entire building crumbling under the impact of the fall. That had little effect compared to the pain searing through her body.

When she hit the bottom, she lay stunned, wings crumpled and a stone heap on top of her.

The respite came when no follow up attack arrived. Maybe the stone actually blocked the elder's access to her.

Double-edged swords and all that...

Bones knitted back together... a hundred **[System]** messages started screaming at her. Blood dripped down on her.

The building wasn't empty, she realized. Or rather, it hadn't been empty while it was still a building.

There was no way to tell who the blood belonged to, but she knew one thing: they were dead.

So she fed herself.

That sped up **[Regeneration]** rapidly. She almost wished it hadn't as her body reformed, literally shoving the crushing rubble out of the way.

The blood hadn't just been from one person, but a half dozen. That was enough to refill her.

With a wave of will, she shoved enough stone off of her so she could stand up. Then she spread her wings, which turned ethereal.

That let her reduce the surface area. But there was no rule that ethereal wings couldn't produce lift.

She shot up through the rubble like a rocket, breaking free into the air.

A hand snagged her ankle and then flung her back onto the ground. She caught herself and spun, kicking the elder in the head with a foot.

That got her released, but didn't seem to affect him much other than put him in a defensive stance.

They stared at each other with animosity.

That didn't last long.

He darted in and punched. She pushed the attack away and kicked. He rolled over her leg and tried to pull her off balance.

That didn't work. She held onto her position by sheer will. That allowed her to knee him in the face.

Unfortunately, that didn't do much.

The flurry of exchanges continued. He was by far the superior combatant using weird martial arts, but he held raw **[Power]** which made hitting her sort of like hitting a rock.

There was only one problem. She was a rock, slowly turning into a pebble.

She had no idea how he had so much density behind him. She'd already drained multiple normal sized mana shards worth of **[Power]** in the fight.

He didn't even seem winded.

This was a battle of attrition she wasn't going to win. She waited until there was a bit of space between them and then dumped a **[Power]** infused bomb between them.

It sent both of them flying away from each other.

But only one of them had wings.

# CHAPTER 49 - ESCAPE AGAIN

Elania soared high into the air, the wind whipping through her hair as she put distance between herself and the Elder.

Almost immediately, the incorporeal and insidious restraining spell the elders used hit her. It felt like her wings were heavy, and she was a rock...

A rock with a decent trajectory for getting far away.

Not to mention she pushed herself and resisted the feeling of chains pulling her back with gritted teeth.

The connection snapped after a tenuous few seconds, and then she was free.

Elania's heart pounded in her chest, and she doubled the distance again before slowing down. A slow spin while hovering allowed her to search for Yolani and the carriage.

Her vision was enhanced by her seraph form and **[Divinity]** stores, but it still felt a little strange being able to clearly see the distant streets below clearly when she squinted slightly.

Relief flooded through her when she spotted the vehicle, still moving forward at a breakneck pace.

She started toward it immediately, but there was another pressing problem.

Her **[Power]** was extremely low, less than 30% of its maximum, which was the lowest she'd been in a long time and much to dangerous.

Running out of **[Power]** was death... even in the best of times.

And these were very much not those.

She needed to recharge and fast. Her gaze fell upon a group of monks positioned ahead of the carriage, clearly intending to attack.

Well, she knew what to do.

A grim sort of determination settled over her, but nothing enough to destabilize her emotions and wings.

People treated lesser-demons like her as mana batteries... but that was a two-way street.

There wasn't any way to use **[Stealth]** to hide her approach, but she tried to push a bit of **[Presence Concealment]** to the front. They were already so busy pointing and preparing for the carriage coming toward them that they didn't look up.

When she reached them, she tucked her wings close and dove towards the group.

The wind began to scream in her ears as she hurtled towards them like a bird of prey.

While her dive went unnoticed, her landing was anything but. The roof groaned with the thunderous impact, and she whipped her wings around to slice the monks close enough into shreds.

The others were still turning toward her as she launched forward. Fingers turned to golden sheathed claws as she ripped and tore. Wings sent feathers flying like fans of knives, and the carnage reached a crescendo as she ripped the **[Divinity]** essence from their bodies.

That made her even faster, and then they were all dead.

Elania didn't hold back or move, allowing all the **[Power]** to flow into her as fast as possible.

She gorged on their power.

**[Power: 1800/1688]**

A sigh escaped, and everything felt right. Even the warnings about excess power that appeared from the **[System]** were her friend.

Everything felt more vibrant. The slowly graying tint to the world she hadn't even noticed until she'd refilled her **[Power]**.

Maybe she'd be able to take on the Elder now?

She shut that thought down quickly. He was the reason she was so low in the first place, and they needed to get out of the Artisan District and to the safety of the Magistracy.

Or at least get Keswick or Bannon to help her fight.

She needed another edge...

Her HUD was finally showing her **[Power]** gauge, so maybe the rest of the system was working?

Pulling up her **[Status]** screen brought up a garbled mess of words on a beige background, with two marble pillars on the sides. Okay... it had turned into some kind of heaven theme while being so bright it sort of hurt to look at for very long.

Not being able to see the skill list and all the things irked her slightly. What she really wanted to do was consider changing her slotted skills.

Suddenly, that section solidified slightly, the words standing still just enough that she could read them.

Not for the first time, it felt like the **[System]** was reading her mind.

Before it could break or go unreadable again, she pushed her desired changes, replacing **[Stealth]** and **[Martial Bladsmanship]** on the list.

**[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank S+), Enhanced Mana Sensing (Rank D), Mana Manipulation (Rank S+), Demonic Aura (Rank A) (Active)]**

Almost immediately, the sense of exactly where the Elder was flared in her mind. She needed to level up **[Enhanced mana Sensing]** somehow, especially if it was this effective when slotted.

The sound of their rushing carriage drew her attention, and she moved to the edge of the building. Yolani raised a hand toward her and shouted something, but it was lost in the background noise.

Elania tensed, flaring out her wings, and then jumped at the optimal time. She didn't just want to land on the roof heavily, that would destroy everything, so she took a more gentle glide downward as she lined up and matched the vehicle's pace.

It took a bit of precision to line up accurately enough to grab a handhold and then dismiss her wings, but somehow, she managed it.

The guards still held on to their spots, although one on the flank position was missing. Their escort had been reduced to three. Not that they were doing much of the escorting.

It was obvious they were distressed, and holding onto the carriage and not falling off was probably a bit of an ordeal for someone without her abilities. They remained silent, not daring to say a word.

She pulled herself up onto the roof and moved closer to Yolani, keeping her voice loud enough so her friend could hear her over the rushing wind. "The Elder isn't dead," she said grimly. "He's too strong for me to take on alone."

Yolani's brows furrowed with concern. "What do we do then?"

Elania shook her head, her gaze fixed on the approaching wall that surrounded the Magistry district. "I don't know yet. But we need to get out of the Artisan district first!"



As if on cue, a group of monks appeared in front of them, their hands glowing with divine energy as they prepared to attack.

Elania tensed, ready to defend the carriage, but before she could move, a barrage of musket balls slammed into the monks from behind.

The monks crumpled to the ground; their bodies riddled with holes.

Elania's head snapped towards the wall, her eyes widening as she saw the Magistry Guard lined up along the ramparts, their muskets glowing from the discharge.

Relief flooded through her as she realized they were finally within range of friendly defenses. The guards on the wall were active and armed, ready to defend against any further attacks.

Yolani let out a shaky breath, her hands gripping the reins tightly. "Thank the gods," she muttered.

Elania nodded, agreeing with the sentiment. She turned and looked behind them, her eyes still scanning the area for any sign of the Elder.

She knew he wouldn't give up so easily, but for now, they had a moment to catch their breath.

As the carriage approached the gate, Elania could see the guards rushing to open it, their faces tense with anticipation.

Elania gritted her teeth as the Conclave monks redoubled their efforts, determined to prevent their escape. The Elder was closing on them from behind as well, her enhanced senses placing him even though buildings blocked a direct view.

Stray shots whizzed past the carriage, the projectiles coming dangerously close to striking them.

"They're not letting up!" Yolani shouted over the din of battle, her hands gripping the reins tightly.

Elania's eyes narrowed, her divine power surging within her. With a wave of her hand, she erected a divine barrier in front of the carriage,

the shimmering wall of energy acting like an oversized snowplow, deflecting the stray bullets.

“Just keep driving!” Elania called back, her attention focused on maintaining the barrier. “We’re almost there!”

Yolani nodded; her face set with determination. She reached for her magic projectile wand, taking aim at the monks who had managed to get too close to the carriage.

With a series of quick, precise shots, she sent them tumbling to the ground, their robes smoking from the impact.

Elania turned her focus toward the rear. The Elder had caught up to them, his face twisted with rage as he prepared to launch another attack.

Before he could strike, a series of cannons opened fire from the city walls, sending a spray of grapeshot hurtling towards him.

The Elder’s eyes widened in surprise, and he quickly erected a barrier of his own, the golden light shimmering as it absorbed the impact of the projectiles.

The barrage halted his pursuit, forcing him to focus on defending himself rather than attacking.

There was a clearing between the buildings of the Artisan district and the wall, and as they broke through the threshold, the realization that they had made it arrived. There were far more guards that hadn’t been able to fire that would be if anyone came out of the cover of buildings.

The guards on the walls continued to fire, providing cover as they made their final approach.

Elania breathed a sigh of relief as the carriage passed through the gate, the portcullis slamming shut behind them with a resounding clang.

The sound of cannons and gunfire continued to echo above.

The relief died as the gate on the other side of the gate tunnel slammed shut as well. Yolani brought the carriage to a lurching halt.

A guard appeared on the other side. "Who goes there?"

Annoyance pricked at her. Who the fuck did they think they were?

The guards seemed to be taking no chances.

Elania glanced at their escort. "Hey! It's your job to figure this out."

The one holding onto the back had at some point lost his musket. There was also the unfortunate reality that her enhanced senses picked up that at some point, he had relieved himself.

A frown appeared on her lips. The carriage ride hadn't been that bad, had it?

Okay, maybe it had been pretty bad.

They probably shouldn't have taken so long. But... at least they had got everything of value out of the shop that was easily movable. Checking the inside of the carriage, nothing seemed to have escaped, and the weight-reduction packs were pretty durable.

The other guard seemed to have fared slightly better and nodded to her and went to discuss entry.

Minutes ticked by, each one feeling like an eternity. Yolani looked at her with worry, but they didn't talk.

Finally, the portcullis opened, and they rolled into the Magistray district. A prickle of unease settled over her. The attack had been too close, too coordinated. Someone had known their route, and where they would be.

Their target was pretty clear as well. She doubted they'd have gone after just Yolani.

They definitely saw her as the primary threat and priority.

They were probably right about that.

She just needed to hurt them a lot more than she already had, somehow.

It would be a shame to disappoint them.

# CHAPTER 50 – RESPITE (PART I)

Elania stepped out of the carriage, her eyes immediately drawn to the damage that surrounded them.

The seraph's attack had left a trail of destruction in its wake, the once pristine streets and rows of magistrate buildings now marred by rubble and debris.

The laser beam had cut through the area like a hot knife through butter, leaving a jagged wound that stretched as far as the eye could see.

The Magistry tower itself...

Elania's brow furrowed in confusion. The tower stood tall and unblemished; its walls totally untouched by the devastation that had ravaged the rest of the district.

It was as if an invisible barrier had protected it, shielding it from the seraph's wrath.

Elania turned to Yolani, who stood beside her. “Look at that,” she said, pointing to the tower. “It’s completely undamaged. The laser damage just... stops.”

Yolani followed her gaze, her eyes widening in surprise. “You’re right,” she said, her voice tinged with awe. “Considering how important it is, there is probably some type of protection. Some kind of defensive enchantment, maybe?”

Elania nodded, her mind racing with possibilities. Maybe the Celestial Engine could power a shield to protect the entire city next time? They hadn’t exactly asked for the specifics of why the Magisters wanted the engine charged as full as possible.

As they made their way towards the tower, flanked by their escort of guards, Elania could feel the adrenaline from their escape slowly dissipating.

It was mostly her mind aching from the exertion of the fight, and she could feel the weight of exhaustion settling over her like a heavy blanket. Physically, though, she was as fine as ever thanks to **[Regeneration]**.

She pushed the fatigue aside, knowing that there was still work to be done. They had retrieved the workshop’s treasures and escaped the Conclave’s clutches, but the threat was far from over.

The seraph was still out there, and they needed to find a way to stop it, or they were all going to be screwed when the Elders brought it out again.

There was a little evidence that they couldn’t just release it whenever they wanted. If they could, she could only imagine they’d have demolished every district offering resistance by now. So they had to have at least some limitation.

Elania glanced at Yolani, taking strength from her presence. They had been through so much together.

When they reached the Magistracy tower, Magister Keswick was waiting for them on the steps. That just drove in how important their roles were.

The Magister's face was etched with lines of worry, but relief softened her features.

"Thank the gods you've made it safely," Keswick said, her voice tight with tension. "As soon as you came within range, we've been monitoring your progress. I must say we didn't expect them to move so quickly, or we would never have let you go out there."

Elania grunted, a conflicting feeling running through her. Not let them go out? Something in her rebelled at thinking this mortal would dare try to prevent her from doing whatever she willed to do...

Before she could say something to that effect, she clamped down on it. That was the **[Divinity]** talking for sure.

That didn't kill the notion that someone had leaked their movements, though...

"Somehow, they knew we were going to be out there. They didn't just flood the area with monks and an Elder randomly," Elania said.

Yolani and Keswick both looked at her with a frown.

"You think we have a leak?" Keswick mused. "Well, you are likely correct, I'm afraid. Our institutions are so old there has been plenty of time for such things... I believe Magister Bannon used one such in Ms. Aetherhart's rescue, even."

Elania grunted. That was true. It seemed the city had been preparing for conflict for a long time... at least its major organizations had been.

"The seraph's attack has left us in a precarious position," Magister Keswick said, her brow furrowed. "Our defenses are weakened, and we need to act quickly if we hope to stand a chance against the combined forces of the Conclave and Lightbringers."

She turned to Yolani, her expression serious. “Ms. Aetherhart, we need your expertise in artifice now more than ever. Our weaponry has been depleted at an alarming rate, and we need you to assist in their replenishment. Every musket, every bomb, every pouch of shock crystals is vital to maintaining our defenses. We have ample mana shards for your use in repairing and replenishing supplies.”

Yolani straightened her shoulders, a determined glint in her eye. “I understand, Magister. I’ll get to work right away.”

“I need some of those,” Elania said immediately. “Ours burned up during the battle at the Conclave, and I only have one that Magister Bannon gave me. I need at least a dozen. It’ll help me in combat immensely.”

“Done. I’ll see that they are brought to you as soon as you are settled in,” Keswick answered. She let out a tense breath. “Let me show you both to your rooms, and then we can see about restoring the Celestial Engine.”

The Magister led them inside and toward the elevator at the back of the main lobby. The entry room was full of soldiers and staff members talking or working on their equipment.

There were even several wounded that were laying on makeshift cots. It seemed every space in the building was being utilized by people that had taken cover.

That made sense if the tower was the most magically protected building in the city.

“We’ve collected several dozen Conclave prisoners. They’re locked up inside the tower and under heavy guard, so you don’t need to worry. We’ll utilize them to power the engine as necessary,” Keswick said.

Elania’s heart sank as Keswick mentioned the captured monks, her spine going cold at the implication.



“I’m not ready to do that,” Elania said.

Keswick looked at her sharply, then her expression softened. “Of course. It’s a bad idea to overcharge your **[Divinity]** essence right now. The prisoners won’t be a concern until we are ready for the next transfer, and when you aren’t as... full.”

Elania remained silent, her mind reeling at the prospect of what lay ahead. If her wings had been out, they would have been flickering unhappily.

The idea of murdering prisoners, even if they were enemies, felt like a line she wasn’t ready to cross.

The lives of countless innocents depended on her ability to power the Celestial Engine. But at what cost? How much of herself was she willing to sacrifice in the name of the greater good?

She didn’t have an answer by the time the elevator dinged, and they stepped out. The space wasn’t familiar to her, but Elania recognized a heavy metal vault door; the entrance to the engine. So they were near the heart of the tower.

Keswick led them down a short hall toward a cross of three doors. As they walked, Keswick explained, “Elania, your proximity to the Celestial Engine is of utmost importance. If another attack occurs, you’ll need to hurry to the control room and do your best to maintain its power.”

“Really, I don’t see how I can even nudge the meter. I thought it was the essence distribution that was the problem, not the raw amount of **[Power]** available,” Elania replied.

Keswick grunted. “That’s true, but the higher the **[Divinity]** level is on the engine, the more efficiently it will be processing that raw power into effects we have available. Namely, the defensive field. There are other capabilities we haven’t utilized in living memory that could

also strike back, but that requires a much higher quality than we have ever enjoyed.”

Elania nodded, absorbing the information.

There was a lull in the conversation, and Elania absentmindedly checked her pack and holster. The recent memory of firing on the Elder came to mind.

Elania glanced at Yolani. “The pistol turned out pretty effective against the Elder. It saved my life back there.”

Yolani looked back at her, concern etched into her face. “What do you mean? I honestly didn’t expect it to be that critical, considering the powers you can throw around while a seraph.”

“It punched through his shield when nothing I could throw at it would get through, but then he used some kind of illusion magic. I thought I had killed him, but it was some kind of trick,” Elania explained.

Yolani frowned. “Illusion magic? That’s not a common type of magic. I don’t think it’s something you’d expect a Conclave member to use, either.”

Elania turned to Keswick, who had been listening intently. “Magister, do you know anything about the Elders using illusion magic?”

Keswick’s expression grew grave. “It’s impossible, but it’s certainly not common. That this Elder was able to confuse you so effectively speaks to their power and skill, especially as an ascendant with a compatible transformation.”

Bells started going off in Elania’s head. She’d seen that word used on her status sheet, and if the Magister knew more about it, she was going to ask later if she could.

Yolani sighed. “Great, just what we needed. As if the Elders weren’t dangerous enough already.”

“I didn’t do a good enough job,” Elania mumbled.

Yolani placed a comforting hand on Elania's shoulder. "But you still managed to defeat him, even with his tricks. That's a testament to your own strength, Elania."

Elania frowned, but she was grateful for Yolani's support. "Thanks. I didn't actually beat him, though. We ran away, remember?"

"Yes, and we made it out alive. That's sort of beating him," Yolani countered.

"Based on your description of his abilities, it sounds like you were facing Elder Holt, the leader of the Conclave," Keswick said, her brow furrowed.

Elania's eyes widened. "Elder Holt?"

Keswick nodded gravely. "He's never actually been met by a Magister, so we have little information on him. Rumors, though... paint the possibility that it was him. Besides that, there are only so many Conclave Elders that it is almost certain he is the one you faced."

She frowned. "It's likely that what you thought was a fatal blow wasn't actually an illusion, but rather a planned substitution."

"A substitution?" Yolani asked, leaning forward in her seat.

"Yes," Keswick replied. "Elder Holt is known for using body swapping techniques to avoid injury. He likely had a prepared substitute ready to take his place if he sustained fatal damage."

Elania's mind raced as she processed this information. "So when I thought I had killed him..."

"He had already swapped bodies, transferring his consciousness to a new host and leaving behind the injured one," Keswick finished.

Elania slumped back in her chair, the weight of this revelation hitting her. "That's sort of ridiculous," she muttered.

Although as soon as she said it she wanted to take it back. There were so many other ridiculous things, half of them relating to her own abilities, that it body-swapping wasn't near the top of the list.

Keswick's expression was grim. "Indeed. It makes him an incredibly tough opponent to defeat. Even if you think you've landed a killing blow, he may have already escaped unscathed."

The Magister stopped and gestured to the doors. "Here are your quarters and workshop. There is a lift to the workshop directly, but I wanted to show you the normal route to get here first."

# CHAPTER 51 - RESPITE (PART 2)

**K**eswick let them step inside first.

Elania felt confusion and shock hit her as she scanned the opulence that surrounded her, and Yolani's breath hitched in a mirror of the emotion.

The space was vast, with high ceilings and plush furnishings that spoke of wealth and power. It was nicer than the lobby and offices of the Magister herself. Or at least it seemed like it. They'd never seen Keswick's personal quarters.

It was a far cry from the modest accommodation they were both used to.

Keswick led them through the main living area, pointing out the various amenities. "These rooms were once reserved for high-ranking Magistracy officials," she explained, her voice echoing in the cavernous space. "But given the current circumstances, we felt it was best to allocate them to you and Yolani."

Elania nodded, feeling a tinge of unease. Wasn't there a better use for the space than just housing them?

As they moved further into the quarters, Keswick gestured to two separate bedrooms, each one as luxurious as the last. "You'll have your own private spaces to rest and recharge," she said, a hint of a smile on her lips. "I know how important it is to have a place to call your own, especially at times like these."

Elania glanced at Yolani, who seemed just as overwhelmed by their new surroundings.

An internal door led to the workshop. As they stepped inside, they found staff members were already unpacking and unloading their belongings using a freight elevator that was built into the back. It was large enough that they had brought up the entire carriage.

The reason for that was self-evident; there were four cannons sitting waiting to be serviced, and against the back wall stacks of muskets were lined up neatly. It almost made the few armfuls they'd salvaged from the shop a joke.

Actually, they'd probably need all the weapons for the war, so maybe not.

Keswick turned to Yolani, her expression serious. "Your skills in artificing will be crucial in the days to come," she said, her voice heavy with the weight of responsibility.

"We need you to focus on creating and maintaining firearms for the city's defense. Every gun, every bullet, could mean the difference between life and death."

Yolani nodded, her eyes already scanning the workshop with a critical eye. Elania could see the gears turning in her mind, the calculations and designs that were already taking shape.

Keswick turned to Elania. "I will let you two get settled in. In the morning, we will apply your excess **[Divinity]** to the engine."

“If it’s critical, shouldn’t we do that sooner?” Elania asked.

Keswick shook her head. “You’ve just experienced a heavy conflict. It would be much better for you to settle and rest your soul to make the transfer easier. On both you and the engine. It isn’t so critical that we can’t delay for long enough for you to rest, and if something changes, the engine is not far.”

Elania nodded and Keswick showed herself out of the workshop while the workers continued to unload and unpack.

“Are you going to supervise?” Elania asked, looking at Yolani.

The other girl nodded. “Really should. I’m sure we can trust them... but I’d hate for something to go missing.”

Elania nodded, but if that was a concern, the carriage had been out of sight for a while.

It took almost an hour before they were finished, and then they sent the staff away. The foremen informed them that Yolani would be expected to accept a dozen apprentices and lower-ranking artificers into the workshop to help her.

“It’s a bit much,” Elania mumbled.

“It’s fine,” Yolani replied. “I can manage them. We never had really large operations, but I know how Ranolf handled things.”

“I can think of better role models,” Elania said.

“Even if he wasn’t a nice man, his methods did work to run the shop and keep it going. There is no way I can do everything alone in this workshop, anyway,” Yolani replied.

Elania grunted and nodded. With everything unpacked, they turned back into the living space. She made a straight line toward one of the comfy looking sofas.

She sank into it and let out a sigh and closed her eyes. It felt perfect and even if her body was never going to really give her the normal aches and pains of a rough day, her mind was another matter.

Yolani plopped down beside her, a weary expression on her face as she leaned back against the cushions as well.

“That was too close,” Elania said, breaking the silence that had settled over them. “If it hadn’t been for your pistol, I don’t know if I would have made it out of there.”

Yolani turned to face her, a flicker of concern in her green eyes. “I’m just glad it worked.”

Elania reached out, taking Yolani’s hand in her own. “It was a good bit of teamwork.”

Yolani’s eyes went to their hands, and she managed a small smile and squeezed. “We did.”

The moment didn’t last long, though. Yolani looked back at the workshop with a frown. “The Conclave, they’re not going to stop, are they? They’ll keep coming after us, after you.”

That was one truth that they couldn’t avoid. Elania nodded. Even if the Magisters tried to somehow make peace, she didn’t think her existence would be allowed.

The same could be said for the Lightbringers, but she didn’t think...

This was a war of extermination. She didn’t think there was any way for a peaceful resolution. Either the Conclave would be destroyed, and the Lightbringers wiped out, or the Magistracy and Guard would be wiped out.

That was an unsettling thought, and her estimation of how things had been developing...

It seemed like their side was losing.

Elania sighed, the weight of their predicament settling heavily on her shoulders. “I’m afraid so.”

They sat in silence for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts. Finally, Elania spoke again, her voice heavy with the weight of their situation.



“We need to be prepared for anything,” Elania finally stated.

Yolani nodded, her brow furrowed in thought. “Agreed. We’ll need to fortify the city’s defenses, and I’ll need to focus on producing as many weapons as possible.”

Elania’s gaze drifted to the workshop, her mind already whirring with ideas. “I can help with that. My knowledge of Earth’s technology could come in handy.”

Yolani’s eyes widened, a glimmer of excitement breaking through her serious expression. “That’s right! If we can combine your knowledge with my artificing skills, we might be able to create some useful weapons.”

Elania felt a surge of determination, a renewed sense of purpose in the face of the challenges ahead. “How many mana shards do you think the Magistracy has in stock? Maybe we could implement the automatic rifles if we changed them to use those? With dumb projectiles and a single input source?”

Yolani nodded quietly. “And the explosive cannonballs... I need to think about how we can maximize the shrapnel.”

“We need to finish finding the correct formula for the gunpowder, so we don’t need to rely on so much **[Power]** from the shards and crystals,” Elania muttered.

“They should have what we need here. I’m not sure how we could get a big enough supply with the combat going on and the Conclave having control of the Artisan district,” Yolani said.

Elania let out an annoyed sound. “Ugh. That’s going to be a tremendous problem. I didn’t think about it, but if we’ve lost the entire district... we’re surrounded. That’s really not good. Do we even have enough supplies to hold things?”

Yolani bit her lip. “They should have a lot here. There are likely underground stores and stuff. The Magisters wouldn’t be less prepared than the Elders for this...”

Elania looked at her sharply. “Are you sure about that?”

Yolani shook her head silently.

“It isn’t like we can get away or even negotiate with them, so I guess we just have to hope they are more competent than... what we’ve seen,” Elania muttered. “At least for me, maybe they’d consider letting you...”

“No,” Yolani said, her voice serious. “We’ll destroy the Conclave and push out the Lightbringers. Or die trying.”

It was Elania’s turn to nod silently.

They talked about different projects for almost an hour before Yolani let out an enormous yawn.

Elania rose from the couch, stretching her arms above her head. “We should probably get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

Yolani nodded, stifling a yawn. “You’re right. We’ll need all the rest we can get.” As she stood up, she eyed Elania with a sly look. “So, where are we sleeping?”

Elania blinked. Suddenly, it felt like she’d been dumped into a tense situation. “What do you mean?”

“There are two giant bedrooms for us,” Yolani said. “But no one said we had to use both. Do you want to sleep together?”

Elania swallowed. “Yes?”

Yolani smiled and let out a little laugh. “Are you going to transform out of your Seraph form?”

Elania blinked, still recovering from the earlier question. “I am not sure how easy it would be while my **[Divinity]** essence is so dominant.”

“Hmm. Alright. Maybe I won’t find myself pinned underneath a giant paw and a hundred pounds of fluff then,” Yolani replied.

Elania blinked. “That only happened... that only happened... uh!”

Yolani laughed.

Elania realized she was being teased and reached out to tickle Yolani’s sides, which resulted in a satisfying squeak.

Somehow, they managed to get a good night’s sleep.

# CHAPTER 52

## - RESPITE

### (FINALE)

Elania stepped onto the half-sized elevator beside Yolani and then got a good hold on the handlebar. The Celestial Engine pulsed and spun in the background as they descended towards the control room.

She closed her eyes, reaching out with her senses to gauge the engine's power. A frown creased her brow as she realized the levels had dropped... or at least that was the impression she felt compared to their previous visits.

The strain on the divine machinery was probably due to the shield used to protect against the seraph.

If one attack had made such a noticeable effect, it meant that even with her assistance, the tower wouldn't resist many more of those.

The elevator came to a stop; the doors opening to reveal the control node. Magister Keswick stood before the intricate console. She turned to greet them, her eyes flickering to Elania.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, his voice tight with tension. “The engine is ready for the infusion.”

Elania nodded, stepping forward to the console. She wasn't sure how to read the gauges, but as she neared the recharging pedestal, she felt a distant calling.

The engine was hungry.

Yolani put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “You got this.”

Elania nodded back at her. It sure didn't feel that way.

When she placed her hand on the device, it felt like an angry hand reached out and pulled her in.

A quick mental thought pushed her **[Soul Management]** perk into the forefront, halting the sudden theft of her essence and allowing her to moderate the flow herself.

The white void felt familiar, except for the massive sphere of gold. Beside it were two tiny pebbles that represented her other essence stores.

She realized that her interface's portrayal of them as ratios was not entirely precise. She still had the same amount of human and darkwalker essence... they were just dwarfed by the massive ball of **[Divinity]** that she had amassed by consuming the monks.

Letting it all go into the engine wasn't going to hurt her... probably. It'd restore the balance.

The thin hose that represented the Celestial Engine's drain on her expanded rapidly with her will until the golden light was draining away through it like a raging river.

The engine latched onto the offered essence, gorging on it with a speed that took Elania's breath away. She could feel the shifts in her own essence, the proportions of human and darkwalker increasing as the divinity was siphoned away.

As the transfer continued, Elania could sense the engine's power growing, the ancient machinery thrumming with renewed vigor.

It left her feeling breathless, though.

She pushed through the discomfort.

The engine's consumption rate suddenly spiked as her **[Divinity]** sphere reached half of its original size, causing a reverberation that shook the control room.

Keswick's voice echoed in the strange visualization world all around her. "Elania, slow down the transfer!"

Suddenly, she was back in the control room, her hand stuck to the pedestal like they were two powerful magnets.

"The engine is gaining power too quickly!" The Magister urged, her voice rising above the thrumming machinery.

Elania blinked, surprised by the Magister's warning. She focused her will, attempting to throttle the flow of essence into the hungry maw of the Celestial Engine. It was like trying to hold back a raging river with her bare hands.

She glanced at Yolani, who was studying the console with a furrowed brow. The gauges on the control panel were moving rapidly, some of them spinning out of control.

"This is different from last time," Elania said, her voice strained. "My essence seems to have a much bigger impact."

Yolani nodded, her eyes still on the gauges. "It could be that the density of your essence is higher now, due to all the monks you consumed. More concentrated power, more impact."

That matched what she had put together and Elania nodded, but she couldn't help but grimace at the reminder of the lives she had taken.

The engine continued to pull at her essence, the golden light of her divinity pouring into it like a waterfall. Her seraph wings suddenly

appeared on her back, providing a visual indicator as well: they weren't glowing nearly as strongly.

Elania could feel the strain on her soul, the pressure building as the engine demanded more and more.

She closed her eyes, focusing all her will on controlling the transfer. She had to find the right balance, to give the engine what it needed without letting it consume her entirely.

When she felt like she was empty, she began to wrestle for control of the flow. A pulse of **[Power]** into her **[Soul Management]** perk forced the issue.

It was like slamming a dam in place of the river, and there was a sudden reverberating impact inside both her soul and the Celestial Engine.

The entire tower shook slightly for a moment.

She felt weakened, like she had just run a marathon.

Magister Keswick turned to Elania, a mix of relief and disappointment on her face. "You did well, Elania. The engine's power has increased by nearly twenty percent. We're out of the danger zone of celestial instability."

Elania nodded, trying to catch her breath. "That's good."

But Keswick wasn't finished. "However, if we want to use the engine as a weapon against the Conclave, we'll need even more power. You should prepare to consume more monks. I can prepare the prisoners."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Elania said. "I think it would be better if I went back out to help the Guard."

Keswick frowned, then conceded. "That is an option. It will leave the prisoners stored for an emergency later, as well."

Elania squeezed her hand into a fist and then released it. She hated hearing the prisoners referred to as items to be stored. Even if they were stupid, radical monks... they were still people.

Yolani patted Elania on the back supportively. “Magister Keswick, if there’s nothing else, I think it’s best if we retire for now. Elania needs to recover her strength. It’s obvious this took a lot out of her.”

Keswick waved her hand dismissively. “Of course, of course. For now, get some rest, Elania. I’ll notify the other Magisters that you will be assisting them once you’re ready, while preparing for the mana shards you needed.”

Elania nodded gratefully, leaning on Yolani as they turned to leave the control room.

The trip back up the elevator and to their rooms was a blur.

Elania fell back onto their bed, allowing the mattress to engulf her. Her entire body felt heavy, like she was weakened considerably.

Yolani sat down beside her with a worried look. “Are you alright?”

“I’m not sure. I think... I’m not sure my seraph form is going to be as strong as it was. That doesn’t really make sense to me though since my **[Power]** capacity is still high,” Elania replied.

Yolani was quiet for a minute before speaking. “It might be the same as the Celestial Engine? Keswick said that the more **[Divinity]** ratio it had, the more effective it could use its **[Power]**. Maybe the same applies to you when you’re a seraph?”

Elania frowned. “I’ll have to balance how much input to the Engine I provide then, especially if I’m going to be fighting Elders again.”

“This might help you with that, actually,” Yolani said.

Elania blinked and then thought about it.

Actually, maybe Yolani was right.

If she had less **[Divinity]** the Elders wouldn’t be able to manipulate her as much? Especially for their ‘restraining’ abilities, which seemed



to be aimed at her. Or... probably the seraph they had imprisoned. Enslaved?

“I think you might be on to something,” Elania said as she sat back up. “I’m not sure how we can test it though, and if my seraph abilities are weakened... I’ll need another weapon or something to deal with them.”

“I’m sure the armory has some special magic weapons, and I can see about making you a new rifle? I’m not sure how well it will work on the Elders, though,” Yolani replied.

Elania thought back to her fights with Elder Winx, Eidan, and Holt. “It will stress them out at least. I know it was wearing down Winx and forced him to engage. I already explained how the pistol worked on Holt.”

Yolani nodded. “I’ll make it a priority, then. I don’t want you going out with every advantage I can figure out.”

Elania glanced at her. “You won’t be going with me?”

There was a brief shake of her head before Yolani replied. “No. I think it’ll be best if I stay here and work on the equipment full time. If I go fight, I can probably replace a dozen guards, but here I can keep a lot more fighting.”

“At least a hundred,” Elania replied with a grin.

Yolani blinked. “What?”

“You would replace at least a hundred guards in a fight,” Elania said before smiling.

Yolani raised an eyebrow. “Okay. But you’ll replace a thousand. With the mana shards Keswick promised, you’ll easily be able to collect the **[Divinity]** needed for the engine.”

Elania’s mirth evaporated. That meant she’d be killing a lot more monks or Lightbringers...

A frown appeared on Yolani's face immediately. "Sorry. That's not too fun a thought, is it?"

Elania nodded. "I will do it, though. Except the prisoners. I can't do that. It's not right."

Yolani nodded, her expression understanding. "I don't know how I would feel in your place, but it's a line I would hesitate to cross as well."

Elania leaned over and rested her head on Yolani's shoulder. It felt like the weight of her responsibilities was pressing down just as much as the sudden reduction of **[Divinity]**. Her seraph form was much less...

Detached.

Elania sunk back into the bed, then looked up at Yolani, who had developed an even more concerned expression than before.

"I think I need a few hours to recover," Elania said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Yolani nodded, her eyes filled with understanding. "Of course. Take all the time you need. I'll focus on the artifice equipment and supplies in the workshop. I'm not sure that'll be enough time for the rifle, though."

She reached out, placing a comforting hand on Elania's shoulder. "If you need anything, just let me know. I'm here for you."

Elania managed a weak smile, grateful for Yolani's unwavering support. "Thank you."

As Yolani left the room, closing the door softly behind her, Elania felt the last remains of emotional numbness from her **[Divinity]** wash away, replaced by a tidal wave of pain.

The events of the past few days crashed over her, the weight of her actions and the consequences they had brought bearing down on her like a physical force.

She thought of the lives lost, the destruction wrought, and the uncertain future that lay ahead.

Elania buried her face in a pillow and let the tears flow.

Her shoulders shook with silent sobs as she finally allowed herself to feel the full extent of... everything.

When she had no more tears left to shed, she took a shuddering breath and closed her eyes.

She reached within herself without even bothering to call up her interface.

**[Enhanced Mana Sense]** was replaced by **[Crisis Management]**. The cooldowns for her slots immediately began their countdowns.

The skill took effect immediately, a sense of calm washing over her like a cool breeze.

Sleep and merciful unconsciousness claimed her.

# CHAPTER 53 - ARMORY

Elania woke up feeling drained, the events of the previous day still weighing heavily on her mind.

She dragged herself out of bed and into the bathroom, splashing cold water on her face to help her focus.

The reflection in the mirror told her what she had already noticed: she looked like shit, felt like shit. It wasn't exactly the same as an ill-planned hangover, but it was close enough.

Yolani wasn't around, so she was alone. Moving back to the bed to sit, she decided to experiment with her **[Status]** and **[System]** interface.

**[Status: Elania Reyes]**

**[Level 121 Lesser Demon (Ascendant)]**

**[Karma: 12243]**

**[Power: 1659/1688]**

**[Perks: (Soul Siphon - Visible) (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration) (Demonic Transformation)]**

**[Class: Artificer Shop Assistant]**

[Skill Slots: 4]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank S+), Enhanced Mana Sensing (Rank C), Mana Manipulation (Rank S+), Demonic Aura (Rank A) (Deactivated)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana), (Darkwalker)]

[Magical: Artifice (Rank D), Elemental Affinity (Rank E), Presence Concealment (Rank D)]

[Physical: Stealth (Rank S+), Martial Bladesmanship (Rank C), 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 D), Negotiation (Rank B), Intimidation (Rank D), Bribery (Rank C), Basic Handcrafting (Rank D)]

Well, it didn't look like much had changed at all, despite all the carnage she had committed. That wasn't normal. It was annoying her. She didn't understand why it wasn't working like it had before. It wasn't just her **[Ascendant]** status because things had been fine after receiving it.

The adventure into Ranolf's Kennels and recovering the Hornar Antlers...

Things had started to go awry when she'd started chopping people in the Conclave Fortress, as best as she could remember.

The interface seemed more stable than before. Her **[Divinity]** essence was much lower than before... so maybe that had something to do with it? Did the **[System]** not like working for beings with high **[Divinity]** or something?

A frown appeared on Elania's face. When she was transformed into a Darkwalker, the interface didn't work at all.

Maybe the two weren't really related? It didn't show up when in Darkwalker form because it wasn't... they weren't normally sapient like a human?

Then for her seraph form and high **[Divinity]** it sort of went fuzzy?

She knew the **[System]** had been made by the gods, at least that's what she'd been told. Maybe since the **[Divinity]** was from two different sources they interfered with each other?

Elania shook her head. She was grasping at straws.

She flicked open her **[Soul Management]** page to examine her essence composition.

**[Soul Management]**

**[Darkwalker Essence: 39%, Human Essence: 40%, Divine Essence: 21%]**

Well, that was in line with what she remembered before passing out. She'd almost expected to be transformed back into a human because of the sudden shift, but that hadn't happened.

A spark of intention brought her wings back into existence, the ethereal appendages materializing behind her. Elania reached back and grasped one, pulling it forward to scrutinize it.

The once-lustrous feathers seemed dimmer; their divine glow significantly diminished. She supposed that made sense—less **[Divinity]**, less divine-looking wings.

She wondered if they'd turn black if she didn't have any **[Divinity]** left at all, or if she would revert to her human form.

Elania sighed and let go of her wing, then stood up. Soul-searching and introspection could be put on hold long enough for her to get properly dressed. She walked over to the dresser and noticed a new set of clothes had been laid out for her.

Yolani must have brought them in while she was asleep.

The outfit comprised a pair of well-fitted trousers, a comfortable tunic, and a set of sturdy leather armor.

Several belts and loops adorned the ensemble, providing ample space for holding various tools and supplies. A pack sat nearby, ready to be filled with necessities for their upcoming mission.

It wasn't as big as she was used to, but it was narrow in the middle and the main back hung low. Perfect for fitting someone with wings...

That was a nice thought, but since she could make her wings ethereal at will, maybe not strictly necessary. The appendages were definitely metaphysical about how they worked.

As Elania donned the new attire, she noticed a handwritten note tucked beneath the pack.

She recognized Yolani's elegant script immediately. "I'm in the workshop. Come get the rest of your stuff before going out."

Elania's first thought on opening the door to the adjoining workshop was that someone had installed great soundproofing. Maybe magical soundproofing?

A dozen artificers were hard at work, tinkering with an array of firearms and cannons. The air buzzed with the sounds of metal on metal and the occasional hiss of steam.

In the corner, Yolani hunched over a workbench, her attention focused on a pair of bracers. Elania approached her, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"Hey," she said, announcing her presence.

Yolani looked up from her work, her green eyes sparkling with warmth as they met Elania's. "Hey, you look better," she replied, setting down her tools. "I see you found the new outfit I left for you. It suits you well."

Elania returned Yolani's smile, grateful for her friend's thoughtfulness. "Thanks for the new gear. It fits perfectly."

Yolani's expression grew more serious. "We got word that the fighting has turned tense in the Noble district. The Lightbringers are trying to push out into the other districts, but they've been contained so far."

She held up the bracers for Elania to inspect.

Half a dozen mana shards gleamed on the inside of each bracer, a thin layer of cloth covering them. "These will allow optimal access to the shards for you, while protecting your skin from abrasion."

Elania took the bracers, turning them over in her hands. "Thank you, Yolani. These are perfect."

She slipped the first one on, the weight of the mana shards a reassuring presence against the insides of her forearms. "The mana shards are pretty high quality."

Yolani nodded. "Keswick had two dozen full shards brought to us, plus a ton of empty shock crystals. We have plenty of work to do already."

Elania ran her fingers over the smooth surface of the bracers, feeling the power thrumming within the shards. It was much better than the ad hoc bracelet she had fashioned and blown up in Elder Winx's face.

Elania's gaze drifted to the box of shock crystals sitting on the workbench. She furrowed her brow. "Who's going to refill these? It takes a lot of **[Power]** to charge them up."

Yolani gave her a look. "Who do you think? We don't have any other demons in the tower, and manually extracting and transferring from the mana shards would be pretty... wasteful."

Elania groaned. "There are so many."

She picked up one of the empty shock crystals, turning it over in her hand. The clear, faceted surface caught the light, reflecting a kaleidoscope of colors across her palm.



“There are a lot. It will take a couple of hours,” Yolani agreed. “Still, this just represents the ones shot by the snipers on the tower...”

“There’s no way the two of us can maintain the ammo supply of the entire Guard,” Elania muttered. “How are we going to deal with that?”

Yolani shook her head. “We’re the only team in the tower for this, anyway. The cannons can operate on full mana shards, but there is only so much **[Power]** available. The Guard Fortress has its own teams for ammo, but they’re probably much more strained that we will be.”

“They have their own demons for transfers?” Elania asked, surprised.

“The acquisition was after Ranolf’s shop went out, but yes. They have a few in-house artificers. It was one of the things I suggested to Bannon. Still, they were having to outsource work to us and anyone they could find, anyway,” Yolani replied.

Well, complaining was only wasting time.

“We should get to work,” Elania said, her tone resolute. She set the crystal back in the box and rolled up her sleeves, ready to begin the process of charging the shock crystals.

Yolani nodded in agreement, her own determination mirroring Elania’s. She grabbed a handful of mana crystals and placed them on the workbench, arranging them in a neat row. “I’ll prepare the mana shards while you focus on channeling your **[Power]** into the crystals. When you get low, you can drain one of the mana shards.”

The process wasn’t particularly draining, just... routine. It was something they had done a thousand times together already. The familiarity led to them working in tandem, Yolani handling the task of opening the crystals for transfer while Elania maneuvered the **[Power]** into place.

Hours passed as promised, and the pile of empty shock crystals began to dwindle as the corresponding pile of ready-to-use musket ammo grew.

When they were almost done, a messenger entered and headed straight for Elania.

Elania felt self-conscious as the man bowed to her. “Magister Keswick sends word that Magister Astolf has requested reinforcements to hold the Lightbringers back at the Noble District causeway. If the honored demoness would care to assist, she should prepare.”

Well, that was a bit to take in. Honored Demoness? Was that her title now?

Elania and Yolani exchanged a look.

“I’m going,” Elania declared, her eyes hardening with determination as she set down the last charged crystal.

Yolani nodded. “We should have finished your new rifle first. I haven’t even started on it.”

“That’s fine. What about that promise about an armory? Is there a magic destiny sword or something hidden away in there for me?” Elania asked.

Yolani blinked. “A what?”

“I’m joking. Sort of. A sword and a knife to replace my Vorpall one would be nice.” Elania stood up and let out a tense breath.

“Let’s go look,” Yolani said.

The messenger led them through the Magistracy halls, but the armory wasn’t that far. He left them to pick through what they wanted and report to Keswick.

It didn’t take long to find a seemingly durable sword that had an enhanced blade. The choices for daggers were much more limited, but she found a serviceable standard steel one that fit easily on her belt loop.

Both would be excellent additions to her seraph light-based powers. Fighting the Elders had proven that using those all the time would never be something to rely on.

The nearest exit point of the tower wasn't actually the ground floor when you had wings, so they found one of the exterior doors that led to a lookout platform. The guard manning the station was a bit surprised at their arrival but gave them space.

Elania looked back at her friend. "I'll be back."

Yolani nodded, her expression a mix of concern and support.

"Be careful out there," she said, her green eyes searching Elania's face. "I'll be here, working on more ammo and weapons. I'll have your rifle rebuilt when you get back."

Elania placed her hand over Yolani's, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "I will. Keep the workshop running smoothly. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Elania stepped up onto the parapet of the lookout platform, her gaze fixed on the distant city cavern walls. She took a deep breath, feeling the cool air fill her lungs, and let her divine essence surge with a brief pulse of **[Power]**.

Her wings materialized with only a little additional effort. The guard behind her gasped loud enough to be heard while Yolani called out for her to be careful.

Be careful. Elania nodded. She would do her best.

With a powerful beat, she launched herself into the air, the wind rushing past her face as she soared higher and higher. When she was high enough to touch one of the now permanently stuck on light stones, she stopped to hover.

The city sprawled out below her, a maze of winding streets and towering buildings. Chasms separated the districts, bridges made little

paths between them, and waterfalls tumbled down into the abyssal lakes below.

Smoke was everywhere, and she was sure if the city's filtration system wasn't working to purge and purify the air, they'd all be suffocating already.

Elania angled her wings, banking towards the Noble district.

As she drew closer, the sounds of battle reached her ears. The clashing of steel and the cries of the wounded mingled with the distant roar of explosions. Small pockets of fighting in the disjointed no-man's-land of the districts themselves.

The Noble district looked particularly aflame.

Smoke billowed from every terraced level of the district, obscuring the once-pristine facades of the noble houses.

The main elevator, a massive structure that connected the city to the surface, was a hive of activity as enemy troops poured down into the streets below.

Elania considered flying higher to scout out the situation, but a glint of metal caught her eye.

The gate she had been asked to defend needed support. Part of its wall had crumbled, and some of the wooden braces were smoldering. It looked like it had already been assaulted multiple times.

Elania folded her wings and dove towards the gate, the wind whipping through her hair as she plummeted towards the fray.

# CHAPTER 54 - FRONTLINE

Elania touched down on the gate roof, her wings folding neatly behind her back.

The guards on duty snapped to attention, wary expressions glued to their faces as they determined whether or not she was a threat. Even when they figured out she was there to help, they didn't relax.

Dark circles underscored their eyes, and their uniforms bore the stains and tears of prolonged battle.

"Where's Magister Astolf?" Elania asked, her voice carrying over the distant sounds of conflict.

The nearest guard shook his head, his helmet askew. "We don't know, my lady. Last we heard, he was at the southern gate, trying to hold the line."

Elania's expression turned somber as her eyes scanned the bridge extending ahead of the gate.

The structure served as a checkpoint between the central district and the affluent noble district, with the primary cascade of water from

Neftasu's largest waterfall encircling the island-like pillar that granted access to the surface.

On the other side, Lightbringer units stood watch atop the stolen ramparts, their gleaming armor reflecting the flickering light of the fires that raged through the noble district.

Smoke billowed from every terrace level, painting the sky an ominous shade of gray.

The gate's position set it back from the bridge, providing a measure of safety from the Lightbringers' projectiles.

As Elania surveyed the scene, uncertainty crept into her mind. The distance might not be enough to guarantee their protection, especially if the Lightbringers possessed more advanced weaponry. Especially with the height advantage.

Thankfully, she didn't think they had cannons. Otherwise, they'd be in trouble.

She turned back to the guards. "I'll try to locate Magister Astolf and assess the situation further."

The guards nodded, their faces etched with a mix of determination and exhaustion. Elania could see the toll the constant fighting had taken on them, but she knew they would continue to stand their ground.

Elania's wings twitched, ready to propel her into the air, when a flurry of movement caught her eye.

On the Noble district side, soldiers were moving.

And they were coming toward the gate.

They formed neat squares and rectangles like a well-rehearsed machine, and Elania's enhanced vision let her take in the sight almost as if she had binoculars.

The outer layers of the squares had comically large shields that reminded her of roman ones. When the shields came up and interlocked, it made a solid wall. What was it called? Tortoise formation?

The Lightbringers surged forward faster than she thought possible. A loud horn blared from nearby, and shouts spread up and down the nearby walls. Men moved back and forth carrying boxes of shock-crystals and metal crossbow bolts.

Nearby, a cannon barked from the wall, flying with a nearly flat trajectory.

It was accurately aimed. Elania fully expected it to smash the Lightbringers painfully in an example of why you didn't march densely packed infantry through artillery.

Just before impact with the enemy soldiers, a golden light wedge appeared, and the projectile deflected away and into the rushing water.

Elania grunted. "Shit."

They had magical defenses!

The air crackled with tension as the first volley of musket shots rang out; the sound reverberating through air.

This time the barrier didn't form, and a clinking rain of lead smashed into the pristine-white armor and shields of the oncoming formation. None of the enemies went down.

No wonder they were having so much trouble holding onto the Noble district. If this was how the firearms and cannon of the Guard worked, they didn't have a weapons advantage at all.

She glanced at a nearby guard who was taking aim. He had light chainmail and leather armor, and a broad short sword hung from his belt.

No, if the Lightbringers were able to close to melee, they were at a distinct disadvantage.

She needed to do something.

Elania launched herself into the air, her wings unfurling with a powerful snap.

Wind whipped through her hair as she rapidly gained altitude, the besieged gate shrinking below her. Then she angled toward the enemy.

Lightbringers in the center of the formations took aim.

She banked hard, narrowly avoiding a cloud of projectiles that would have turned her into a pincushion.

Higher and higher she climbed, until she was out of range, at least as long as she didn't hover in one place for too long.

Elania reached for her bracer, fingers finding the smooth surface of a mana shard.

**[Power]** thrummed through her as she drew upon the shard, a tingling sensation that raced along her nerves.

Golden light gathered in her palm, and all around her, a dozen lances coalesced into existence. It was a move she'd used before and was getting better at using. It was sort of annoying that her seraph abilities didn't have ranks or levels to measure, but that was just a consequence of her transformation ability.

The spears shimmered all around her with barely contained power. Even her wings, which had been rather dull, seemed to soak in the **[Power]** lighting up more brightly.

With a flick of her wrist, she sent her volley of spears hurtling downward, streaking toward the Lightbringer formations like a volley of falling stars.

Just before impact, the golden barrier sprang to life.

The lances struck it and detonated, exploding like firecrackers in a dazzling display of light and sound.

Elania shielded her eyes, squinting through the glare. As the explosions faded, her heart sank.



The Lightbringers marched onward, their steps unfaltering. Not a single soldier had fallen, their armor unmarred by the barrage.

She watched, frustration welling up inside her, as they drew ever closer to the gate.

Elania's wings flared, catching the updraft of her own attack as she watched the Lightbringers advance, their shields glinting in the artificial light.

The steady rapport of musket fire echoed across the cavern, mingling with the booming retorts of cannons.

A Lightbringer at the front crumpled, his armor dented from a well-placed shot. Before Elania could even blink, another Lightbringer stepped forward, seamlessly covering the gap with their shield.

The formation marched on, unfazed.

Magic. It had to be. No ordinary armor could withstand such an onslaught without a scratch.

Elania's hand drifted to her bracer, fingers brushing against the largest mana shard embedded there. Raw power thrummed beneath her fingertips, begging to be unleashed.

One devastating blow could end this. Shatter the Lightbringers' formation like glass.

But at what cost?

Her gaze flicked to the causeway. If she unleashed that kind of power here, the bridge would crumble. She didn't know the strategic implications. There were four bridges into the Noble District, but the one she was at that connected to the Central district, which was still under control by the Guard...

No. She couldn't make that call. Not without consulting the Magisters first.

Elania's jaw clenched as she watched the Lightbringers draw ever closer, their advance relentless. Musket balls pinged off their shields, ricocheting into the abyss below.

There was going to be a scaling of the walls. She angled toward the gatehouse.

A few minutes later, Elania touched down on the ramparts, her wings folding behind her as she landed on the top of the wall.

The Lightbringers reached the walls at nearly the same time, their ladders digging into the stone like the claws of a great beast.

Guards rushed to repel the invaders, their swords clashing against the Lightbringers' heavy armor.

The sound of metal on metal rang out, punctuated by the sharp cracks of muskets firing at point-blank range.

Elania's eyes locked onto the damaged section of the wall, where the Lightbringers swarmed like ants. She charged forward, her seraph-powered light weapons materializing in her hands.

A Lightbringer reached the top of the wall, his sword raised high.

Elania met him head-on, her divine claws tearing through his armor like paper. The man crumpled, his body and essence exploding in a spray of light that flowed to her rapidly.

**[You have slain Lightbringer Soldier - Human - Lvl 143]**

**[You have lost 17 Karma.]**

**[You have gained a level!]**

**[You have gained a rank in Martial Bladesmanship!]**

Elania blinked, surprised by the sudden influx of power. It wasn't the divinity she expected from absorbing a monk, but rather the familiar rush of leveling up and gaining a new skill.

She dodged a strike from another Lightbringer, her mind racing. Why wasn't she receiving divinity? Was it something about the monks

themselves that granted that power, rather than her seraph form interfering with the absorption process?

Questions for later. Right now, she had a battle to win.

Elania danced through the melee, her light weapons flashing as she cut down Lightbringer after Lightbringer. The guards rallied around her, their muskets barking as they poured fire into the enemy formations.

A Lightbringer lunged at her, his sword whistling through the air. Elania parried the blow, her divine claws raking across his chest. The man staggered back, his armor rent and torn.

**[You have slain Lightbringer Sergeant - Human - Lvl 156]**

**[You have lost 411 Karma.]**

**[You have gained a level!]**

**[You have gained a rank in Martial Bladesmanship!]**

Elania pressed forward, her wings flaring out behind her as she leaped over a fallen Lightbringer. She landed in the midst of a group of soldiers, her light weapons spinning in a deadly arc.

The Lightbringers fell before her, their armor no match for her seraph-powered attacks. Elania moved like a whirlwind, her claws and blades striking with blinding speed.

**[You have slain Lightbringer Soldier - Human - Lvl 148]**

**[You have lost 811 Karma.]**

**[You have gained a level!]**

**[You have slain Lightbringer Soldier - Human - Lvl 151]**

**[You have lost 13 Karma.]**

**[You have gained a level!]**

**[You have gained a rank in Martial Bladesmanship!]**

The ramparts were slick with blood, the bodies of fallen Lightbringers littering the stone. Elania stood amidst the carnage, her chest

heaving as she caught her breath. Each time she stepped in a pool of blood, it began to dissipate into **[Power]**.

The more she took, the more her wings turned dull. That was a side effect of the increase in human essence.

The wave was repulsed.

The guards cheered, their voices rising above the din of battle. They had held the wall, thanks in no small part to Elania's efforts.

But the fight was far from over. More ladders slammed against the ramparts, disgorging fresh waves of Lightbringers onto the walls. The sections on both sides of the gate were fully engaged, and the gate itself began to groan.

A glance down at the causeway told her why: pyromancers were spewing fire breath on it, and the metal bands around the steel structure were glowing bright yellow.

Elania readied her weapons, her eyes narrowing. This was going to be rough for the Guard.

The tide of battle shifted, a relentless onslaught of Lightbringers swarming the ramparts like a horde of armored ants.

Elania danced through the melee, her divine claws rending armor and flesh alike, but for every enemy she struck down, two more seemed to take their place.

"Fall back!" a grizzled sergeant shouted, his sword flashing as he parried a blow from a Lightbringer knight. "We can't hold the wall!"

Elania's eyes narrowed, her wings flaring out behind her as she leaped over a fallen soldier. She landed amid a group of Lightbringers, her light weapons spinning in a deadly arc.

The enemy fell before her, but more kept coming.

It was an endless wave of white armor and gleaming swords.

Musket fire from the flanks slammed into the Lightbringer ranks, but the bullets ricocheted off the heavy armor of the soldiers in the outer layers.

Elania's gaze flicked to the inner ranks of the enemy formation, where soldiers in lighter armor surged forward, scaling the walls with frightening speed.

A knot of dread formed in her stomach as she realized the truth: the Lightbringers had adapted their tactics, using their heavily armored troops as a shield to protect the more agile soldiers who could quickly overwhelm the defenders.

The City Watch fought bravely, their swords and spears clashing against the enemy's blades, but they were losing ground, forced back step by bloody step.

Her slaughter on the wall was killing plenty, but it wasn't stopping the attack. She needed to try something else.

Elania leaped atop the gate, her wings flaring out behind her as she landed on the battlements. She raised her sword high, the blade shimmering with divine light, a beacon of hope amidst the chaos of battle.

"Stand strong, Guards of the Watch!" Her voice rang out over the din of clashing steel and the cries of the wounded.

The guards rallied the best they could, but the fighting remained intense.

They weren't retreating, though.

Elania reached for her bracer, her fingers closing around a mana shard. She drained it completely, the power surging through her veins like liquid fire.

Her wings exploded outward, expanding into massive pillars of light that stretched at least twenty meters in height.

The Lightbringers below faltered, their eyes drawn to her.

Elania slotted Demonic Aura and activated it, pushing an incredible amount of **[Power]** into the skill.

She extended it outward, the energy visible to the naked eye as a dark wave that washed over the enemy formation like a tidal wave.

As it covered the formations, she could feel their holy magic that was providing their protective barrier.

Somewhere in the center of the formation, a priest or mage channeled the protection spell, drawing upon the power of an artifact. She wasn't exactly sure how she knew that, but as soon as she had the thought, it felt true.

Elania's Demonic Aura clashed against the holy barrier, the two forces battling for dominance. The air crackled with energy, the very stones of the ramparts trembling beneath her feet.

Elania pushed harder, pouring more **[Power]** into her Demonic Aura.

The holy barrier shuddered, cracks spreading across its surface like a spider's web. Elania's eyes narrowed; her focus laser-sharp as she targeted the weak point in the enemy's defenses.

With a last surge of **[Power]**, she shattered the barrier, the holy magic dissipating like mist in the wind.

"Fire!" Elania shouted.

A cannon barked on cue, the sound reverberating through the cavern.

The projectile slammed into the Lightbringer formation, tearing through armor and flesh alike. Bodies crumpled, blood splattering the pristine white shields.

Elania's eyes flashed, her wings flaring out behind her as she drew upon the **[Power]** surging through her veins.

There was an excellent **[Divinity]** based attack for this situation. She'd have to thank Elder Holt for showing her.

She raised her hand, a pillar of light coalescing above the enemy ranks.

A Word bubbled up from her throat on their own. “Condemnation.”

The Lightbringers looked up, their eyes widening in horror as they realized what was about to happen.

The pillar dropped, a blinding flash of divine energy engulfing the center of the formation. Soldiers disintegrated, their bodies turning to salt in an instant. Shields melted, armor vaporized, flesh and bone reduced to dust.

The legion of **[System]** messages that flooded her interface, she swiped away.

Half the enemy force was gone, obliterated in a single devastating blow.

A grim smile tugged at her lips.

“Sweep them from the walls!” she shouted.

The Guard obeyed.

# CHAPTER 55 - SCOUTING

Elania stood amidst the carnage, her divine form shimmering with an ethereal glow. The Lightbringers' retreat had left the battlefield strewn with the fallen, their broken bodies a testament to the ferocity of the combat.

She moved among the corpses, her hand outstretched, drawing forth the lingering essence of the slain. The power flowed into her, a rush of energy that filled her being to the brim.

**[Absorb the lingering Power from Lightbringer Soldier - Human - Lvl 154?]**

Elania willed the absorption, feeling the soldier's strength become her own.

**[You have gained a rank in Martial Bladesmanship and Mobility!]**

She grunted. That put **[Martial Bladesmanship]** to S+ rank. Not that she was going to have an advantage against a true master who had leveled it up naturally, but... if she needed to use the sword, she'd hopefully be capable.



She moved to the next fallen Lightbringer, repeating the process. With each absorption, she felt her power grow, her skills sharpening, her body adapting to handle the influx of energy.

**[Absorb the lingering Power from Lightbringer Marksman - Human - Lvl 161?]**

**[You have gained a rank in Archery!]**

Her bracers let off a diffuse glow and then turned to their normal, lustrous sheen as she finished topping them off.

The energy she had spent in the battle was fully replenished, her shards thrumming with barely contained power.

A thought crossed her mind as she surveyed the battlefield.

She had gained five new levels from the absorption, pushing her closer to the next perk checkpoint.

If she could reach it, she would gain another perk point to spend, further enhancing her abilities.

Elania's musings were interrupted by the sound of the City Watch guards moving among the fallen, gathering loot and equipment from the dead.

A series of shouts erupted as a fresh Guard unit arrived from inside the district to reinforce the gate.

Elania strode towards the fresh unit, her eyes narrowing as she recognized Captain Harrik at its head. The sight of him soured her mood, memories of their previous encounter at the City Watch Headquarters flickering through her mind.

"You're late for the fight," she said, her voice sharp with annoyance.

Harrik met her gaze, unflinching. "If I had rushed my unit, they would be tired and of no use."

Elania's eyes raked over the soldiers, noting their pristine appearance. Not a single one looked as if they had seen combat. She bit back a comment on that.

A sergeant, one of the few survivors of the defense, approached them. "Captain Harrik, Lady Elania," he said, nodding to each in turn.

"Report, soldier. Where is your lieutenant?" Captain Harrik said.

"Dead, sir. In the first wave," the sergeant replied.

He launched into a detailed account of the battle, his voice filled with awe as he described Elania's divine intervention. "Without Lady Elania, we would have been overrun."

Harrik's expression remained impassive, his reply noncommittal. "I see."

Before Elania could respond, a lightly armored messenger hurried towards them, his face ashen. "Captain, I bring grave news."

Harrik turned to the guard, his brow furrowing. "Speak."

"Magister Astolf is reported dead, slain by a Lightbringer Paladin."

A stunned silence fell over the group. Elania felt a chill run down her spine as the implications sank in.

Captain Harrik finally spoke, his voice trembling. "Only Magisters Keswick and Bannon remain alive. This bodes ill for the city."

Elania couldn't help but agree. With only two Magisters left, the city's defenses were weakened, its leadership in disarray.

Well, it had already been in disarray, but now there were only two of the five leaders left... and herself, she supposed. Three major combatants against the remaining Elders and who knew how many Paladins?

Elania turned to Captain Harrik, her voice firm. "I'm going to scout for other Lightbringer attacks. See what I can find out."

Harrik's eyes widened slightly, but he nodded. "Very well. Lady... Elania. I'm sure you know how to use your abilities better than the rest of us."

She nodded and then spread her wings, preparing to take flight.

"Good luck." Harrik's tone held a hint of relief, as if he was more than happy for her to leave.

Well, the feeling was mutual; she suspected. She didn't like him much either.

Without another word, she launched herself into the air, her wings carrying her swiftly to the light stone level of the city. The wind whipped through her hair as she weaved between the chained stones, using them as cover.

She scanned the streets below for signs of trouble.

There was plenty of it.

Elania angled her wings, soaring towards the nearest plume of smoke. As she drew closer, she could see the flash of weapons, hear the clash of steel on steel.

She descended, alighting on a rooftop overlooking the skirmish. A group of City Watch guards were engaged with a squad of Lightbringers, the two sides trading blows in a fierce melee. They were inside the Conclave district.

Elania watched for a moment, assessing the situation. The guards were holding their own, but the Lightbringers had the advantage of numbers.

She considered intervening, but hesitated. Her mission was to gather information, not engage in every battle she came across.

Still, the sight of the guards struggling against the Lightbringers tugged at her conscience. She had the power to help, to turn the tide of the battle.

Plus, she could earn some levels.

A single undetected strafing run, with her dropping explosive light spears on the Lightbringers from behind, ended the fight.

Without stopping to land or talk, she continued on.

As she followed the circle around the Noble district, she found smoke billowing from the other gates leading out of the noble district, confirming her suspicions.

The Lightbringers had launched a coordinated attack, overwhelming the city's defenses.

If they had taken the three other gates, they now had free access to the Slums, Conclave District, and Syndicate District. Essentially the entire North, East, and South sides of the city.

She spotted a particularly fierce battle at the causeway connecting the noble district to the Conclave district. The Lightbringers had breached the defenses, their forces pouring through the gap like a relentless tide.

Elania descended, alighting on a nearby rooftop for a better view and hopefully avoid the notice circling overhead would bring.

The Guard garrison at the gate fought valiantly, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. Monks from within the Conclave district had weakened their position, allowing the Lightbringers to strike with devastating effect.

"Fall back! Fall back to the secondary defenses!" a guard captain shouted, his voice hoarse with desperation.

But it was too late. The Lightbringers surged forward, their weapons flashing in the dim light of the cavern.

They cut down the retreating guards, their screams echoing off the stone buildings.

Elania gritted her teeth, her hands clenching into fists. She wanted to intervene, to unleash her divine power upon the Lightbringers.

But she knew she couldn't be everywhere at once. The city was under attack from multiple fronts, and she had to prioritize.

She took to the air once more, turning toward the City Watch fortress. She really should head to meet with Magister Bannon and then report to Keswick everything she had learned and seen.

But...

She glanced over her shoulder.

There were a lot of Lightbringer targets in the open.

Elania wheeled around, her eyes scanning the battlefield below. She spotted a dense formation of Lightbringers, their shields locked together in a tortoise formation.

Her lips curled into a snarl as she summoned her **[Power]**, infusing it into a barrage of light bombs.

She hurled the bombs with precision, guiding them with her will. The explosions rocked the Lightbringers' formation, but their shields held firm.

Only one soldier fell, his body mangled by the blast.

**[You have slain Lightbringer Soldier - Human - Lvl 142]**

**[You have lost 87 Karma.]**

Getting close enough to absorb his essence wasn't going to be easy, so she left the body for his fellows.

She turned her attention to the monks, their robes fluttering as they scattered across the battlefield.

She needed the **[Divinity]** from the monks, though.

Her wings folded, and she dive bombed them.

Light bombs and explosive spears found their marks, detonating in brilliant flashes of divine energy.

**[You have slain Conclave Monk - Human - Lvl 138]**

**[You have lost 76 Karma.]**

**[You have slain Conclave Monk - Human - Lvl 141]**

**[You have lost 82 Karma.]**

**[You have gained multiple levels!]**

At the last second, she expanded her wing surface and flared them, bringing her dive to a halt just above the ground and low enough for her fingers to scarp the blood pools of viscera and gore the explosions had created.

The mess rapidly disappeared into a shower of glowing gold that chased after her.

She pulled back up into the air to find another group to repeat the process.

It wasn't long before she lost herself in the battle's rhythm, her divine form a whirlwind of destruction.

Time seemed to blur, the minutes stretching into an indistinct haze.

The only constants were the explosions, the screams, and the steady flow of power into her being.

Finally, her **[Enhanced Mana Sense]** spotted an Elder.

He glowed against the background, his mana denser and very obvious as he jumped over buildings moving in her direction.

She didn't bother to finish the group she was about to attack. Instead, she turned and gained altitude, easily outpacing the Elder in the sky and keeping far away.

A smile appeared on her face. She could almost feel the annoyance created by her retreat.

Nothing interrupted her high-altitude flight.

The central district remained secure, but enemy forces surged towards the outer Magistracy walls from the Slums and Artisan District.

The number of buildings blocked any hope of a clear line of fire, and there was little the defenders could do.

She noticed the Watch Fortress to the south faced a similar problem.

Elania banked sharply, her wings cutting through the air as she retreated to the Magistracy Tower. Magister Keswick needed to be informed of the dire situation immediately.

Below, the Magistracy guards scrambled to fortify their positions, barricading streets outside the walls and hauling cannons onto defensive towers.

The inner wall of the Magistracy loomed ahead, a formidable barrier bristling with even heavier fortifications.

The tower itself boasted an array of weapon emplacements, artifice cannons filling the slots like the teeth of a gaping maw. More importantly, the value of having the area around the tower free of obstruction became apparent.

Maybe whoever had built it had been thinking ahead.

She alighted on one of the emplacements, her sudden appearance startling the guard stationed there. He whirled around, hand instinctively reaching for his weapon before recognition dawned on his face.

Elania waved off an apology. "I must speak with Magister Keswick immediately. The enemy's siege on the City Guard fortress is intensifying, and I fear they may not hold much longer without reinforcements."

The guard nodded, his face paling at the news.

# CHAPTER 56

## - ARTIFICING

## AND REPORTS

Yolani surveyed the workshop, her eyes assessing the progress of each worker as they diligently crafted firearms.

The air hummed with focused energy, punctuated by the rhythmic sounds of metal being shaped and the occasional crackle of arcane energy.

She moved between the workstations, her steps purposeful and assured. At one bench, a young apprentice struggled to align the barrel of a musket.

Yolani paused, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Ease up on the pressure,” she advised, her voice calm and encouraging. “Let the wand guide the metal. Don’t force it.”

The apprentice nodded, his brow furrowed in concentration as he adjusted his technique. Yolani watched approvingly as the barrel began to take shape under his renewed efforts.



In the corner, a group of workers toiled over the preparation of charcoal and sulfur, their faces streaked with sweat and grime.

Yolani approached them, inspecting the quality of the powders. “Excellent work,” she praised, scooping a handful of the fine black powder, and letting it sift through her fingers. “We’ll need more charcoal.”

Satisfied with the progress, Yolani returned to her personal workbench.

She laid out an array of tooling wands, each one meticulously crafted for a specific purpose. The wands gleamed in the workshop’s light, their intricate runes pulsing with latent power.

She selected a musket from the rack, its wooden stock smooth and worn from use.

With practiced movements, Yolani began to disassemble the weapon, her hands working deftly as she separated the barrel, lock, and stock.

Each piece was laid out before her, ready for inspection and refinement.

Yolani reached for the cutting wand, its tip glowing with a precise, blue light.

She held it aloft, poised to begin the delicate process of taking the musket apart.

Her mind raced with ideas for improvements as the original work came out, piece by piece.

Yolani’s fingers danced over the disassembled musket parts, her eyes scrutinizing every surface for imperfections.

She picked up the barrel, running a thumb along its length, feeling for any irregularities. Satisfied, she set it aside and turned her attention to the blank chunk of steel that would become the modified rifle’s innards.

Taking it in hand, Yolani scrutinized it, its surface gleaming under the workshop's light.

She hefted the chunk in her palm, gauging its weight and density.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she envisioned the potential within the raw material.

Yolani selected a carving wand, its tip glowing with a soft, amber light. Setting her goggles down over her eyes, she got to work.

Wand met metal, and she focused her intent as she began to shape the material.

Her artifice tool hummed as it sliced through the metal like butter, leaving behind smooth, precise cuts.

Sparks flew as Yolani worked, the metal taking form under her skilled manipulations.

She carved out the rough shapes of the components she needed; each one perfectly sized to fit the musket's new design. The air filled with the acrid scent of heated metal and the crackling of arcane energy.

When the cutting was down, she finished the components with a polishing. Then she turned her attention to the mana shard that would be the central piece for the weapon for Elania to dump her **[Power]** into.

Holding it up to the light, Yolani admired its prismatic brilliance. It was higher quality than the last one she had used and would allow her to increase the magazine capacity and muzzle velocity for Elania.

Considering what they were up against, that was definitely necessary, even if she had to reinforce the barrel with thicker bands. It wasn't like the extra weight was going to bother Elania, either.

The crystal thrummed with latent energy as she carefully set the shard into the custom-designed housing, ensuring it was securely nestled within the intricately carved metal.

With a steady hand, Yolani reached for her etching wand.

Its tip glowed with a soft, blue light as she brought it to the surface of the housing.

Delicate runes began to take shape under her precise movements, each one imbued with arcane power.

The runes pulsed in sync with the mana shard, forming a complex network of energy pathways.

Yolani's brow furrowed in concentration as she worked, her eyes focused on the intricate details of the housing. She carefully aligned the mana shard with the musket's firing mechanism, ensuring a seamless connection between the arcane power source and the weapon's internal components.

Next, Yolani turned her attention to the musket's barrel.

She selected a reinforced alloy, and then a melding wand. The original barrel was of a lesser material, but she'd combine the two and they would take on the characteristics she wanted.

Shaping the metal was a joy, but melding it was a science. If she got the ratio wrong, there was every chance that barrel would simply fracture or explode on first use.

Thankfully, she didn't get it wrong.

She cooled the metal with another wand without affecting the temper and then began to etch patterns on the inside of the barrel that would direct and amplify the velocity of the projectile while applying the spin that Elania had described for flight stabilization.

That was notoriously difficult, and Yolani grunted as she nearly missed a rune. Not being able to see anything until the etching glowed to **[Mana Sight]** while working on the inside of the barrel was a real pain.

She didn't let the difficulty distract her from her principal goal.

She fitted the mana shard housing into the musket's stock, aligning it with the firing mechanism and barrel. The components clicked into place, forming a seamless and elegant design.

With a last flourish of her wand, Yolani activated the mana shard.

The crystal pulsed with a brilliant light, its energy flowing through the intricate network of runes and channels.

The musket hummed with power, ready to unleash its arcane might upon the battlefield.

Yolani glanced at the clock, her eyes widening as she realized hours had passed. The workshop buzzed with activity; the workers were still engrossed in their tasks.

Her muscles protested from the prolonged focus as she stretched. The magazines and oddly shaped projectiles still needed to be made.

She made her way to the corner of the room, dedicated to resting. There was a barrel of fresh water and some old biscuits. She skipped those with a wary look and took a cup of cool water, the liquid pleasantly soothing.

On the opposite side of the workshop, the freight elevator came to a stop, its arrival announced by a loud clang.

A rough-looking man emerged, pushing a cart laden with rocks. His face twisted into a scowl.

"Who ordered me to dig up these rocks from my Ralfot Farm?" he demanded, his voice gruff and irritated.

Yolani's heart leaped with excitement. "That's me!"

She hurried to the cart, her eyes eagerly examining the rocks.

A pungent odor assaulted her nostrils, and she noticed traces of manure clinging to the stones.

Wrinkling her nose, Yolani gingerly picked up a rock. She brought it close to her face, scrutinizing its surface.

Her mind raced, comparing its characteristics to the descriptions Elania had provided.

A grin spread across her face. “This is it,” she whispered, her voice tinged with triumph. She was almost certain that it was the saltpeter that Elania had described.

She just needed to do a few more tests...

And then they could start trying to find the correct ratio of the three key ingredients.

Saltpeter, charcoal, and sulfur.

Gunpowder.

\*\*\*

Elania strode through the Magistracy halls, her wings pulsing with the radiant glow of her replenished **[Divinity]**. Stares followed her every step, a mixture of awe and apprehension etched on the faces of those she passed.

She reached Keswick’s office and was promptly ushered inside by a secretary. The Magister sat at her desk; her expression inscrutable as Elania entered.

“The Central district gate to the Noble district holds,” Elania said, her voice steady despite the weight of her words. “I fought at the gate myself.”

“Finally, some good news,” Keswick muttered.

Elania frowned. “The Lightbringer soldiers, they don’t provide **[Divinity]** like the monks do.”

Keswick’s gaze flicked to Elania’s wings, noting their luminous state. “Yet your wings are glowing.”

Elania nodded. “The battle at the Conclave gate. Monks attacked from within while Lightbringers assaulted from outside. They control the causeway there now.”

She paused, her eyes meeting Keswick's. "I could have destroyed the causeway entirely, but I wanted to consult with you first before taking such drastic action."

A flicker of approval crossed Keswick's features. "A wise decision. It's a measure we may be forced to take, and soon."

"There's more," Elania continued. "Before the Elder drove me back, I observed Lightbringers and Monks working together from both sides to repair a bridge to the Conclave fortress."

Her words hung heavy in the air. "If they succeed, the Conclave will have an even stronger foothold in the south."

Keswick rose from her desk, gesturing for Elania to follow. "Come, let me show you something."

She led Elania to a large table dominated by a detailed map of the city. The districts were clearly delineated, each with its own unique markings and symbols.

Keswick traced a finger along the map. "As you can see, the City Watch and Magistry are both connected this wall." She tapped a line that ran between two circular walls enclosing their respective districts. "The City Watch Headquarters and Magistry Tower both serve as fortresses themselves."

Elania leaned in, studying the layout. Her gaze settled on a section of the wall that looked different from the rest. "There," she pointed, "the seraph's laser swept through there."

Keswick nodded grimly. "It destroyed a section of the wall between our districts."

"I saw it during the battle," Elania confirmed, her wings twitching at the memory. "The damage was extensive."

"And it's left us vulnerable," Keswick sighed, her fingers drumming against the table. "We need to prioritize repairs and reinforcements

in that area. Restore the line of supply. It's taking too long for me to receive and send word to Magister Bannon."

"Isn't that more to do with the way stones being disrupted and losing the Guards' telepathy?" Elania asked.

Keswick nodded. "But not being able to send reliable messengers back and forth makes it even worse."

Elania's eyes scanned the map, taking in the positions of their forces and those of the enemy. "The Lightbringers and Monks will probably target that weakness."

"Agreed," Keswick said, her brow furrowed in thought. "We'll need to deploy additional troops and perhaps have you assist there."

"I can help with that," Elania offered, straightening up.

Keswick's lips curved into a smile. "I had a feeling you would say that." She rolled up the map, her gaze meeting Elania's.

Drinks and cookies arrived, and they spent the next hour discussing the specifics of the battles that Elania had been in. Keswick was very impressed with the way she had demolished the tortoise formation's barrier.

The aerial bombing was also commented on, and Keswick wondered if there was a way for her to improve the efficiency of those attacks.

Elania drew a blank. Maybe if they made gunpowder bombs? But those would be much too heavy for her to carry. Utilizing her **[Power]** would probably continue to be the most effective method of explosive delivery.

Elania studied the map, her brow furrowed. "What's the situation in the Slums?"

Keswick's lips pressed into a thin line. "We don't know." She tapped the map, her nail clicking against the parchment. "We pulled all our units stationed along the wall with it to defend other districts."

“So the enemy could be making significant gains there,” Elania mused, her wings twitching with unease.

“It’s a distinct possibility.” Keswick sighed, rubbing her temples. “Then again, we hoped the locals would slow them down.”

There was possibly some truth to that. The slums were a rough place, and the Ironfist Mercenary Company wasn’t the only para-military group operating there. But she doubted they would slow down the organized Lightbringers or the monks much.

Most people would just keep their heads down, hoping to wait for the conflict to blow over.

It wasn’t like the Magistry had done much to engender any loyalty from them.

Elania’s gaze drifted to the markers representing their own forces. The pieces seemed woefully inadequate compared to the sea of enemy tokens. “We’re outnumbered,” she breathed, a thread of despair weaving through her words.

Keswick nodded grimly. “We’ve lost three Magisters already.” She looked up at Elania, her eyes haunted. “Magister-level combatants, gone. Just like that.”

“And we do not know how many Paladins the Lightbringers have in reserve,” Elania finished the thought, her stomach twisting.

“Elders, Paladins, who knows what else they’ve brought to bear.” Keswick’s fingers curled into fists on the table.

Elania’s mind raced, trying to find a glimmer of hope in the bleak picture before them. “What about reinforcements? Allies from other cities?”

Keswick shook her head.

Elania’s wings drooped, the weight of their situation bearing down on her. She looked at the map again, desperately searching for something, anything, they could use to their advantage.



But the cold, hard truth stared back at her from the parchment.

They were losing ground, and fast.

The enemy's advance seemed inexorable, a tide of destruction sweeping over the city.

Keswick reached out, placing a hand on Elania's arm. The Magister must have seen the despair on her face. "We're not done yet," she said, her voice low but fierce. "We'll fight with everything we have. To the last breath."

Elania grunted. That might have been supposed to comfort her, but...

She really didn't feel any loyalty to the city.

She just wanted Yolani to be safe. For both of them to be safe.

Keswick's eyes narrowed as she traced a finger along the map. "Here's what we're going to do," she said, her voice crisp with authority. "Elania, I need you to make an assault on the monks in the Artisan District."

Elania's wings flickered, the prospect of battle sending a thrill through her veins. That... feeling wasn't entirely comforting when she realized how fast it had changed her mood.

"Aim for the ones between the Magistracy and City Watch district," Keswick continued, "while you do that, make your way along the wall towards the City Guard. Try to ease the pressure there so we can attempt to reestablish contact."

She tapped a spot on the map, her nail clicking against the parchment. "Contacting Magister Bannon is a priority. If that proves impossible, return here, and we'll devise a new plan to send reinforcements and relieve the Guard."

Elania nodded, her jaw set with determination. "Understood."

She turned to leave, but a thought pulled her back. "I need to see Yolani before I go."

Keswick's expression softened, understanding in her eyes. "Of course. But remember, Elania, you're free to manage your time. But remember, you need to be back soon to recharge the engine."

The weight of that responsibility settled on Elania's shoulders, but she squared them, ready to bear the burden.

With a final nod to Keswick, Elania strode out of the room, her wings pulsing with barely contained energy.

She had a mission.

If things were going to turn around, she couldn't fail.

# CHAPTER 57

## - ARMAMENTS AND CORNED POWDER

Elania strode into the workshop, her wings tucked tight against her back. The familiar scent of metal and oil filled her nostrils. That was a comforting contrast to the smoke and blood that had clung to the air on the battlefield.

Yolani looked up from her workbench, a smile brightening her soot-streaked face. “Elania! You’re back.”

“Yep, but not for long,” Elania said, her eyes softening as they met Yolani’s.

The other girl’s expression turned serious, and she nodded before reaching under the bench and pulling out a sleek silver and black rifle. “I finished it.”

Elania's eyes widened. The weapon was a work of art, the metal gleaming with a deadly sheen. Intricate runes etched along the barrel pulsed with a faint blue light.

She took the rifle reverently, marveling at the craftsmanship. "Yolani, this is... incredible."

Pride shone in Yolani's eyes. "I think it's my best work yet. And look." She pointed to the barrel. "I've reinforced the entire thing, but the barrel especially. It should be able to handle your **[Power]** pressure much better so the velocity and rate of fire will be jumping up correspondingly."

Elania's fingers traced the side of the weapon. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

Yolani's hand found hers, squeezing gently. "Just make sure you come back to me."

Elania's breath hitched. Those words were almost like a punch to the stomach.

Elania nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Yolani was just being nice. She was her friend, and they were roommates. That's all it was.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Yolani turned back to her workbench, gesturing to a series of small piles of powder. "The saltpeter arrived. I've been working on finding the right ratio for the gunpowder."

Elania leaned in, studying the piles. She wracked her brain, trying to remember the formula.

"I'm sorry," she said finally, frustration coloring her tone. "I still can't remember the exact proportions."

Yolani waved a hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it. We'll figure it out. Trial and error, right?"

"There are some other things I remembered, but... I'm not exactly an expert. I just remember a bit from history class. I did a report on it,

but it was years ago in high school,” Elania said hesitantly. The truth was, she was afraid of giving bad information.

Yolani nodded encouragingly. “Yes?”

Elania took a deep breath. “Okay, so from what I remember, there was this process called corning powder. It involved mixing the ingredients wet instead of dry.”

Yolani’s eyes widened. “Wet? Wouldn’t that make it not work?”

“Not exactly. See, mixing it dry caused a lot of problems. The dust could ignite spontaneously, and the ingredients would separate if vibrated.” Elania picked up a pinch of the saltpeter, letting it fall through her fingers. “Mixing it wet made it safer and more consistent.”

Yolani leaned forward, her elbows on the workbench. “Huh. So how did they do it?”

“They would grind the charcoal and sulfur together in one mortar, and the saltpeter in another. Then they’d combine them and grind them together again.” Elania’s brow furrowed as she tried to recall the details. “This made sure the particle sizes were similar, which helped with mixing.”

Yolani nodded, her eyes bright with understanding. “And then?”

“They pressed the mixture into sheets or cakes and dried it. After that, they used stamp mills with big wooden hammers to break the sheets into grains.” Elania held up her thumb and forefinger, about an inch apart. “The biggest grains were about the size of a corn kernel. That’s why they called it corned powder.”

“Clever.” Yolani grinned. “What did they do with the grains that were too big or too small?”

“They just recycled them back into the wet mix to make more powder.” Elania shrugged, a wry smile tugging at her lips. “Waste not, want not, right?”

Yolani chuckled. “Right.”

Elania's smile faded. "But, Yolani, this is all probably way beyond what we can do right now. I mean, we don't have stamp mills or mortars or any of that stuff."

Yolani reached out, her hand resting on Elania's arm. "Hey, it's okay. This is still really helpful. Even if we can't do it exactly the same way, it gives me a pretty good idea of the problems we might have. We can work those considerations into whatever we plan."

Elania met Yolani's gaze, the warmth in those green eyes easing the knot of worry in her chest. "You're right. We'll figure it out."

Yolani grinned. "Of course we will. We make a pretty good team, don't you think?"

The mirth slowly died as Elania realized she needed to detail everything she had seen while scouting.

Elania's mood turned grim as she recounted everything. The Light-bringers' relentless assault, the monks' attacks in the rear, the city's crumbling defenses - each detail painted a bleaker picture.

Yolani listened intently, her brows furrowed. "What about Henri? Any news?"

Elania shook her head. "I didn't see him. But my next mission is to secure the route to the City Watch and meet with Magister Bannon. I'll do my best to find out."

Yolani nodded solemnly, then her jaw set, determination hardening her gaze. "Alright. I'll keep working on the weapons. We need every advantage we can get."

Elania unclasped her bracer, the full mana shards glinting in the workshop's light. She held them out.

Yolani raised an eyebrow. "Elania, what...?"

"Take them. I know you all can use the full shards. You've probably been using a lot of [Power] making things?" Elania said.

Yolani hesitated, then reached out, her fingers brushing Elania's palm as she took the shards. "But what will you use?"

"I was hoping you could give me the low-power ones from the workshop. I'll have plenty of opportunities to recharge them during the fighting after all," Elania replied.

Yolani nodded slowly, understanding dawning on her face.

She moved to a shelf, rummaging through the various crystals and shards until she found what she was looking for. Then she carefully extracted the mana shards from Elania's bracer and replaced them with the empty ones.

"These aren't as potent as the ones you had before, but they are close enough. I really should have thought of this and made them more easily swappable. Maybe for the next version," Yolani said.

Elania slid the now **[Power]** empty bracer onto her forearm. The half dozen empty shards called out to her slightly, desiring to be filled. Elania grunted. "Do you have more drained shards? Let's replace five on the other one as well. I only really need one charged one before I go out."

Yolani nodded, and the swap only took another five minutes. When Elania slid that bracer back on, she nodded. "Perfect."

Yolani nodded. "Just be careful, you won't have as much **[Power]** to use right away..."

"One more thing." Elania's gaze drifted to a crate in the corner. "Could I get a bag of the rifle shock crystals?"

Yolani raised an eyebrow, then went and fetched a small pouch. "What are you going to do with them?" she asked while handing them over.

Elania's eyes glinted with mischief as she hefted the pouch. "I can overload these crystals with my **[Power]**, make them detonate on impact. Like miniature bombs."

Yolani's brows shot up. "Won't that consume the crystals? Seems wasteful."

"True, but I have a hunch." Elania's fingers danced over the pouch. "The Lightbringers and monks, they've been using [**Divinity**] barriers against me."

Understanding dawned on Yolani's face. "But the shock crystals are essence neutral. They might slip right through those defenses."

Elania grinned, the expression almost feral. "Exactly. They seem to have to be specific with what they block. [**Divinity**], cannonball, or musket... doing all three at the same time doesn't seem to be easy for them. Adding yet another to the mix... something might get through."

Yolani chuckled, shaking her head. "You're mad, you know that?"

"All the best people are," Elania quipped, slipping the pouch into her pocket.

A comfortable silence settled between them, the weight of the impending battle pressing down. Elania could see the worry in Yolani's eyes.

She reached out to squeeze Yolani's hand. "Hey, I'll be back before you know it. Can't leave you to have all the fun here without me."

Yolani squeezed back, a shaky laugh escaping her. "You better. I don't want to have to come out there and drag you back myself."

She pulled her friend into a tight hug.

"I'll come back to you," she whispered, remembering what Yolani had said earlier. "I promise."

Yolani's arms tightened around her, a silent acknowledgment.

They pulled apart reluctantly; the moment stretching between them. Then Elania squared her shoulders, the mantle of the warrior settling over her once more.

"Time to go blow some things up," she said, a fierce grin spreading across her face.



Yolani matched her smile, the fire of determination burning in her eyes. “Give ‘em hell.”

With a final nod, Elania turned and strode out of the workshop, the rifle slung across her back and the pouch of crystals a reassuring weight at her side.

She had a job to do.

# CHAPTER 58

## - SUDDEN STRIKES AND REUNIONS

Elania plummeted from the cavern's ceiling, her golden wings tucked tight against her body. The wind whistled past her ears, a deafening roar that drowned out the distant sounds of battle.

Below, a group of monks hurried through the rubble-strewn streets, their robes billowing in the acrid breeze. They moved with purpose, unaware of the death that hurtled towards them.

Elania's lips curled into a snarl as she pull her light spears into reality. With a flick of her wrist, she sent them spinning towards the ground, their tips glowing with divine energy.

The spears struck the monks, exploding in a burst of blinding light. Screams of agony filled the air as the monks were engulfed in **[Divinity]** hued flame.

Elania didn't pause to admire her handiwork. There were still several monks that had managed to protect themselves.

She snapped her wings open, the sudden drag slowing her descent. As her feet touched the ground, she lunged forward, her hands morphing into wickedly sharp claws.

The surviving monks didn't stand a chance.

Elania tore through them like a whirlwind, her claws rending flesh and bone with equal ease. Blood splattered her face, warm and sticky, but she paid it no heed other than to take their spilled essence for herself.

As the last monk fell, Elania straightened, her chest heaving. She could feel the **[Divinity]** flowing into her, a heady rush of power that made her nerves sing.

This was the tenth group she had ambushed, and yet her strength showed no signs of waning. If anything, she felt more alive than ever, her **[Power]** stretching to new heights with each kill.

Part of that was that she was purposefully holding onto more **[Power]** in herself instead of releasing it to her mana shards. That effectively turned her body and mind into a furnace, one that was constantly damaging and repairing itself.

Reforging her **[Power]** capacity to be even higher in the process.

Whenever the excess grew too much to bear, she shunted it off into one of her bracers.

**[Power: 2144/1785]**

It was certainly working.

Her hand brushed against the pouch of shock crystals at her belt, still unused. The normal attacks had proven sufficient thus far, and she saw no need to show the possible new weapon unless it was critical. Keeping it in reserve as a surprise seemed ideal.

The same went for the rifle slung across her back. Even if it only used **[Power]** for propellant, ammunition was limited. Best to save it for when she needed some overwhelming physical ranged firepower.

Elania flexed her wings, the golden light illuminating the surrounding devastation. With a powerful beat, she launched herself back into the air, the rush of wind drowning out the distant screams and explosions.

Her **[Presence Concealment]** kept her hidden from enemy eyes, turning her into a silent bird of prey. She'd avoided striking the same area more than two times in a row, to prevent any of the enemy's remaining Elders or worse from pinning her down and forcing her to retreat.

She scanned the city below, taking in the burning buildings and crumbling walls.

Soldiers moved through the streets like ants, their armor glinting in the flickering light of the fires. Elania's lips curled into a predatory grin.

More prey for the hunt.

Before Elania could line up a new target, a sudden heat suffused the air.

She turned her gaze towards the distant Conclave Fortress, her eyes widening at what she saw.

The Seraph had returned, hovering near the chasm that surrounded the Conclave fortress.

Chains encircled its ankles and wrists, glinting in the eerie light that emanated from its form.

Its hood obscured its face, but Elania could sense the power that radiated from it, a palpable force that made the air crackle with energy.

Red light began to build within the seraph, a swirling vortex of power that grew brighter with each passing second. Elania's heart raced as she realized what was about to happen.

The Seraph unleashed its cataclysmic laser, sweeping it across the city below. Buildings crumbled and streets shattered, reduced to rubble in an instant.

Elania watched as the laser carved a path of destruction through the heart of the city, leaving nothing but devastation in its wake.

The laser stopped abruptly, its focus shifting to the Magistry tower. Yolani was in that tower.

Elania held her breath.

A golden dome shimmered into existence around the tower, a shield that seemed to absorb the laser's energy. The dome pulsed with light, growing brighter until it was a blinding beacon.

Elania covered her eyes with the back of her hand.

The shield held firm against the seraph's assault.

The seraph's laser eventually dissipated, its energy spent.

The golden dome flickered and faded, revealing the Magistry tower unscathed beneath its protection.

Elania let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

Hovering in the air, she realized the fighting had gone silent. She wasn't the only one that had been shocked by the display. She surveyed the destruction below without letting her emotions play into it.

Smoke billowed from the shattered buildings, obscuring the streets in a haze of gray. There were great splotches throughout the city now, where fighting and the laser had taken their toll. Maybe even half the city had been demolished.

She had no idea how many people had just died... had died so far.

A flicker of movement caught her eye, and she watched as the seraph disappeared into the distance, its chains glinting in the fading light. Elania frowned, her mind racing with possibilities.

“Two days,” she muttered to herself, remembering the time between the first and second attacks. “That might be how long they take to use it again.”

She shook her head, pushing the thought aside. There wasn’t really enough to base her theory on, at least not enough to be sure.

Elania banked hard, her wings slicing through the air as she turned towards the City Watch fortress. She still needed to contact Magister Bannon and search for Henri.

Below, at multiple points, the Lightbringers and monks were assaulting the city wall situated between the Magistry and City Watch.

Her jaw clenched as she spotted a group scaling the wall, their ladders locked into the stone. She slowed and then turned toward the attack, summoning a light spear.

There was no time to admire the impact, and she was already moving on to her next target.

Another light spear, another explosion.

The guards on the walls cheered as they saw her. That was ultimately short-lived as they prepared for another attack, or moved to assist allies further down the wall that were still engaged.

She could see the City Watch fortress in the distance. It was under heavy assault, with ladders propped against its walls and arrows raining down on the defenders.

Cannon fire and musket shots rang out as the guards tried to hold back the tide, but Elania could see they were outnumbered.

She hesitated.

Keswick’s words echoed in her mind. If she couldn’t restore the communication lines, she was supposed to return.

Elania gritted her teeth, frustration welling up inside her. She wanted to keep fighting.

There had also been the Seraph attack. That had likely drained the engine. Yolani was in the tower, and she needed to go back.

With a last glance at the City Watch fortress, Elania turned back towards the Magistracy tower. She flew low over the wall, her light spears striking down any enemies she encountered.

Elania soared through the shattered window of the Magistracy tower, her wings folding gracefully as she landed on the polished marble floor. It took her two circles of the tower before she finally spotted the very specific landing place that led to the Magister's office.

The glow of her golden aura illuminated the room, casting long shadows across the walls.

When she landed and made her way inside, Keswick was already there, probably having spotted her return.

The Magister did not appear happy. "Where have you been? I expected you back sooner."

Elania met her gaze evenly. "I was attempting to reach the City Watch, as you well know."

"And you couldn't spare a moment to report back?" Keswick's voice was sharp, but Elania could see the fear lurking behind her anger.

"I'm here now." Elania stepped forward, her boots clicking against the floor. "What's the status of the Celestial Engine?"

Keswick's shoulders slumped, the fight draining out of her. She rubbed her temples, her fingers trembling slightly. "The seraph's attack stressed it heavily. We're running out of time."

Elania watched as Keswick turned and began to pace the room, her robes swishing with each step.

The Magister halted and fixed Elania with a piercing stare. "Do you have enough essence, or do we need to call for the prisoners?"

Elania's stomach churned at the thought. She shook her head vehemently. "I'm full. There's no need."

Keswick studied her for a long moment, her lips pressed into a thin line. Finally, she let out a heavy sigh. "I suppose I'll have to take your word for it."

Elania clamped down on a retort. Damned straight she would.

She followed Keswick through the winding corridors of the Magistracy tower. Everyone else was busy working in the various chambers, and the more hectic back and forth were above or below them.

The Celestial Engine level was eerily quiet, except for a low hum she could feel through the walls as they got closer to the vault entry doors.

It was the first time going down to the Celestial Engine control room without Yolani.

It felt like her friend should be there, but she didn't want to insist on bothering her.

They rode the elevator down without speaking, although the background noise of the Engine spinning and doing its 'celestial things,' continued.

Keswick took her place at the monitoring point, her fingers flying over the controls with practiced ease.

Elania stepped up to the altar, the pedestal looming before her like a silent sentinel. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for what was to come.

She'd done this before, more than once. This time, she'd manage it again. No sweat.

Her hand touched the cool surface of the pedestal, and the world fell away.

The familiar sensation of the engine's essence enveloped her, a swirling vortex of energy. The white space with her essences visualized for her slowly faded into existence, replacing everything else.



It was simple enough to attach the Engine's siphon hose and begin the transfer. Everything was normal.

Until it wasn't. A familiar aura that made Elania's heart skip a beat.

**[Greetings, Elania.]**

The voice echoed through her mind, a resonant tone that sent shivers down her spine. She knew that voice.

Eziel.

She turned and the seraph-turned-sword hovered before her, its now golden blade gleaming in the stark white of the essence space. Elania stared at it in shock, her mind reeling.

"How?" she whispered, her voice trembling. "How are you here?"

**[Some things are harder to digest than others. I have been waiting for you to return.]**

"What do you want?"

# CHAPTER 59 - ANCIENT REVERBERATIONS

Eziel didn't answer Elania's question. Instead, reality blurred and she was suddenly plunged... somewhere else.

She landed with a gentle thump in a patch of mud.

One thing became quickly apparent. All around her was a blasted battlefield. The ground beneath her feet had been churned by the trampling of countless soldiers.

The sky above was a roiling mass of dark clouds, shot through with flashes of lightning that illuminated the scene in stark relief.

When she flicked her wings and stood back up, they were anything but ethereal. Pristine white feathers greeted her, physical ones. Despite the trip into the mud coating the rest of her, those were untouched.

Filth couldn't adhere to the wings of an Angel, she realized. Was that what she was here?

She realized the skies were filled with hovering combatants she had missed earlier. Elania jumped, and she made her wings work to propel her upward, something she had been gaining proficiency in.

Before her, two armies faced each other across the torn earth.

On one side, a host of humans, beast people, and lesser angels like her stood or hovered in formation, their weapons gleaming in the fitful light. They were a ragtag bunch, clad in mismatched armor and wielding an assortment of swords, spears, and bows. Others held staves or wands that bore the signs of magic.

The other side drew Elania's attention more intensely.

A horde of twisted creatures seethed and writhed, their bodies a nightmarish fusion of flesh and metal. Some were vaguely humanoid, with too many limbs and gaping maws filled with jagged teeth.

Others were little more than amorphous blobs of pulsating flesh, studded with glowing eyes and lashing tentacles.

Looking over her shoulder, there was a figure that dwarfed them all, drifting forward behind the rag-tag army.

It was Eziel, in his true form. Not a sword. A high-rank seraph.

How she knew that, she did not know. But he was their leader.

Her leader?

He towered over the battlefield like a colossus. His wings unfurled behind him, each feather a blade of shimmering light. His armor was solid gold that glowed a radiance that hurt to look upon, and in his hands he held a sword that burned with holy fire.

Elania stared up at him in awe, her heart pounding in her chest.

She had seen Eziel before, but only as a sword.

A cry went up from the human army, and Elania turned to see them surging forward, their weapons raised high. The beast people let out howls of fury as they charged, their claws and fangs bared.

And then the two sides collided in a clash of steel and flesh. The air was filled with the screams of the dying and the roars of the monstrous creatures as they tore into each other with savage abandon.

A compulsion suddenly settled on Elania.

She wasn't just a spectator.

She needed to participate.

In the air, angels under the command of Eziel clashed with black winged creatures. More importantly, her role wasn't just fighting—she was one of the arch-seraph's lieutenants.

Elania rallied her wing of angels, her voice ringing out over the din of battle. "With me, brothers and sisters! Let us drive these abominations back to the abyss!"

Dichotomy struck her instantly. That wasn't something she'd say, was it? Reality nearly splintered before she regained her composure.

There was no time to hesitate.

They surged forward as one, their weapons glowing with holy light. Elania led the charge, her pearl sword flashing as she clove through the twisted flesh of a winged beast. It screeched in agony, black ichor spurting from the wound before it plummeted from the sky.

All around her, the other angels fought with equal ferocity. One wielded a spear of shimmering silver, impaling a monster through its gaping maw. Another loosed arrows of pure energy from a bow of living wood, each one finding its mark in the heart of an enemy.

Lightning crackled from Elania's fingertips, arcing through the horde of creatures and leaving smoking husks in its wake.

Below, Eziel strode through the enemy ranks like a god of war. His sword cleaved great swaths through the monsters, each swing generating shockwaves that sent them flying. The very ground shook with the force of his blows, savage scars of wind carved into the earth.

“Elania!” His voice boomed across the battlefield, making her bones vibrate. “The mortals need your aid!”

She signaled to her wing, and they dove as one, plunging into the melee on the ground. They landed amidst the clashing armies, their wings flaring out to sweep the monsters aside.

Elania lost herself in the rhythm of combat, her sword a blur of motion as she hacked and slashed. She wove between the ranks of humans and beast people, striking down any creature that dared to challenge her or threaten an ally.

Yet for every monster they felled, two more seemed to take its place. The horde was endless, a seething mass of nightmarish flesh that threatened to overwhelm them all.

The armies clashed with cataclysmic force, powers beyond imagining rending the very fabric of the world. It became clear that despite their valor, her side was losing. The enemy’s numbers were too great, their strength too vast.

Then, on the horizon, a golden orb appeared. It shone like a second sun, its light piercing the gloom of the battlefield.

Elania’s eyes widened as she realized what it was.

A Celestial Engine.

One that could move.

“Rally to the Engine!” Eziel’s voice boomed across the field. “Let its light be your guide!”

The forces of light fought with renewed vigor, their weapons glowing with the radiance of the Engine. Elania dove into the fray, her sword a blur of motion as she struck down the monstrosities that threatened to overwhelm them.

The cacophony of destruction was deafening. Void magic, light magic, and all manner of terrifying powers clashed in a maelstrom of chaos.

The very earth reshaped itself under the onslaught, mountains rising and falling like waves in a storm-tossed sea.

Mortals died in their tens-of-thousands, crushed like ants beneath the feet of the warring gods.

Elania watched in horror as entire battalions were wiped out in an instant, their screams lost in the din of battle.

Angels and monstrosities clashed in the skies above, their magic rending the fabric of reality. Beams of searing light pierced the clouds, while tendrils of darkness snaked across the heavens.

Elania realized with a start that she was witnessing a war of gods.

As she fought on, the scene before her seemed to shift and blur. Elania felt herself being pulled back, as if she were an observer watching from afar.

The battlefield receded into the distance; her view a window from high above.

She saw the Celestial Engine in its entirety, a shining beacon of hope amidst the darkness. And she saw Eziel, towering over the field like a colossus, his sword raised high as he rallied his troops for one last charge.

The engine pulsed with an otherworldly glow, drawing in the energies of the raging battle like a ravenous beast.

As it swelled with power, the fighting began to ebb, soldiers on both sides turning their gazes skyward.

Eziel raised his sword before him, the blade shimmering with divine light. The blade grew in size, doubling, then tripling, until it was a solid pillar of energy. He braced himself, wings spread wide, as if preparing for an immense impact.

The celestial engine erupted with a blinding beam of pure radiance hundreds of miles wide.

It carved through the earth like a scythe through wheat, obliterating everything in its path. Soldiers, angels, and monstrosities alike were consumed by the searing light, their forms disintegrating into motes of ash.

The beam swept across the battlefield, leaving naught but devastation in its wake. The very ground was scoured clean, the once-churned mud simply a chasm into the depths. Mountains tore apart and then melted in the fury, turned to soot and ash and thrust into the wind.

Eziel pushed through the beam, his golden armor glowing white-hot as he fought against the relentless onslaught. With a mighty beat of his wings, he burst forth from the light, soaring high into the sky.

Everything he had tried to protect turned to ash.

From her vantage point, Elania saw the true extent of the destruction. The armies on both sides had been utterly annihilated, reduced to smoldering cinders. It was as if the hand of a wrathful god had reached down and wiped the slate clean.

A vivid scar of flame and fire, carved across and through the world like a burning wound for a thousand miles.

A haunting realization settled over her like a shroud. Ash fell from the sky like rain. This was the end of an era, a cataclysmic event.

Eziel's deafening shout echoed across the barren landscape, a sound of pure anguish and loss. It was a cry that spoke of betrayal, of a trust shattered beyond repair.

In that moment, Elania knew the truth.

They had been betrayed, both sides manipulated like pawns.

The Celestial Engine had not been their salvation.

It had been their end.

Elania gasped as the vision shattered, leaving her alone in the essence realm.

Her **[Divinity]** had drained below twenty-five percent according to her **[Soul Management]** HUD.

With a shuddering breath, she slowed the flow, carefully extricating herself from the connection.

As she broke free, the mundane world rushed back in a dizzying blur of sensation. Keswick stood at the engine controls, her attention focused on the arcane readouts and pulsing lines of power.

If she noticed anything amiss, she gave no sign.

Elania staggered, her legs trembling beneath her. The vision had left her reeling, her mind awirl with images of apocalyptic destruction and divine conflict.

She steadied herself against the cold metal of the control housing, trying to regain her equilibrium.

"I... I need to rest," she managed, her voice sounding distant and strained to her own ears. "The transfer... it took more out of me than I expected."

Keswick glanced up, her brow furrowed with concern. "Of course. Go, get some rest. We'll need you at full strength for what's to come."

Elania nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She turned and stumbled towards the elevator, her feet moving of their own accord. The elevator door slid open with a soft hiss, and she practically fell inside, slumping against the railing as the car began its ascent.

As the elevator rose through the levels of the tower, Elania closed her eyes, trying to make sense of what she had seen.



# CHAPTER 60 - MACHINE GUNS AND CONFESSIONS

Yolani's hands moved with precision as she assembled the final components of her new Guards' rifle. The sleek, black metal gleamed under the workshop's lights. She slotted the mana shard into place, and the weapon responded with a temporary hum as it came to life and then went silent again.

Ready for testing.

Or using, she thought grimly.

"Machine gun," she whispered, testing the foreign words on her tongue.

Elania had used the term to describe weapons capable of unleashing a storm of bullets. Yolani had to admit, it was an apt name.

The rifle was a marvel of artifice. Almost, but not quite, as polished as the one she had built for Elania.

Its lead projectiles, propelled by the mana shard's energy, would fly at a lower velocity than the shock crystal ammo of older versions or of Elania's custom weapon. That was a necessary sacrifice due to the conversion from shock crystal to mana shard.

There simply wasn't the same amount of 'pressure' from the shard as there was a shock crystal.

Instead, she had wound multiple power shunts through the action to the projectile chamber and barrel.

But what it lacked in individual impact, it made up for in sheer volume of fire. The massive magazine it could utilize was heavier than the weapon and easily reloadable.

Guards could literally just dump buckets of inert ammo into a funnel to keep up the rate of fire. They didn't even have to worry about the barrel heating, because she had worked a set of heat absorbing runes down the metal length that would recycle the energy back into the shard.

That was a work of art that she was amazed that she had even managed without further study.

Okay. It hadn't actually been tested for more than a few seconds of firing, but she was almost positive it would work long term, too.

The modifications had required sturdier materials, driving up the cost.

Each one would represent a significant investment. A bit more than a full cannon. Not every soldier would be equipped with one.

She sighted down the barrel, picturing the weapon in action. The machine gunners would open up, stitching deadly lines across the battlefield, forcing the enemy to take cover. Then the regular infantry

would flank them, or they could drop a bomb on them, or open fire with artillery...

It wouldn't stop the enemy by itself, but used together with other tactics? A potent combination.

But would it be enough to turn the tide against the Lightbringers and the Conclave?

She placed the finished rifle on the workbench, next to a row of identical weapons awaiting fabrication and refurbishment. The prototype was complete. Now they just needed to finish the rest.

She was fairly certain she could show the apprentices how to carry out the manufacture of everything but the heat recycling runes. That would cut down on the work required by her and avoid spreading her time too thinly.

Yolani allowed herself a small smile.

Despite the dire circumstances, the thrill of innovation sang in her blood.

But... she needed a break from working.

She made her way to the gunpowder tenders, where a constant stream of smoke puffed from the ventilation hood. The apprentices worked diligently, mixing the volatile ingredients with careful precision.

She surveyed the scene, her brow furrowing. The piles of sulfur and charcoal powder dwarfed the saltpeter, the key component in the explosive mixture.

It had become abundantly clear that their initial estimates were off. The saltpeter, it seemed, made up the bulk of the recipe.

Yolani's gaze drifted to the lone cart of saltpeter, a sinking feeling settling in her gut. With the supply lines from the Ralfot farms compromised, this single delivery might be all they could expect.

The once-promising project now felt like it was in jeopardy.

Yolani turned away, a heavy sigh escaping her lips. She needed a moment to herself to process the setback and figure out their next move.

She stepped out of the workshop, the acrid scent of sulfur and charcoal clinging to her clothes. That wasn't ideal.

Her feet carried her to the quarters she shared with Elania. She pushed open the door. The room was empty. Hopefully, Elania would be back soon.

Wrinkling her nose, what she needed was a bath. The suite didn't have a shower, but did have running water. The master bath was separated from both rooms and had something of a mini-pool sized bathtub for washing.

Ridiculous luxury.

But there was no point in wasting it, so she took the time to soak and enjoy the heat.

When she was finally done, she took the time to dry off and put on a shift, but when she opened the door to their shared quarters, Elania was there, sitting on the bed.

"Elania!" Yolani said, a smile appearing on its own.

Her friend looked up morosely and nodded. "Hey."

Something was wrong. Elania seemed like she was exhausted and distant. Had she made another transfer to the engine already?

"Hey," Yolani said softly, crossing the room to sit beside Elania. "What happened?"

Elania lifted her head, her eyes shadowed with exhaustion. "I didn't make it back to the City Watch. We're cut off."

Yolani's breath caught in her throat. The implications of that statement, the isolation and vulnerability it implied, settled like a lead weight in her stomach.

“The seraph attacked again,” Elania continued, her voice flat. “I had to recharge the Celestial Engine.”

“The seraph?” Yolani’s eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t even hear it.”

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of Elania’s mouth. “The divine shield must be pretty effective then.”

Yolani reached out, placing a hand on Elania’s knee. “You should rest. Recharging the engine, it takes so much out of you.”

But Elania shook her head, a faraway look in her eyes. “There’s more. When I was connected to the engine, Eziel was there.”

“Eziel?” Yolani leaned forward. “What did he want?”

“He showed me a vision,” Elania said, her voice barely above a whisper. “A battle, unlike anything I’ve ever seen. Angels and demons, tearing each other apart. And in the end, a Celestial Engine, wiping them all out.”

Yolani listened, her heart aching for the pain and confusion etched on Elania’s face.

“What does it mean?” Yolani asked, her voice gentle.

Elania shook her head, her shoulders sagging. “I don’t know. But it feels important, like a warning or a clue.”

Yolani squeezed Elania’s knee, a silent offer of support. “We’ll figure it out together. But first, you need to rest. You can’t keep pushing yourself like this.”

Elania looked up, meeting Yolani’s gaze. In that moment, Yolani saw the vulnerability, the fear and uncertainty that Elania so rarely allowed to surface.

She rubbed Elania’s back in soothing circles. “It’ll be okay. We just need to do our best.”

Elania nodded, her gaze fixed on the floor, but the contact seemed to make her relax. Yolani kept at it, wanting to help.

“I’m incredibly grateful you appeared in my life, Elania. Things would be so much worse without you.” Yolani’s voice was soft, filled with sincerity.

Elania tensed, a subtle shift in her posture.

“I feel closer to you than anyone else, after everything we’ve been through.” The words tumbled from Yolani’s lips, a confession she couldn’t hold back any longer. “I am—”

Elania turned abruptly, grabbing Yolani’s shoulder and silencing her with a kiss.

Yolani’s mind reeled, shock and confusion warring with the electric sensation of Elania’s lips against hers.

A voice in the back of her head screamed that this was wrong, so very wrong, but it was drowned out by the intoxicating scent of cinnamon filling her senses... by the tingles Elania’s hand left behind as it slid down her side.

Elania pushed her back into the pillows. She broke the kiss, pulling back just enough to look into Yolani’s eyes.

Yolani’s heart raced, her breath coming in quick gasps. “This is wrong,” she finally managed, the words barely audible.

Elania’s fingers brushed Yolani’s temple, stroking her still damp hair with a gentleness that belied the intensity of the moment. “It isn’t wrong, but that’s not what matters.”

She leaned closer, her breath ghosting over Yolani’s lips. “Do you want me to kiss you again?”

Confusion and conflict swirled in Yolani’s mind, but one thing cut through the haze with startling clarity.

“Yes,” she breathed, the word a plea and a surrender all at once.

# CHAPTER 61 - TROUBLES AND SECRETS

Elania stirred, the warmth of Yolani's body pressed against her side slowly drawing her muted attention. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the soft light from the city light stones filtering through the curtains.

Yolani's arm draped across her, a comforting weight that anchored her to the present.

She turned her head, studying Yolani's face.

The worries and stresses of their daily lives were absent, replaced by a tranquil beauty that made Elania's heart ache. Memories of the previous night drifted through her mind, snapshots of vulnerability and passion.

The kiss had been electric, a spark that ignited a fire within them both. They had come together in a tangle of limbs and gasping breaths, exploring each other with a desperation born of an uncertain tomorrow.

Now, in the morning's quiet, Elania felt a tangle of emotions.

Affection for the woman beside her, the friend who had become so much more... But also uncertainty, a nagging worry that whispered in the back of her mind.

Elania sighed, careful not to disturb Yolani's slumber. She knew they would need to talk.

Slipping out from under the covers, she moved with deliberate slowness to avoid waking her companion. A warm pillow went under a greedy arm as a replacement.

The cool air prickled Elania's skin as she rose. She stretched, her muscles protesting the movement before they woke up.

As she reached for her clothes, her thoughts churned like a restless sea. It had all felt so right in the moment.

She pulled on her shirt, the fabric rasping against her skin. A flicker at the window hinted at the battle outside, still raging. Even if the soundproofing of the tower had isolated them for some time, that reminder was impossible to ignore.

Elania sighed, running a hand through her tousled hair. There was an entire army working tirelessly to end her. Had already hurt Yolani and done tremendous damage to everything.

And for what? Some stupid, bigoted righteousness?

Elania moved to the window, the stone floor cold beneath her bare feet.

She gazed out at the sprawling Magistracy complex. The flat roofed administrative buildings were far below, and the outer wall of the district periodically flared with light as cannons belched their payloads out into the city.

The weight of their situation settled on her shoulders, a heavy mantle she couldn't shake.



For a moment, she just wished that she knew what their actual goal was, but that passed quickly.

From experience, opening a dialogue with them was nearly pointless. And she was tired of the dogmatic drivel they spouted at the drop of a dime.

Demons bad—something, something good.

It was all very black and white to them. No bend at all.

Maybe they'd snap like a pencil.

Maybe she could do something to make that happen.

She glanced back at Yolani, still asleep in the tangled sheets. Her raven hair spilled across the pillow, a stark contrast to the pale fabric.

Elania's heart clenched, a pang of longing for a future where they could explore their feelings without the constant danger looming over them.

A future where they could wake up together every morning without the weight of the world on their shoulders.

Where they could learn more about each other, in the simple joys of a shared life.

But that future seemed distant.

Elania sighed, her breath fogging the glass.

She knew they had to focus on the present, on the battles ahead. There would be time for dreams later if they survived.

She turned from the window, her resolve hardening.

When they survived.

They had work to do, a war to win. And she would fight with everything she had to make that distant future a reality.

Because if they didn't, there wouldn't be any mercy granted to them by the enemy, of that she was certain.

They had made this a war of annihilation.

A soft murmur drew Elania's attention, pulling her gaze from the window.

Yolani stirred, her eyes remaining shut. Her brow furrowed slightly, and another noise escaped her lips; a gentle sigh that whispered through the quiet room.

Her arm moved, sliding across the decoy pillow as if searching for something.

Elania felt a tug at her heart, a pull that drew her back to the bed.

She crossed the room, her bare feet silent against the stone floor, and settled on the edge of the mattress. The sheets dipped beneath her weight, a subtle shift that brought her closer to Yolani's sleeping form.

She reached out, her fingers gentle as they brushed a stray strand of hair from Yolani's face. It was a tender gesture, a touch that spoke of affection.

Yolani's skin was soft beneath her fingertips, warm with the heat of sleep. Elania let her hand linger for a moment.

Yolani's eyelids fluttered, a single emerald orb peeking out from beneath dark lashes.

As awareness seeped in, both eyes flew open, widening in surprise at Elania's proximity.

A rosy hue bloomed across Yolani's cheeks, a vibrant contrast to her raven hair splayed across the pillow.

Embarrassment painted her features, a fleeting emotion that danced in her gaze.

With a gentle movement, Yolani reached up. Her fingers brushing against Elania's, a touch that sent tingles skittering across her skin. She guided Elania's hand to her face, pressing the palm against the warmth of her cheek.

Yolani's eyes drifted shut, her lashes casting delicate shadows against her flushed skin. A soft sigh escaped her lips, a whisper of contentment that hung in the air between them.

"Good morning," Yolani murmured, her voice still thick with the remnants of sleep.

Elania's heart swelled, a wave of affection crashing over her. "Good morning."

Elania slipped into the bed and they cuddled for a long time until she knew they had to talk. Time wasn't going to stop for them, no matter how much she wished for it.

Elania bit her lip and then met Yolani's gaze. "We should talk," she said softly, "about last night."

Yolani nodded, sitting up. Silence hung between them, heavy with unspoken thoughts. Elania reached out, interlacing their fingers. Yolani's hand was warm, her skin soft against Elania's own.

"We need to be careful," Yolani whispered. "We can't let anyone know our secret."

Elania nodded, a flicker of apprehension in her eyes. The way Yolani worded that...

She decided to just cut straight to it.

"I noticed signs that same-sex couples were hidden here. Not even in the brothels or anywhere I saw." She paused, her voice dropping. "I was afraid to talk to you about it or ask because... I was afraid how you would react."

Yolani blinked, conflict playing across her features. She chose her words carefully. "It isn't just considered wrong, it's illegal. Immoral. Most people consider it worse than... abusing children."

Elania contained her anger, forcing a smile. "Well, I'm already a lesser-demon, so they thought I was that bad already." The smile faltered. "I don't want to get you in trouble, though..."

Even if it seemed like she already had.

Yolani must have noticed the droop in her expression because she pulled her into a tight squeeze and didn't let go. "The penalty is imprisonment, or death in Neftasu."

Elania grunted and suppressed her anger. Hide your lesbians, bury your gays was in full force it seemed. Now they had to worry about being arrested on top of an invasion?

She didn't think any of the Magisters or member of the Guard would dare. But that wouldn't change the culture of the city. It was easier to think of ways to wipe out the invasion force, rather than fix a society's perception of homosexuality...

The vulnerability in Yolani's eyes made her heart break. She reached out and stroked Yolani's hair, her touch gentle. "I don't think those things apply anymore, considering the invasion. But there's no reason we have to tell anyone either."

A worrying thought struck her. "The cleaning staff might have already noticed we're only sleeping in one bed."

Yolani shook her head. "That isn't even odd. Most people would sleep in the same bed if they were family. Actually, sleeping alone would be more strange."

Elania's brow furrowed. Sleeping in the same bed was fine, but two girls kissing was not? That didn't really make sense to her.

But she trusted Yolani's judgment.

A sly smile tugged at her lips. "Well, one good thing about this room is the soundproofing. We'll need more like it wherever we go then, considering how loud you got last night."

Yolani's face flushed a deep crimson. She grabbed a pillow, pushing it toward Elania.

It was impossible not to giggle.

# CHAPTER 62

## - ODDS AND BOMBS

A knock at the door shattered the intimate moment, startling Elania and Yolani. They exchanged a panicked glance.

Yolani leapt from the bed, scrambling for her clothes. She tugged on her leathers fast enough that her fingers fumbled with the fastenings.

Elania moved to the door, her steps measured and cautious. She cracked it open, peering out at the messenger who stood in the hallway.

“Magister Keswick requests your presence immediately,” the messenger said, his tone brisk and efficient.

Elania nodded, her expression guarded. “We’ll be there shortly.”

She closed the door, turning to face Yolani. The artificer was already dressed, her hair hastily tied back.

Elania moved to her own gear, donning her combat leathers and gear. She checked her weapons, ensuring they were secure and ready.

Yolani’s brow furrowed. “Do you really need all that in the tower?”

Elania met her gaze, her eyes hardening. “The only person I trust here is you.” She paused, her voice dropping. “Definitely not Keswick, or the Magistracy.”

Yolani’s expression softened, understanding flickering in her eyes. She reached out, her hand brushing against Elania’s arm. “I’ve got your back, no matter what.”

Elania nodded, “Same.”

The route to the Magister’s office wasn’t that long.

They heard the indistinct murmur of voices in the hall before they reached Keswick’s office lobby.

The space bustled with activity. Guard officers huddled around an enlarged map of the Magistracy District. The normal furnishings had been cleared away, replaced by a large tactical table that dominated the room.

The officers discussed the situation in low but urgent voices as they pointed out things on the map or focused on other details, and messengers hurried in and out.

Magister Keswick stood in the doorway to her office, her expression grave. She turned toward them as they approached. “Elania, Yolani.”

The Magister gestured toward the map. “As you can see, a siege of the district has begun.”

She fixed Elania with a fixed stare. “I trust you have rested long enough to recover? If recharging the Engine leads to such long downtimes, we’ll need to factor them into our planning.”

Elania bit her lip. Paranoia ran its fingers across her spine. Did the Magister know already?

That seemed impossible, and Elania’s voice remained steady. “It drains me a bit, mentally. I could probably handle it more often.”

Keswick stared at her for a moment longer, then turned toward the map. “As you can see, a siege of the district has begun.”

Elania looked closer, her eyes scanning the map. The Magistry District was ringed with red markers, each one representing an enemy force. They were surrounded, cut off from the rest of the city.

“What do you need us to do?” Elania asked.

Keswick’s gaze met hers.

Yolani moved to stand beside Elania. “We’re ready to do whatever it takes.”

Keswick nodded. “Good. We have little time.” She turned back to the map, her finger tracing a path through the city streets.

“We have roughly 4,000 able guardsmen in the district now. That many again in the Central district. We don’t know how many remain holding the City Watch, but they would have had nearly ten thousand,” Keswick explained.

Elania’s brow furrowed. “And the enemy?”

Keswick was silent for a moment. “In excess of fifty thousand, that we can tell. There might be that many again that are still in the Noble district, or haven’t entered the Artisan District.”

Yolani blanched, the color draining from her face. Her hands trembled slightly, but she clenched them into fists, steadying herself.

Keswick noticed the movement and turned to her. “Yolani, do you have any new weapons for us?”

Yolani took a deep breath. “The machine gun emplacement. It would be a good idea to put it up high on the tower. Despite its lower velocity, the vantage point would make it useful, or at least force the enemy to keep physical protection wards and spells on constantly.”

She paused for a second before finishing hesitantly. “We have more than enough lead for casting. The only issue might be [Power] consumption.”

Elania put her hand on Yolani’s shoulder. “Shouldn’t be a problem. I can keep fetching full shards.”

Keswick nodded, a glimmer of approval in her eyes. “Agreed. Continue to work on the cannons as well.”

Yolani’s expression hardened with determination. “We’ll have some trial shrapnel black powder ammunition, as well as multi-element infused shot ready soon.”

Keswick grunted. “Let’s hope it will be effective.”

“What have the telescopes been able to determine about the City Watch?” Elania’s voice held a note of concern. “I didn’t connect with them during my last mission.”

Keswick’s expression soured immediately, her brow furrowing. “The fighting on the wall between the two fortresses has intensified.” She shook her head. “There’s too much smoke to see the Watch any longer.”

A wave of guilt washed over Elania, her shoulders sagging under the weight of it. She should have been out there, fighting alongside the Watch, not indulging in a good night’s... sleep.

“I can try to reach the City Watch directly,” Elania offered, her voice tinged with determination. “Avoid confrontation, just to pass messages.”

Keswick nodded. “There’s something you need to do before going to the City Watch.”

She pulled out a smaller map of the entire city, spreading it across the table. Her finger circled the noble district, then tapped on four points. “The causeways,” Keswick said, her tone grim. “You need to destroy all of them.”

“We will be pulling the central district Guard out and abandoning the district to reinforce our defenses here. Shutting these down will slow the enemy coming across them.”

Elania nodded, her expression hardening with resolve.



She glanced at Yolani, their eyes meeting in a silent exchange. They both had their own mission to accomplish.

Yolani's hand brushed against Elania's, a fleeting touch that spoke volumes. They were in this together, no matter the cost.

Elania turned back to Keswick, her voice steady. "We'll get it done."

Yolani's eyes sparkled with excitement. "We should test the elemental cannonballs on the causeways."

Elania frowned, her brow furrowing. "I'm not a cannon."

A chuckle escaped from Yolani. "No, but you can drop them."

Elania grunted. That was true. There were a few more considerations, though. "I'm not sure I could carry more than a couple. Would that be enough to do the damage? It might be better if I just used my normal mana shards."

Yolani shook her head, a grin spreading across her face. "That's the beauty of it. Part of the cannonball utilizes an advanced script that will let you supercharge the ball before dropping it, at the cost of more [Power], sort of like when you use multiple shards at once."

Elania's eyes widened. "So it'll be a really big bomb?"

Yolani's expression turned serious, but it was impossible to miss the electric in the air. "Yep, big enough to blow the causeway for sure."

# CHAPTER 63 - DROPPING IT

The air above the city was her domain as Elania flew towards her target.

During the few hours it took Yolani to prepare, she had flown several sorties to bombard the encroaching enemy.

She'd taken the opportunity to test [Presence Concealment] in various ways until a few things became clear.

With it active and [Power] enhanced, she was almost undetectable until the last second with it was far too late and she was already upon them.

With it just passive, or actively slotted, then as long as she maintain a certain altitude they usually didn't notice her.

Her measurement was mostly whether they were panicking or shooting crossbows or monk-bells at her. So maybe it wasn't an exact science.

She was taking no chances now, though, and she pushed a steady trickle through the skill.

The weight of the four oversized cannonballs tugged at her harness.

Below, the Central district causeway to the Noble district came into view, a thin ribbon of stone stretching across the chasm.

Elania spotted the guards on the wall, already in retreat.

On the other side, in the Noble district, the Lightbringers were forming up.

Despite the distance, Elania could sense their anticipation, their eagerness to cross the causeway and claim the abandoned district for their own.

She glanced down at the cannonballs. They had no idea what was coming.

Elania angled her wings, adjusting her course. Once she was directly overhead and flying down the causeway toward the enemy, she pulled the release strap for the first cannon ball.

It had a large red symbol painted on it.

Fire.

Yolani had precisely calculated how much [Power] she needed to provide. Then made her practice on mana shards until she had an exact number thanks to [Identify].

Elania closed her eyes, reaching out with her senses. She could feel the mana shard within the cannonball, a tiny pinprick of light. She focused on it, pushing her power into the shard.

It was a strange sensation, like trying to fill a cup that was already full. The power evaporated as soon as it touched the shard, dissipating into the air.

But Elania could feel something building, stuck in the runes that Yolani had etched into the metal.

She pushed harder, pouring more into the cannonball. The runes glowed, the metal heating like a hot oven.

Finally, she felt the shard reach its limit. It couldn't hold any more power, the runes shimmering with barely contained energy.

Elania reached for the strap that held the cannonball to her harness. With a sharp tug, she released it, watching as it plummeted towards the bridge below.

Elania watched the cannonball fall, her heart pounding in her chest as it grew smaller and smaller.

The cannonball struck the causeway with a dull thump.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Elania's heart sank, a sickening feeling settling in the pit of her stomach. Had the runes failed? Had the mana shard not been strong enough?

She started to pull from her bracer, and finish the job herself.

It was critical that the causeway be destroyed, that the Lightbringers be cut off from the retreating Guard units. She couldn't let them pass, couldn't let them—

A blinding flash of light erupted from the point of impact, a massive fireball that consumed the causeway in an instant.

The shockwave hit Elania like a physical blow; the heat baking her skin even from this distance. She threw up a hand to shield her eyes, squinting against the glare.

It was nothing like the [Divinity] infused explosions, or even the seraph's laser beam. Those created fire and heat, but only as a byproduct of the energy.

This was elemental fire. It was the product.

Stone flew in all directions, chunks of masonry the size of houses hurtling through the air. The water all around flash vaporized, and she shot upwards and away to avoid the super-heated steam.

Looking behind her, the causeway was gone. A full third of it in the center was missing.

The Lightbringers on the other side were in disarray, their formation shattered by the explosion. Some lay unmoving on the ground,

others staggered to their feet, their armor scorched and dented by debris.

The Lightbringers would not be crossing into the Central district today. It was a pity they'd avoided the hot vapor cooking them like lobsters.

Yolani's modifications had worked perfectly.

Elania reached for the next cannonball, her fingers brushing against the cool metal. Three more to go, three more bridges to destroy.

Lighting, Acid, and dissolution.

They weren't traditional elements, but whatever. She wasn't the artifice expert.

Even if she had been confused at Yolani's explanation on how the lighting would destroy stone.

She decided to save it for last.

Acid worked as much as she thought it would, dissolving the causeway to the slums as much as it did the Lightbringers that had been crossing it.

For the Syndicate district, Dissolution was eerily silent. The orb created a black hole that left nothing behind except a powerful implosion of air and water.

When she dropped Lightning, she was perhaps not playing it as safe, hoping to hurry on to complete the rest of her mission.

There wasn't any shockwave.

Instead, tendrils of light lashed out in every direction. Far enough to slap her in the side and send her tumbling.

Far enough to zap several light stones above, and send them falling in an explosion of crystal.

It was worse for the Lightbringers on the ground, and for the causeway itself. The lightning tendrils tore everything asunder, regardless of what it was made of.

There was a noticeable lack of [System] messages. That was a bit confusing. She didn't get credit for kills when dropping bombs? She needed to ask Yolani about that.

One thing during all the fighting that had only worried her later was her [Karma] going down. Despite it being a seemingly useless stat. Thirty thousand points down was a lot, though.

A numb feeling filled Elania's stomach. The bombs were far more effective than she had been able to imagine, and had proved one thing.

If they... if she was willing to destroy the city, reduce everything, and everyone to rubble...

They'd be able to repulse the enemy army.

There would just be nothing left.

Elania banked sharply, her wings slicing through the air as she turned towards the City Watch fortress.

The wind whipped at her face, tugging at her hair and clothes, but she paid it no mind. Her focus was solely on the fortress ahead, and the assault that was still ongoing.

From her vantage point in the sky, she could see the Lightbringers swarming the walls like ants, their white armor glinting in the sunlight.

The defenders were putting up a fierce fight.

Without reinforcements, they wouldn't last much longer.

Luckily for them, she was here.

# CHAPTER 64 - STRATEGIC WEAPONS

**E**lania's heart sank as she flew over the City Watch district.

The outer wall had been breached, a gaping hole blown through the stone and mortar. Flames licked at the edges of the hole, the acrid smell of smoke filling the air. A hastily twisted tower of metal had been put in place for the enemy to climb up and through the defense.

It wasn't the only hole, either.

All along the southeastern section of the wall, the stone burned, the heat so intense that Elania could feel it even from a distance.

Lightbringers poured through the gap, their armor glinting in the flickering light of the flames. They swept across the wall, their numbers overwhelming the defenders.

The City Watch Fortress stood at the center of the district, its towers belching cannon fire in a desperate attempt to stem the tide.

But even from here, Elania could tell that the musket fire had slowed, the steady crack of shock-crystals fading into the chaos of battle.

Crossbow bolts flew back and forth, the defenders and attackers alike seeking to pincushion their foes.

“Where is Magister Bannon?” Elania muttered to herself.

He should have been able to use his magic to hold the tide, to turn back the Lightbringer assault. But there was no sign of him, no flashes of arcane energy or thunderous explosions.

She knew that the City Watch was outnumbered, outgunned, and running low on ammunition. Without Magister Bannon’s support, they didn’t stand a chance.

“Damn it all,” she muttered, reaching for her sword. She had to do something.

She soared over a dense pocket of Lightbringers on the wall. The sword wasn’t really needed. She was able to summon her attacks without it but having something in hand somehow felt better.

Maybe it was the seraph memory from Eziel’s vision?

Behind her, shimmering spears of pure light materialized, hanging suspended in the air, waiting for her command.

She completed her pass, flipping around mid-flight to face the enemy below.

She pointed her sword at them.

The light spears plummeting downward. The Lightbringers, caught off guard by the sudden aerial assault, had no time to react.

The spears struck the wall in rapid succession, each one detonating in a blinding explosion of divine energy.

The force of the blasts tore through the enemy ranks, their armor and flesh alike disintegrating under the onslaught. No warding spells or defensive barriers had been active.



As the smoke cleared, the wall lay bare; the Lightbringers reduced to nothing more than charred remnants and twisted metal.

Elania allowed herself a moment of satisfaction before turning and seeking a nearby melee.

She landed amidst a group of City Watch guards hopelessly mixed with the invaders. Her enchanted Magistry sword cleaved through the Lightbringers' armor as if it were paper. The claws flaring from her left hand, crackling with energy, tore at their flesh, leaving deep, sizzling wounds in their wake.

"Push them back!" Elania shouted to the guards, her voice cutting through the din of battle. "Don't let them gain another inch!"

The guards rallied. Before, where they had been falling back and trying to escape, now they were pushing forward, knocking down siege ladders and holding the line.

A sudden heavy blow slammed into her from behind, smashing her against a stone crenulation.

The impact cracked the masonry, sending shards of rock flying outward and she nearly went tumbling off the wall with it.

The familiar tingling sensation of [Regeneration] kicked in, knitting together her bruised side and mending the cracked bones. A flare of [Power] and a stretch of her wings halted the momentum, and she regained her feet, twirling to face the direction of the attack.

There was no one there.

Confused, she spread her wings and started to push off the wall, but a gust of wind slammed into her from above, knocking her back down.

She hit the stone with a painful thud, her wings crumpling beneath her. It took a pulse of [Power] and will to shove off the magical attack.

Wind. Wind magic, she realized.

She rolled onto her feet and curled her wings around her like a shield, scanning the battlefield for the source.

Standing atop a nearby tower were two figures. One she recognized as Elder Gant, his robes fluttering in the wind. The other was a large man clad in pristine white armor, his outstretched hand clutching a ball of pale green swirling energy.

Elania pushed herself to her feet, draining a mana shard and pressing it through her [Demonic Aura] to form a defensive barrier. Just as she finished, she felt a perilous spike stab into it, but the magic dissolved inside of her [Power].

Her heart sank at the realization of why Magister Bannon hadn't been out on the battlefield. There were other major combatants on the enemy's side, likely powerful enough to overpower him.

And now she faced two of them at once.

The air magic of the paladin posed an extreme threat to her aerial mobility. She wasn't sure she could fly and block his magic simultaneously, leaving her vulnerable.

She hadn't directly confronted Elder Gant during the clash at the Conclave Citadel, but she knew he had been at least as strong as Magister Bannon.

Gant jumped down from the tower, then began to approach with slow, deliberate steps. His movement was measured, calculated.

Elania's grip tightened on her sword, her knuckles turning white. She could feel the tension in the air, the anticipation of the impending confrontation.

All the Guards and Lightbringers fighting had somehow moved away, still locked in their smaller conflicts, but unconsciously moving away as if they could sense the giants in their midst.

Like a fucking Dynasty Warriors game. Gant stopped and raised his chin with a smug look. Elania growled back.

“So, the demon shows her face at last,” Gant said, his voice carrying across the battlefield. “I believe you illegally impugned my name to trespass where you did not belong.”

Elania’s lips curled into a snarl. “Spare me the pleasantries, Gant.”

“Indeed,” Gant replied, his eyes narrowing. “Your presence in this city has been a blight upon our holy mission. It is time to rectify that mistake.”

He took another step forward, closing the distance between them. Elania shifted her stance, preparing for the inevitable clash. She knew Gant wanted to engage her up close, while aerial advantage was nullified and force her into a ground battle.

“You’re welcome to try,” Elania said, her voice dripping with venom. “But I won’t go down easily.”

Gant’s lips twitched into a smile. “I would expect nothing less from a creature of your ilk. But even demons can be purged by the light of righteousness.”

“I’m so tired of two-bit villain acts,” Elania hissed.

Her eyes slid off her opponent. Normally that would be suicide, but she didn’t like her odds in a two-on-one.

The city behind Gant and the paladin stretched behind them. It was nearly a straight line through the Artisan district, then through the Conclave district, and finally the Conclave Fortress.

A direct line to the enemy base. Nothing important—that was Yolani, Henri, the Magistry, and City Watch—in the way. That was all behind her.

A chill ran down her spine.

It was easy to imagine Elder Holt or more Paladins showing up at any moment.

Elania made a decision. The last time, it had been in a panic. This time, it was a measured response.

She sucked down all the power in her left bracer at once, forcing it into her palm as fast as she could.

The energy compressed, condensing into a dense, pulsating sphere.

It wanted released and did not want to remain smashed together.

They thought their pet seraph was the only one capable of launching strategic laser beams?

She would show them.

Winx had survived her first attempt, but this time she had more focus and experience with the ridiculous discharge.

She narrowed her aura and sucked down another mana shard in her other bracer just to pump her [Demonic Aura] enough to focus the energy into a narrow beam.

Narrow being nearly thirty meters in diameter, but things were relative, right?

Her vision disappeared in a flash of blinding light as her attack lashed out, a searing lance of [Divinity] laced energy that moved in slow motion.

Recoil from the shaping slammed into her, nearly knocking her off her feet, but she held her ground, her wings flaring out to steady herself.

Stone and metal turned to liquid, then vaporized into hot plasma. Buildings simply ceased to exist, along with their inhabitants. The ground trembled, the earth inside the city cavern buckling under the pressure.

Even the light stones flickered. Reality didn't like what she was doing, the air around the laser turned into reflective glass shards before shattering.

When the point of the blast finally struck the wall of the cavern where the Conclave fortress stood, it dug into the stone deeply. A river

of lava poured out and over the section where the bridges had once stood, scouring away their efforts to rebuild a crossing.

Finally, the power winked out all at once, the beam simply shrinking into itself and ceasing to exist. The air still crackled with residual energy.

Elania stared at the devastation her attack had wrought.

She focused her [**Enhanced Mana Sense**], reaching out to scan the area for any signs of life. Nothing. No trace of Gant or the Paladin's essence remained, their life force snuffed out by the sheer power of the attack.

The nearby enemy soldiers turned and routed. The guards were too exhausted to chase and began to tend the wounded instead. They were in such rough shape that none of them cheered.

Elania turned and looked up to the City Watch Fortress. No more delays.

She pushed off the ground, her wings carrying her upwards.

# CHAPTER 65

## - AN OLD GUARD

**E** lania's wings carried her towards the top of the Guards' fortress. Unlike the elegant spire of the Magistracy, the structure was built for function over form, its flat roof bristling with defenders.

As she neared, a volley of shot and bolts lashed out at her, the sentries responding with alarm. She veered swiftly, rolling out of the way of the screaming projectiles and then arcing around for another loop.

She made another pass, and the barrage began to subside as officers took back control. When they finally stopped aiming at her and returned to firing towards the ground, she touched down.

An officer approached, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "Magister Bannon left orders you are to be brought to him if you arrived," the young man said, his voice tense but respectful. "Follow me."

Elania grunted and did just that. She was tempted to comment on her welcome but decided against it. Things were already tense enough.

They headed down a stairwell, Elania falling into step behind him while folding her wings into a golden cloak. As they descended, the stone shook with the deep periodic booms of cannon fire.

“How long has the assault been going on?” Elania asked.

“Hours,” the lieutenant replied. “Days, maybe. They’ve been pounding us non-stop. I’ve lost track of time. We’re holding for now, but...”

Holding. Elania didn’t reply. From what she had seen, they were slowly being peeled back from the outer wall and district and forced into the citadel.

They were in a pocket, and it had closed around them like an enormous monster swallowing a smaller one.

On the next floor down, Elania’s stomach turned at the sight of the wounded and dead lining the hallways. Moans of agony filled the air, mixed with the scent of blood and voided bowels.

Men and women who she assumed were medics or the like, ran between them doing their best to triage, but it looked like a lost cause as more men slowly filtered in, either on their own or on stretchers. The floors were slick with spilled blood.

In some places, the hold was so packed they were forced to step over men who were on the ground, heavily bandaged and chests rising and falling with shallow breaths.

Thoughts of Henri and Gaston nagged at the back of her mind as she followed the Lieutenant. Henri more than Gaston, really, but both of them all the same. They were the two members of the Guard she knew best and actually liked.

Were they safe? Had they been wounded, and she would find them lining one of the halls, or were they...

She clamped down on the thoughts by the time they reached the command room. It was barely better than the charnel house that had become of the hallways, but the center had been cleared and a strategy table set there.

Officers shouted at each other, their voices strained and desperate. Maps and papers littered the table and the floor, forgotten in the heat of the arguments.

Magister Bannon stood apart, his back to the room as he gripped the circular stone window. The tight set of his shoulders spoke volumes about the tension running through him.

Her escort didn't linger, leaving Elania to approach the Magister on her own. She weaved through the arguing officers, their words washing over her like a tide of hopelessness. None of them paid her any mind.

"Magister," Elania greeted as she reached Bannon's side. He remained facing the window, his gaze fixed on the chaos unfolding beyond the fortress walls.

"Why did you blow up part of the city?" His voice was flat, devoid of emotion.

Elania took a deep breath. "The Paladin and Elder Gant were there. I had to take them out."

Bannon grunted, finally turning to face her. His eyes were shadowed, his face drawn with exhaustion. "At least you got two of them, then."

Elania nodded; her attention drawn to the arguing officers. Their voices rose and fell, a cacophony of desperation and fear. "Why are they fighting?"

"The fortress is being overrun." Bannon's words hung heavy in the air. "We're losing ground by the minute."



Well, that was obvious. Anyone could see that. Wasn't it their jobs to keep things together for their men? Maybe all the good officers were out in the fray, doing exactly that.

A cold knot formed in Elania's stomach. "Where are Henri and Gaston?"

"Last I heard, Gaston's squad was assigned to the Headquarters gate. He should still be there, tending to the defense."

Relief washed over Elania, but it was short-lived.

She frowned, her gaze snapping back to Bannon. "Why aren't you doing anything yourself?"

Bannon grunted at the accusation, his eyes narrowing. "With the majority of the Magisters dead, if we lose Keswick or myself, the city will be lost completely."

Elania scoffed, her anger rising. "If all the Magisters had gotten together and went hunting, you could have eliminated the other enemy elite combatants one by one."

"That would have caused too much collateral damage." Bannon shook his head.

She gestured towards the most recent city-scar she had made. "As opposed to that?"

Bannon gritted his teeth. "It's neither here nor there. What's happened has already happened." He sighed heavily. "We were spread too thin. Now we're barely holding on."

Elania's fists clenched at her sides. "So what's the plan, then? Just sit here and wait for them to break through?"

"We fortify our defenses. Hold the line as long as we can." Bannon turned back to the window, his shoulders sagging. "And pray for a miracle."

Elania's wings flared, the ethereal glow casting long shadows across the command room. "You're hiding in your tower, waiting for it to fall around you."

The arguing in the room went silent as all eyes turned on them.

She lunged forward, grabbing Bannon by the shirt. He grasped at her arm, but her grip was unyielding, pulling him close until they were nose to nose.

Whispers rippled through the gathered officers, a mix of awe and disbelief.

"Prepare to abandon the fortress," Elania commanded, her voice ringing with authority. "Lead the guards to the Magistracy district. The shield there will be our last line of defense."

Bannon's face reddened, his jaw clenching. "You can't just—"

"I can." Elania's eyes narrowed, her grip tightening. "Unless you have a better plan? Did you forget your duty?"

The officers exchanging uneasy glances. Bannon's shoulders sagged, the fight draining out of him.

"Very well," he conceded, his voice tight. "We'll evacuate to the Magistracy district."

It seemed like the officers had expected the order to be given earlier and were just waiting for it.

They scrambled into action, barking orders and dispatching messengers. Elania watched them go, a grim determination settling over her.

She needed to go find Henri and Gaston next.

# CHAPTER 66 - CONCEPTS AND CRUMBLINGS

Elania raced down the staircase of the City Watch Headquarters. The fortress shook around her, the sounds of battle raging outside. Dust rained down from the ceiling with each impact, ancient masonry groaning under the onslaught.

The elevator had been inoperable, and that had left the stairwell.

She was already halfway down when she realized she could have climbed back to the roof and simply flown to the ground.

Without warning, a chunk of the wall exploded inward, stonework shattering under a blanket of golden light. Elania cursed, throwing up her arms to shield her face from the flying debris.

The staircase shuddered, cracks spider webbing out from the point of impact. Elania didn't hesitate. She gathered herself and leaped across the gap.

She landed on the other side, her knees flexing to absorb the impact. The fortress shook again, and she had to brace herself against the wall with a wing to keep her balance.

"Damm it," she muttered. One of the major advantages they had so far during the fighting was that the enemy lacked any siege equipment. They had been attacking fortified positions, but the walls had been an equalizer.

From the golden light she'd seen, it was probably something the monks had used.

Their golden bells weren't that long ranged, but it was possible they had something else for smashing stonework. She just wasn't sure why they hadn't brought it out sooner.

The fortress wasn't going to hold.

The order to evacuate was probably given far, far too late.

At the bottom of the stairwell was a scene of barely controlled chaos. Wounded guards lay scattered about, their armor rent and bloodied. Many of them moaned in pain, while others weren't moving at all.

A harried-looking lieutenant barked orders, his voice hoarse from shouting. "Get those stretchers loaded! We need to be ready to move at a moment's notice!"

Less injured guards hurried to comply, lifting and tending to their fallen comrades. Another group worked with grim efficiency, stacking the bodies out of the way. Another man passed through, wielding a large mop that did its best to shove the splattered floor clear.

Elania approached the lieutenant, who looked up at her with apprehension. "Lady Elania," he said, inclining his head respectfully.

Elania nodded, her mind already racing ahead. “We need to secure the wall that leads to the Magistry,” she replied.

The lieutenant frowned, his brow furrowing. “The wall is broken in places,” he said, hesitation creeping into his voice. “And the ramp was scuttled when it was clear we would lose it. There’s no easy way up or down.”

Elania fixed him with a steely gaze. “You’ll need to find a way to manufacture a ramp we can put down. The order is coming down the line for a full evacuation of the fortress to the Magistry.”

The man blanched. “We’ll never make it.”

“We will. Just follow orders and start organizing a team. The ramp is critical or everyone here is going to die,” Elania answered.

He stared at her for another second. She wondered if he had thought they would all be dying already, and that she was insane for suggesting otherwise.

Suddenly steel slid into his spine, and he nodded. “I’ll see to it.”

He turned and started barking orders at several of the other guards as she headed down to the ground floor of the lobby.

As she stepped onto the ground floor, her eyes scanned the scene. The once orderly headquarters had transformed into a hive of frenzied activity. Guards rushed about, forming new units from the shattered remnants of their former squads.

The air buzzed with a mixture of fear and determination.

A grizzled sergeant barked orders, his voice cutting through the din. “First squad, you’re on point! Second squad, cover their flanks! We’ve got to hold that line!”

The Guards snapped to attention, their faces grim. Each man fingered his musket or sword nervously, and then the order to move went out.

Elania followed them.

The courtyard was chaos, contained. The walls in every direction crackled with the non-stop roar of cannon and musket fire.

Guards on the walls took turns popping up from crenulations to fire, then duck down to reload. Half of them were using crossbows, having run out of shock-crystals.

A sphere slammed into a nearby wall, sending the upper part of it shattering, the men and stonework flying into the air and landing just in front of her. She extended her wings to their maximum size and caught it all, softening the impact to the men and preventing the debris from landing on the dozen men that had been standing underneath it.

Further away, others weren't so lucky.

She sat down the bulk of it gently and moved toward the main gatehouse.

A numb feeling passed through her. Why did [Divinity] only destroy? Where were the healing light spells and magic? She should have been able to heal everyone she had passed, including those in the hallways.

She nearly tripped as a wounded man grabbed her ankle.

"Water," he croaked, his eyes looking glassy and lost. He had a hole in his chest.

She froze. Kneeling down, she took his hand. "I don't have any. I'm sorry."

Closing her eyes, she tried to will her [Power] into him, to somehow heal him. [Divinity] tinged the effect yellow, and a thin aura of light surrounded him.

It didn't work. She didn't have the ability to heal.

A sudden realization of the transformation she wore as a cloak over herself hit her like a sledgehammer. Seraphs didn't heal. They punished. They killed.

That was their nature.

**[Absorb the lingering Power from Guard – Human – Lvl 133?]**

Anger roiled off of her as she stood back up. She took the essence, and the man disintegrated into a pool of mist she shunted into one of her mana shards, partially refilling it.

No one even looked at the act that felt entirely too much like failure.

She hadn't received any requests during her trip through the headquarters, despite walking through the pools of blood, but that was likely a good thing.

How would they have reacted if their dead brothers and sisters had suddenly started dissolving before them?

She picked up her pace toward the Gatehouse without missing a beat. When she was nearly to it she spread her wings and leaped up and slipped through the gap between the roof and the main room of the building.

Guards stood at slits and fired out of them. Others manned a cauldron of boiling liquid and poured it out the outer gate. Screams filled the air.

Gaston stood at the center of the maelstrom; a bandage wrapped around his head covering one eye.

"Get those cannons reloaded! And someone bring me a report on the east wall!" the man shouted.

A younger soldier rushed from one of the windows to him, his face pale. "Sir, the east wall is holding for now, but they've raised the yellow flag! They can't hold out much longer!"

Gaston grimaced, his good eye narrowing. "Avel! Ornick! Get over there and support! Take a pack of shocks!"

Two men rushed to obey, carrying a bag of shock crystals with them. The pile he snatched them from was pitifully small compared

to the rate of fire spitting out of the defenses, with only a half dozen remaining.

Gaston turned, catching sight of Elania. His eye widened in surprise.

“Lieutenant,” she greeted, nodding respectfully.

Gaston turned, his good eye widening in surprise. “Elania,” he grunted, his voice strained. “I’ve seen you flying around. Didn’t think you’d make it here.”

Elania winced as she took in his bandaged head and exhausted stance. Why he was still fighting with the injury was the first question that she almost asked but stopped herself short.

She knew why he was still fighting. It was the only thing left for him to do, other than sit down and wait to be killed.

“Are you in charge of the entire wall?” Elania asked.

Gaston grunted. “The other officers are wounded, busy, or... withdrew to request clarification from the Magister. The inner fortress is now being assaulted. Someone has to hold the line.”

Elania glanced toward the fortress as another volley of cannons belched out resistance to the attackers. Some of those officers she’d passed by had fled. It was a sour thought.

“What about Henri? Have you seen him?” Elania asked in a hurry. She needed to know for Yolani.

Gaston grunted, moving to the wall’s edge to look out a slit. “He’s on the west wall somewhere. Probably trying to be a hero.”

Elania nodded. She needed to make sure he was safe. But first she needed to deliver the news.

“I just spoke with Magister Bannon,” she said. “The Guard will be evacuating the fortress to the Magistry. Word will be down the line soon, but we need to prepare for a fighting retreat.”



Gaston's eye widened in surprise, then narrowed. "An evacuation? That's not going to be—"

A deafening crash interrupted him, the sound of wood splintering and stone cracking. Both of them rushed to the hole that stood over the area behind the outer gate. A second slam sent splinters of stone into the inner gate while metal groaned and protested.

"That's a ram! Oil!" Gaston shouted.

"There is none left!" came back a reply from above.

Elania grunted.

Gaston looked at her. "We won't hold long enough for anyone to organize an evacuation," he said grimly.

Elania reached out and gripped his arm firmly. "Lieutenant, I need you to do something for me."

Gaston looked at her with a frown. "What is it?"

"Send someone to find Henri," she said, her voice urgent. "Send someone to get him and keep him safe, put him in with the second or third group of evacuees. That should be safest."

Gaston's frown only deepened. "Elania, I don't think you understand the situation. We'll all be overrun soon. There won't be anywhere safe."

Another smash of the gate sent the bottom of the construction bending inwards. Lightbringers shouted and shoved at it, but the door wasn't ready to surrender yet.

Elania released his arm and stood up straight, a fierce glint shining in her golden eyes. "I understand perfectly, Lieutenant. I will take care of it."

Something flickered across the lieutenant's face. "Alright, I'll send someone to find him. I can't guarantee his safety, though, or that he is even still alive."

Elania nodded and turned toward the murder hole. She unfurled her wings, startling the men who had lined up to drop rocks and fire on the men that would be breaching.

They stared at her with awe and fear.

“I’m going to clear a path.” She jumped down.

Then she punched the gate from the inside, spreading the force across a wide area with her knuckles, sending the door, ram and everything flying outward in a massive spray of stone, metal, and blood.

# CHAPTER 67

## - CONVICTION OF STEEL

Elania leaped from the crumbling fortress wall, her wings carrying her to the lower rampart captured by the Lightbringers.

The ramp behind her leading up lay in ruins, destroyed by the Guard to prevent entry to the inner citadel of the headquarters. Behind her, the City Watch Guards opened fire with their muskets, a thunderous volley echoing through the air.

Further back, they worked frantically to prepare a new metal ramp, desperate to regain the lost ground.

But first, Elania had to deal with the enemy before her.

The Lightbringers had erected a makeshift barricade of corpses, scraps, and debris, using it as cover to return fire and rain down arrows and spells upon the defenders.

Elania's eyes narrowed divine [Power] surging through her veins. There was no need to draw from a mana shard; she'd filled them with the remains of the enemy attempting to breach the gate.

With a grunt of effort, she hefted the massive metal ram on her shoulder, its weight nothing to her enhanced strength. It dwarfed her in size and weight, but she took aim anyway.

A Lightbringer who had popped up to look at her stared, his eyes widening in terror as he realized what was coming.

Elania let loose, hurling the ram with all her might.

It plowed through the barricade like a ballista bolt, sending a spray of men into the air. Bones crunched and armor crumpled as the ram pulverized everything in its path, leaving a trail of broken bodies in its wake.

The attack didn't go unanswered. Conclave monks stood behind the Lightbringers and began to chant and prepare their offensive spells.

Elania flashed forward and spiraled through the air, bells and cross-bow bolts flying past her. Gunfire from the wall called out in an attempt to silence the spells.

She was caught in a crossfire. A bullet hit her from behind, cracking and deflecting off her reinforced leather. The bones underneath re-knit themselves efficiently under the heat of her [Power]-fed [Regeneration].

She saw frustration appear on the monk's faces. That suited her well.

Before she reached the barricade, she formed a massive spear of pure light. It crackled and hummed with barely contained [Power].

With a roll, she landed right in front of the barricade. Half the Lightbringers scrambled away for cover, while the other half climbed up to try to point their weapons at her.

None of it mattered.

She raised her light spear and swung it horizontally at the barricade. Half of it exploded in a flash of light, the explosion angled perfectly to send everything up into the air and away, while sparing the stonework.

Then she swung her weapon the other way, and the other half disappeared as well.

Almost all the Lightbringers were dead, except for a few who had run away early. She jumped forward into a sprint, attacking the monks before they could respond.

They raised staves, bells, and chants against her.

But she was a seraph. And a demon. They lost their heads and then she took their power.

She was just getting started.

\*\*\*

Elania surged forward, her wings propelling her through the air as she pursued another group of fleeing monks and Lightbringers. Her hands cracked with divine energy as she summoned another wave of light spears.

A popcorn of explosions ran down the length of the wall, each blast carefully measured for maximum slaughter and minimum damage to the stonework. She had to leave a path for the Guard to follow her, after all.

[You have gained 3 levels!]

Elania checked her level.

**[Level 188 Lesser Demon (Ascendant)]**

She'd gained a lot of levels, and only twelve more were needed to get her next perk point. She hadn't been able to call up the list of available ones again after spending her last point, but somehow, she was sure that she would get something good.

And her [Power] capacity had skyrocketed during the fighting; she wasn't sure how it had jumped so drastically. She glanced at her HUD.

[Power: 2532/1926]

The only thing she could think of was when she had wiped out Elder Gant and the Paladin.

She'd temporarily held the power of all six mana shards at once, instead of releasing it in one go. Compressed it into a laser. In the act, it had made her feel wonderful.

Maybe she should try it again?

The battlefield fell silent, a rare lull in the thunder of weapons that had turned into a pervasive orchestra. She hovered above the carnage, her wings pulsing with energy.

She shook away the murderous thought.

She had a mission, to clear a path through the enemy for the Guard to follow. Glancing over her shoulder, there was already a thick line of men on the move. Some moved to the wall to fire crossbows on both sides of the wall. Others carried stretchers.

They were right behind her. She needed to continue on.

As she turned, a figure emerged from smoke and dust, blocking her path.

A massive man, clad in shining armor, a blue glow emanating from the great sword in his hand. A Paladin, one of their champions.

He strode forward, his steps heavy and purposeful, without hesitation. Golden lights blared out from the slits in his horned great helm. He locked her gaze in a challenge.

Something possessed her, and she floated down gently to land, drawing her own enchanted sword. Golden crackles filled the air around her as her [Demonic Aura] flexed with her [Divinity] essence.

The Paladin raised his sword, gripping it with both hands. The blue glow intensified. "Demon," he growled, his voice deep and resonant. "Your reign of terror ends here."

Elania laughed, the sound echoing across the battlefield. “Terror?” she asked, her voice dripping with amusement. “This is just the beginning.”

They both moved forward at the same time.

This one she could respect, for not giving her the standard monologue drivel.

When they reached each other, the Paladin swung his blade in a powerful horizontal arc. She leaped over it and it sundered the air with an electric crackle.

With a fierce cry, she brought her own blade down on his helmet; the impact shattering one of the horns before slamming into the solid metal. Her sword shattered, and she kicked off of his chest plate to create distance.

He staggered, but somehow, he didn’t go flying, despite the force she had used. He reached out and grabbed her ankle and then spun to fling her into a crenulation.

It shattered into rubble, and she found herself in the air, falling toward the streets below before flaring her wings and regaining altitude. A predatory grin appeared on her face. This was the challenge a seraph craved.

She flashed back toward her opponent, a streak of divine light. He raised his sword and swung it downward, an executioner’s blade hungry for blood. She rolled at the last second, avoiding the strike by a hair’s breadth. She felt the wind of its passage, the power behind the blow.

As she came up from her roll, her hand darted out, leaving a pulsing orb of divine energy against the Paladin’s stomach.

The light bomb detonated, a starburst of blinding radiance. The Paladin was lifted off his feet, his armor rattling from the concussive

force. Instead of falling, he somehow tightened himself and bounced, then regained a defensive posture.

He spun toward her as she skidded to a halt, then charged. A great circular arc of his weapon had her jump backwards to avoid the first blow.

Despite the distance, it came for a second, and this one sent an arc of razor-sharp wind straight for her.

Elania dumped a mana shard into her [Demonic Aura] and she folded her wings into a shield. It slammed into her, her barrier stopping it.

The square tower behind her wasn't so lucky, the edge of it sliced cleanly. On both sides, stonework fell into heaps on the streets below, turning the bastion into an unsteady, narrow rectangle.

While she was recovering, he cleared the distance and swung down on her again. This time, she didn't have time to move out of the way. Instead, she raised her arms to block.

The blow sent her slamming into the stone floor with enough for that her body dug into the ground several inches, sending spiderwebs across the entire section.

Then he hit her again.

Pain lanced through her body, but she pushed it aside. Pain was nothing. Pain was fuel.

He raised his sword to strike her a third time, this time taking time to channel a blue power that was sure to cleave her in half.

He didn't get the chance to use it; she punched him in the ankle, the [Power] enhanced blow enough to shatter the metal armor. Her fingers and [Divinity] laced [Power] claws dug into flesh and her fingers tore his foot free.

He staggered, and she rolled free.



He swung at her even as she made distance again. The bloody stub she'd left behind bled freely out of the Paladin's armor, but he stood on the stump. Reaching down, he gripped the metal in his massive gauntlet and squeezed.

She couldn't feel anything but shock as the blood flow stopped and he stood, lopsided, on the metal appendage.

What the absolute fuck. He was almost as terrifying as she was.

Almost.

She launched forward again. He swung his great sword to meet her, a gleaming arc of righteous steel. But she was ready for it.

She flared her [Power], compressing her [Demonic Aura] around her hand. As the blade struck her palm, it stopped dead, held fast by her will.

She didn't hesitate to consume another mana shard, dumping all its power into her free hand, turning it into a yellow blur.

It connected with the Paladin's forearm, the force of the blow shattering his vambrace like glass. His arm was left bent at an unnatural angle.

He tried to lift the great sword out of her grip with his remaining hand, but she held it firm.

Elania dumped another mana shard's [Power] into herself. Then she kicked him in the knee.

The joint caved backward with a sickening crunch of metal. He fell to the side, his leg no longer able to support his weight.

The Paladin was undeterred.

His fist, heavy with the weight of conviction, slammed into her head. Her neck snapped to the side, spine shattering and sending her spinning.

He lifted his sword, but she kept her fingers clenched onto the blade with force of will and her [Demonic Aura] more than any strength in

her fingers. Two more mana shards drained instantly, forced directly into [Regeneration].

Her head twisted back into place, [Power] enforcing its position.

There was a second where their eyes locked, neither of them giving an inch.

Then she smashed her free hand into his helmet's jaw, part of his helmet shattered, fragments of metal scattering into the air. He bent back, almost falling from his position on his knees, but he reached out and grabbed her shoulder.

His fingers dug in, trying to crush her with his grip. She reached up, seizing his wrist. She squeezed her fingers like a vise. Armor and bone shattered under the grasp.

He reared back, then slammed his shattered helmet forward toward her face. She was faster. Her leg shot up, foot slamming into his chest. He flew backwards; the fall turned into a spin as he refused to release his great sword.

He couldn't stand any more, though.

Elania got up and then placed her foot on his good arm's elbow joint and ripped the sword away. His grasp around the hilt remained even as his forearm ripped off.

She was forced to pry the gauntleted fingers from the blade herself.

Behind her, the City Watch Guards erupted in cheers. The Light-bringer soldiers, who had been approaching, broke and ran, their courage shattered like the Paladin's armor.

Elania raised the great sword into the air. She could feel the enchantments running through it, some strange mix of artifice and magic.

Encased in the thick steel, she could feel a mana shard. She pushed into it and the blade ignited in blue flame.

She stood over the Paladin and flipped the blade around to point at his heart.

With a final, decisive thrust, she ended it.

# CHAPTER 68 – BREAKOUT

Elania read the system messages that began to blink at her while jamming the tip of the paladin's great sword into the stone.

[You have slain Paladin – Human – Lvl 331]

[You have lost 1243 Karma.]

[For slaying a being over 100 levels higher than you, extra experience is rewarded.]

[You have gained 2 levels!]

[Calibration of System Interface Completed. Synchronization Error Rate: 54%]

[System Sync Rate for User Forms: Human - 89%, Darkwalker - 12%, Seraph - 37%]

[The skill Identify has converted to System skill 'System Analysis (Rank D)' due to System Interface Calibration.]

Elania panted, reading the messages from the [System] again. She'd grown accustomed to wiping them away as fast as they appeared without reading half of them, but this was different.

This really wasn't the time to try to ponder what the heck it meant, though, or why it had happened now.

[Absorb the lingering Power from Paladin – Human – Lvl 331?]

She had really burnt through her mana shards to put the man down, so that was a no-brainer. A quick check revealed she only had four fully charged shards out of the twelve on her bracers.

She really needed to complement Yolani's work the next time she saw her. The leather vambraces hadn't even been scratched.

The Paladin began to glow brightly, and she was surprised at the sheer volume of his essence and energy as it rushed into her.

That wasn't the only surprise, either.

[You have gained a new skill: Indomitable Will (Rank D) – Your determination and force of will are unyielding, allowing you to push through adversity and resist effects that would hinder your actions.]

Elania stared. An actual description of what something did?

A cannonball flew from the City Watch Fortress behind her and slammed into a nearby street. Probably aiming at a pocket of enemy soldiers. She ignored it.

Her [Status] screen came up obediently, still styled with the marble and celestial gold trim. The flickering was only minor, and she focused on several skills.

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank A) (Active) - Emanate a powerful aura that induces fear, unease, and disorientation in those around you. Higher ranks increase the potency and range of the effect. Enhance with [Power] to create physical and magical effects based on user strength of will.]

[Enhanced Mana Sensing (Rank C) - Detect the presence and flow of mana in your surroundings. Higher ranks improve the range and clarity of your mana perception.]

[Physical: Body Conditioning (Rank D) - Your body is toughened against physical stress and injury. Higher ranks increase your resilience, strength, and endurance.]

[Mobility (Rank C) - Move with enhanced speed, agility, and grace. Higher ranks improve your reflexes, balance, and ability to navigate obstacles.]

[Mundane: Crisis Management (Rank S+) - Remain calm and focused in high-pressure situations, allowing you to make quick, effective decisions. At S+ rank, you can maintain performance and detachment even in dire circumstances.]

Elania grunted as she read through the descriptions. While it was nice to finally have some context for what her skills actually did, even if the explanations felt a bit generic and lacking in specifics.

She wondered if the system was still calibrating itself or if this was the best it could do.

Shouting behind her finally forced her attention back to her mission; the Guard had nearly reached her. Every ten or so meters, a pair of men would split off to the right and left to open fire on the streets surrounding them.

They were driving a nail through the enemy lines, but if she didn't keep up their momentum, they were going to stall and be bogged down and in an even worse defensive position than the Fortress.

She'd forced this, and it was her responsibility.

Elania flared her wings and jumped straight up into the air, taking flight.

It was time to dispense another aerial assault.

Time started to blur as she picked her targets. Relentless barrages of light spears bombarded the enemy forces and shattered their formations.

The Guard advanced steadily, their morale bolstered by Elania's aerial support.

When she finally reached the massive chasm that marked the halfway point to the Magistracy's walls, shock took her.

Everything felt like a blur, and she was surprised at how much time had gone by. She'd lost herself into the rhythm again.

The wound had seemed much smaller from further away. It was easily three or four hundred feet across. Rubble from toppled buildings on the edge littered the sides of the canyon, and it was further down than a person could jump and not risk breaking bones.

The wall on both sides was sheared off like a straight cut. Light-bringers raised their crossbows as they spotted her and began to open fire.

She moved back and raised her altitude to avoid it while she considered a solution. She glanced back at the Guard.

They were slowly catching up, while a thicker stream of wounded was being ferried across the wall towards her. On the streets, small squads roved to keep the enemy from getting closer, while crossbowmen and the occasional musket man opened fire at distant targets.

From further away, the City Watch Fortress continued to spew cannon fire on anything and everything that moved more than a street from the wall. Almost like they were focusing all their fire on supporting the evacuation rather than the enemy still attacking the fortress.

Elania's eyes locked onto the crumbling edges of the wall on either side of the chasm. An idea sparked.

She pulled on a mana shard, focusing it into her palm. The [Power] surged through her veins like molten fire. She focused it into a single, concentrated point, her hands glowing with an intense, blinding light.

Not quite a laser, not quite a shotgun. She wanted a fan shaped excavator.

The blast released itself when it hit peak compression, aimed directly at the distant wall end.

The impact was deafening, the force of the explosion shaking the city cavern. Rubble rained down, cascading into the chasm below. The wall end crumbled, rubble rolling down at an angle.

It rolled into position, and then she smashed it again, this time with a much wider blade at lower power. The rubble turned into gravel.

As the dust settled, a makeshift ramp emerged on the far side of the chasm, formed from the shattered remnants of the wall. It was rocky and uneven, but it provided a path for the Guard to cross.

There was the added bonus that the enemy turned to flee as well.

She repeated the method for the wall underneath her, using less [Power] since it was so close. It worked just as well, and then they had a path. She turned and flew back to the front of her allies.

“Cross now! Move quickly!” she shouted.

The Guard hesitated for a moment, eyeing the precarious ramp with trepidation.

She didn’t wait to see how long it took them to figure it out: keep going, or die.

A massive explosion ripped out of the City Watch Fortress, part of the citadel crumbling. The massive chunk toppled down onto the walls and street below.



# CHAPTER 69

## - THE

# REARGUARD

The ground below churned with a constant barrage of explosions as Elania flashed by. She dove low; her stolen great sword cleaving through bodies while her wings acted as blades, mowing down any formation of soldiers that didn't scatter and flee.

She chased down those that ran.

An endless cycle of cycling her [Power] to slay, and then consuming her victims to replenish it. She was so very close to hitting level two hundred.

They learned to keep a safe distance from the wall. Even their sergeants and officers couldn't urge them closer, even with threats.

Even fanaticism had reached its limit.

When the men in front of her on the wall weren't wearing the same robes and armor of the Lightbringers, she almost didn't notice.

But she managed to check her sword just in time to avert a disaster.

The Guard lieutenant from the Magistracy that had pushed forward to connect with them had no idea how close his squad had come to being turned into [Power] for her bracers.

“Report, lieutenant,” she demanded. “What’s the situation at the Magistracy?”

“The defenses are holding, my lady,” he replied quickly. “The enemy hasn’t breached the outer wall. Central District garrison reinforced successfully with minimal casualties.”

A wave of relief washed over her. “Good. There are thousands of men on the way, many wounded. They need assistance.”

The lieutenant nodded, already signaling to a nearby soldier. “Velin! Take that and inform the Magistracy. Prepare to receive wounded and reinforcements.”

The messenger nodded and then sprinted off.

Elania unfurled her wings as the lieutenant turned back to her.

He frowned, confusion appearing on his face. “Are you going back out there? I thought the fortress had fallen?”

Elania shook her head. “They were cut off, but Bannon is likely still fighting. I’m going back for the stragglers.”

“Alone?” The lieutenant’s brows knitted together.

A grim smile tugged at her lips. He really must not have been paying attention or seen what she had been doing already. “I’m the only one who can. Keep the path clear for the others.”

Without waiting for a response, she leaped from the wall, wings carrying her swiftly back towards the besieged fortress.

As she passed over the retreating guards, Elania took in their number. There was far more than she realized. A thick line all the way back to the chasm, where a blob had formed where the injured had to be helped down and up the ramps. It was hard work, and bands of enemies sometimes took potshots at them from afar.

She passed it by without stopping.

The situation on the far wall near the fortress was worse. Scattered groups of Guard held off detachments with ranged attacks as best they could. It was clear that they had stayed behind to give their brothers further down the line, more time to cross the breach.

It wasn't until she nearly reached the City Watch Fortress that she found the first full Lightbringer unit on the wall, in one of the sections that she had cleared near the beginning of the retreat.

She dropped a flurry of light spears on them but didn't slow down to collect their remains.

The fortress was aflame, like someone had filled it with fuel and lit a match.

On one of the ramparts, she saw men shove a cannon off the side. The steel cylinder plummeted, exploding with a furious fireball when it struck the ground.

The fortress courtyard swarmed with the enemy, moving like ants. The walls had been taken. A few defenders held the entrance to the citadel. At some point, they had breached the main gate since she had left.

A barrage of golden orbs slammed into the doorway, obliterating the defense. Stone blew outward and crushed some of the attackers.

It was good to know the enemy's coordination wasn't perfect. Especially with how much disarray the Guard had been in without their telepathy.

It still didn't change the math of just how outnumbered they were, unfortunately.

Elania turned toward the source of the siege orbs. If they brought those to bear against the Magistracy district, just how well would the defense fare?

It would help if she could reduce their capacity to destroy the fortifications. She turned and moved in the direction the orbs had come from.

Her eyes darted across the battlefield, searching for the source.

It didn't take long before she spotted something out of place. Four circles of monks blazed in the distance against her [Enhanced Mana Sense] as they spilled out their mana freely.

Each monk had their hands clasped in prayer, chanting together in a way that somehow amplified the sound loud enough that she could hear from afar.

In the center of each circle stood a single monk, his hands raised to the sky.

At nearly the same time, all four men turned into a golden light that launched straight up into the air.

Horror clawed at her as realization dawned on her. The projectiles that the Conclave had been bombarding the fortress with... where monks. People. Turned into projectiles.

The Conclave was using their own as ammunition.

Fanatics.

The four lights curved toward her immediately. She flicked a wing and spun away in a roll, neatly dodging the first one, and then the second. A sudden flare propelled her upwards over the third and then she dived toward the circles, passing underneath the fourth.

A frantic glance back told her that the aerial display wasn't over yet, though, as the four golden lights curved around after her.

In front of her, four new candidates stepped forward, ready to be transformed into another volley of living weapons. Elania narrowed her eyes and opened her hand, four orbs of crackling energy forming around her.

The monks seemed to realize what was coming because they finished their chant much faster. The reduction in preparation time left the men on the ground shrieking in agony as only part of their bodies ripped away and into the air after her.

Elania grit her teeth. They wouldn't get a third chance. She released her makeshift [Power] bombs. The projectiles launched forward in wobbly line that homed in on the center of the circles.

The monks didn't even try to flee, and the entire intersection lit up with golden light of destruction bright enough she had to cover her eyes as she plunged forward through the air.

When the flash cleared, she realized she had made a mistake. The incoming projectiles didn't die with the circles.

And now there were eight of them.

"Shit!" Elania cursed under her breath. She banked hard, her wings straining as she pushed herself to the limit.

The projectiles followed, their speed increasing with each passing second.

Elania's gaze darted around, searching for an escape.

A building loomed ahead, its windows shattered and its walls crumbling.

She burst through a window, shards of glass cascading around her.

One of the projectiles slammed into the building, exploding in a blinding flash of light. The force of the blast sent Elania tumbling, her wings struggling to keep her from crashing.

She regained her balance, only to find four more projectiles smashing into the ground before her, the impacts shaking the earth and sending geysers of debris flying upwards in her path.

Elania threw up her [Demonic Aura] and punched through them without harm other than a reduction in her [Power] stores.

The remaining three projectiles closed in.

Elania spun in midair, her arms outstretched. Two light spears materialized beside her.

With a flick of her wrists, she sent them hurtling towards the projectiles.

They collided in a blinding explosion, the force of the blast sending shockwaves rippling through the air.

The final projectile surged forward, its energy pulsing with a sickening intensity.

Elania gripped her great sword, its blade thrumming with power. She placed the tip against the projectile just as it reached her, the two conflicting energy sources igniting in a cataclysmic explosion.

The sword won, barely. While she caught her breath, the metal began to turn into dust. The mana shard inside of it had popped with the sudden impact, its [Power] draining the shard beyond its limit.

Drat. She had needed the sword. It had been the most useful of her melee weapons.

When she returned to the Watch Fortress, the first thing she noticed was the relative silence. The signature crack of the Guard's shock-crystals had gone silent, and the battle seemed to have ended.

Dead filled the streets and breaches. Atop the gatehouse, Magister Bannon stood alone, his sword pulsing a deep-water blue. When she landed in front of him, the aura went out.

A crash of water filled the air, a tidal wave rushing out of the courtyard and out the breached gate. It carried with it countless drowned bodies of Lightbringers and guards alike.

Elania frowned. "Is everyone out?"

Bannon shook his head sadly. "Everyone who can be saved has made it out. The rest shall act as a rearguard to buy the rest time.'

Elania's heart sank, but she nodded. "Very well, let's get back to the rest then. They likely still need help to make it to the Magistracy safely. If you want, I can carry you through the air."

He met her gaze, his eyes filled with a haunting resignation. "It's too late for that."

Elania frowned. "You can't mean to—"

He held up a hand, silencing her. She followed his line of sight, her breath catching in her throat. Down the main street, the wave of water diverted, pouring away unnaturally from a group of enemies.

Elder Holt led the group. Flanking him were a half dozen paladins, their heavy armor glinting in the light of Neftasu's light stones. Their steps were measured, purposeful. It was a silent declaration of the impending clash.

Bannon's hand tightened on the hilt of his sword, his jaw set with determination. "Get to the Magistracy, Elania. They need you more than ever now."

Elania furrowed her brow. "We can get out of here. There's no need to fight while they have the advantage."

"The men deserve a chance to make it to safety. It was my failure that caused them to stay overlong, and my duty to correct the error. If I fall back now, then the Elder and his allies will reach them and cut the retreat off," Bannon stated.

He looked at her. "You should go."

# CHAPTER 70 - THE MAGISTER OF THE GUARD, AGAIN (PART I)

Elania looked at Bannon and then at the incoming group. It felt like her heart wanted to wrench, but instead she found cold calculations running through her mind. Fight with Bannon, here and now, or with Keswick, at the Magistracy, later.

The Watch Fortress was a terrible place to have this fight, and at the Magistracy, they would have Yolani's new defenses, hopefully, and the Celestial Engine as a wildcard.

This confrontation sucked, no matter how she tried to cut it. "This is a mistake. We need to fall back with the troops."

Magister Bannon grunted, his eyes never leaving the approaching enemy. "You can do as you wish, Elania. It's clear I have no say over what you do." He paused, his grip tightening on his sword. "But



everyone is counting on you to get the remaining guards to safety. Fighting with me in the ruins of a fallen fortress won't be saving them."

Her fists clenched, and for a second her wings flickered. "You're making everyone else's chances worst by this stupid display. No one will benefit from you staying behind to die. You're throwing away your men's sacrifices!"

Anger flashed on Bannon's face for the first time. Before he could respond, three of the paladins flanking Elder Holt broke away from the group. Their heavy armor clanked as they jogged towards the wall, angling away towards the retreating Guard.

Elania's eyes widened. "They're going after the retreating guards."

Bannon nodded grimly. "You need to go, Elania. I will deal with the Elder and you can protect the men."

She turned and unfurled her wings, golden feathers glinting in the light and propelling her into the air. "Try to retreat when you can!"

He didn't answer, and she didn't look back.

The paladins had a head start, but she was fast. She paralleled them from above and then summoned a light spear, hurling it towards the one in the front. It exploded in a blinding flash, but the paladin emerged unscathed, his armor gleaming in the smoke.

"Damn it," Elania muttered. She needed a plan to deal with all three of them, and fast.

The second paladin in the group turned and leaped onto the side of a building, his boots digging in to find rough purchase on the stone. With a powerful kick, he launched himself onto the roof of another building, his sword flashing as he swung it toward her.

A green arc of wind magic sliced through the air, nearly clipping her. She rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding a second attack. He raised his sword for another strike.

Elania summed another light spear, hurling towards him. He deflected it with his sword, the magic dissipating harmlessly into the air. She dived toward him.

The other two were getting away, and there was no way the retreating guards would be able to deal with them.

More wind arcs flashed by her as she spun, wheeled, and dodged them throughout her plunge.

A ragged volley of musket fire erupted from a group of guards on the wall, the bullets ricocheting off her target's armor like hailstones on a tin roof. Elania seized the opportunity, buzzing past him to aim for the back of the one in the lead.

She landed on his shoulders, her legs wrapping around his helmet in a vise-like grip. The paladin grunted, his hands reaching up to grab her, but she was pulling him up into the air immediately.

Her fists pounded into his helmet like hammers.

A white-hot pain flared in her side as he stabbed her with a dagger, tearing through her leathers. She screamed, dumping a mana shard's worth of energy into her palms, the pour coursing out like a broken hydrant.

The compression only lasted a second, but that is all it needed for it to turn into a blinding flash of light and heat.

The blast sent her flying upwards, her body twisting through the air like a rag doll as [Regeneration] kicked in to mend her side. After several seconds, her wings took back control and stopped the chaotic motion.

The paladin plummeted like a rock, shoulders first. His helmet and head were missing.

One down, two to go.

Elania landed on the wall, her wings flaring out behind her as she faced the two paladins on the street below.

“Quoting my favorite wizard—You shall not pass,” Elania shouted. Her wings flung forward to strike the crenulations, sending a spray of stone at the two Paladins. It thumped and thudded against their armor, and she used the time to jump down toward them.

Two at once wasn't ideal, but she had no idea on how to split them up easily.

They charged forward, their great swords flashing blue and red at nearly the same time. She met them head-on, a light spear in each hand, sending electric sparks showering the scene as the weapons collided.

It wasn't a great clash for her, and she had to spin and dodge by jumping into the air to avoid being slashed in half. Before she could think, she had to dodge again.

The attacks came in a relentless flurry, both of them switching angles as they sought to pin her down and deliver a solid blow.

Behind them, she caught a glimpse of the rearguard pushing further away. They needed more time.

She rolled between one of the paladin's legs. He kicked her, but she planted a shortened spear of light into the meat of his calf, right through the armor. She left it behind.

His fellow's great sword slashed into her upper armor, but it only made a glancing blow. She moved away and then the light spear embedded in the paladin's leg exploded.

As she regained her feet, an explosion atop the Fortress Gate drew her attention. Magister Bannon was locked in combat with Elder Holt and two more paladins. They danced across the wall, Bannon's water magic and blue sword clashing against the Conclave Elder's staff and light spells.

The paladins kept pace with them, flanking Bannon on either side, their great swords flashing with arcs of energy that tendrils and geysers of water cut off prematurely.

Elania's attention snapped back to her own battle as the uninjured paladin's sword nearly took her head off.

Weave, dodge, roll, jump... she spun around the wounded paladin, jabbing him with little spears of light. It wasn't until she moved away from her opponent that she realized the second one had disappeared.

In the distance, he was sprinting down the wall. A loose detachment of guards wielded their weapons against him, but were cut down en masse.

Elania grimaced. He was doing that to draw her further away from Magister Bannon so she couldn't help him.

It worked.

As she took a step to take off after him, she triggered the light spears she had left behind and the second paladin detonated from the inside out.

[You have slain Paladin - Human - Lvl 295]

[You have lost 256 Karma.]

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

[You have gained a level!]

[You are now Level 199!]

# CHAPTER 71 - THE MAGISTER OF THE GUARD, AGAIN (PART 2)

Bannon's sword flashed, a shimmering barrier of water magic deflecting a blast of energy from Elder Holt's outstretched hand. The force of the impact sent shockwaves through the air, the stones of the fortress trembling under the clash of their power.

Elania watched as Elder Holt sent another blast of energy hurtling towards Magister Bannon. It missed and struck the fortress.

The corner of the citadel cracked and then sheared away into the streets below.

A numb thought that if the Elder was capable of that, why hadn't they simply started the assault with that? Why let so many Light-bringers and monks die in the battle?

Maybe they had been afraid of Magister Bannon, and of her?

Bannon landed in a crouch, his hand moving in a series of intricate gestures. A dozen tendrils of water materialized around him, the appendages glinting in the city's light.

With a flick of his wrist, they shot toward the Elder like possessed whips. The Elder's staff flashed, spinning in a rapid flurry before a flare of light sent the water spell fanning out and away.

The water reformed in the air and curved back around to surround the Elder. Spikes exploded from the inside surface of the forming bubble, piercing through Holt like needles.

The water orb settled around him, tinged red.

Bannon had got him!

She started to turn back toward her last target when a flash behind the Magister drew her attention.

"Watch out!" Elania shouted, but she was much too far away for Bannon to hear her.

It was Elder Holt's body replacement skill... or something! The Elder planted his staff in Bannon's back and sent the Magister flying. Somehow, he spun and slammed into a wall feet first, the impact shattering the stonework.

He leaped free from the crumbling stone, but two paladins were there to continue the attack.

One leaned forward to breathe a cloud of fire on him. The rushing flame charred the area, but Bannon was already moving, his body engulfed in a shimmering orb of water. Steam poured off of the construction, but the Magister was left unscathed.

Another paladin charged from behind, sword flashing in a deadly arc. The Magister spun, his water orb exploding outward in a torrent of fury.

The paladin was sent flying, his body slamming into the same wall that the Magister had impacted. The stonework crumbled completely, burying the armored warrior.

A volley of muskets cracked out behind her, and Elania realized she had forgotten her own fight. She turned around; the last paladin had reached the guards.

Ah, she'd fucked up.

The paladin's great sword was cleaving through them like they were nothing, and everything they tried bounced off the pristinely shining armor.

Elania broke into a [Power] propelled sprint.

Too many men died tried to hold the paladin while allowing others to retreat.

Somehow, when she reached him, he knew she was there.

Sliding on the stone, she tried to drop a light bomb on him as she passed by but he grabbed her wrist and wrenched it toward herself. It exploded, blowing her into the ground with a bounce.

His sword came down a second later to slice her in half, but a guard jumped in the way, body blocking the blow at the expense of his life.

Elania didn't have time to process that. The second swing she blocked with a wing. Then she slashed him with the other, jabbing piercing feathers of light through the armor. He didn't flinch from the blow.

He elbowed her in the face hard enough to send her spinning; shards of teeth flying out across the battlement.

A guard ran in to stab him with a sword, expertly aiming for the holes she'd carved with her feathers. The sword drove in halfway be-

fore stopping, point refusing to poke out the other side of the paladin's armor.

The paladin reached down and crushed the guard's neck with an iron fist.

Elania picked herself up, rubbing her face with her elbow. Pain exploded in her jaw as [Regeneration] kicked in. It was enough to leave her panting. Teeth were incredibly painful to heal.

Almost as bad as regrowing a new limb.

The sickening thing was, she had the experience to know.

If it wasn't for the ridiculous array of meta-human post-it notes that had tacked themselves onto her since her arrival in Eladu, she'd have been on the ground screeching her heart out.

She spat a wad of blood and bone at the paladin's feet.

"Slowing down yet, big guy?" Elania said.

He took a step toward her and raised his sword.

She jumped back, out of reach. A quick movement had her rifle sling over her head and then she slapped a magazine into the weapon.

Another hop backward as he began to pick up speed toward her, and then she aimed and fired.

A quick burst of three shots rang out against his armor, ricocheting wildly. She pushed more power into the mana shard and compressed it even more.

This time, the three shots made small holes in his breastplate, and he staggered. Not enough to fall, though.

He took another step forward, and she fired again.

He made it halfway to her before falling onto a knee, hand wrapped around his great sword to remain balanced. His armor heaved up and down heavily as the man breathed.



Elania decided that the Lightbringer Paladins were ridiculous. She wasn't even sure if the system was telling her the truth or not when it reported they were human.

The guards nearby stared at her with shock and awe written all over their faces.

She waved toward the Magistry. "Go on, catch up to the others."

They didn't question her.

Looking out at the Watch Fortress in the distance, she could make out the now smaller figures of the combat there.

A tendril of water flowed out of the ground, wrapping around a paladin's ankle, and yanking him off balance. The warrior stumbled, his sword slamming into the ground to maintain his footing.

Bannon lashed out immediately, a dagger appearing in his free hand as if by magic. It jammed through the armor at the paladin's neck, right between two large plates.

Elania realized the mistake before the Magister did.

The Paladin released his sword and grabbed Bannon's wrist. The fight was too far away, but Elania was easily able to imagine the sickening crunch of bone. She'd just experienced that in her own fights.

Water stabbed the Paladin from below, a rising pike hoisting the armored man into the air before tossing him off the wall.

The Magister's free hand dangled uselessly as he leveled his rapier toward Elder Holt.

The Conclave leader unleashed a barrage of light magic from his staff. Bannon blocked with his sword the strikes that came in from the front, while bolts of water smashed the ones arcing in from the sides away.

She needed to help him.

A stomp to the spine ended the immobile paladin at her feet. Reaching out to absorb his [Power] was almost an afterthought.

[You have slain Paladin - Human - Lvl 261]

[You have lost 1243 Karma.]

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

[You have gained a level!]

[You are now Level 200!]

[Due to reaching a milestone level, you have gained an additional perk point!]

[You have gained a rank in Indomitable Will!]

A rush of power coursed through her. Before she could take a step, another paladin slammed into the ground in front of her as if he had taken a giant leap.

He was tall and broad-shouldered for a paladin, and that was saying something. A blue cloth covered half of his pristine white armor, which seemed oversized when she took in the size of his helmet.

Okay, he wasn't that big. His armor was just comically large.

She canned him with [System Analysis] and received a maddening response.

[Error.]

A frown appeared on her face. Was the skill worse than [Identify] or was the armor interfering?

He reached up and opened the helmet.

Elania hissed as she took in his face. "Paladin Anton," she said, her voice tight with tension.

"That's Arch Paladin Anton to you, demon," he said, his voice dripping with contempt.

"I'm surprised they didn't fire you after you abused your holy sword so much it abandoned you," she replied.

A white circle flared to life around him, and suddenly, six more paladins appeared at his side, stepping out of his shadow, their weapons drawn and ready.

Well, that was truly marvelous.

“Your time to die has come, demon,” he growled, his voice low and menacing. “And I will be the one to send you back to the hell that spawned you.”

Elania glanced over his shoulder. Bannon was still fighting.

Fight, or flee?

A [System] prompt called for her attention.

Ah, what perks did she have available for this mess? It looked like they had changed, maybe because she was transformed?

[Available Perks: (Radiant Aura), (Divine Resilience), (Righteous Smite), (Divine Regeneration), (Angelic Bulwark), (Divine Mending)]

# CHAPTER 72 - TO FINISH A RETREAT

E lania read the list of perks again, a frown appearing on her face.  
[Available Perks: (Radiant Aura), (Divine Resilience), (Righteous Smite), (Divine Regeneration), (Angelic Bulwark), (Divine Mending)]

Well, wasn't that just great? No descriptions, and while at first glance some of them sounded cool, they felt highly redundant.

[System Analysis, User Activation.]

Her mouth fell ajar. What? A series of cards with descriptions appeared in front of her, while Anton and his paladin buddies formed a loose line and readied their weapons.

[(Radiant Aura): Surround yourself with a brilliant celestial aura that allows you to control physical and magical effects in its area. The aura's intensity and size can be controlled, allowing for strategic use in combat situations.]

Pass. Elania flipped the card away, causing it to dissolve into motes of light. She already had [Demonic Aura] and it provided basically the same effects.

[(Divine Resilience): Gain a significant increase in resistance to both physical and magical attacks. This perk grants a passive boost to your defensive capabilities, making it easier to withstand enemy attacks. The resilience grows stronger as your celestial attunement deepens.]

Okay, that sounded better and maybe worth considering. Elania looked at the next card.

[(Righteous Smite): Unleash a powerful burst of celestial energy that deals devastating damage to enemies within a targeted area. The smite can be channeled for increased power and range, consuming more [Power] in the process. This ability requires a period of rest between uses.]

She flipped it away. She already made energy blasts with [Power] and this didn't seem to be much different.

Plus the 'rest' requirement was horrible. How many times did she get to rest during the battle? Wasting her perk on a one-use skill—not going to happen.

Not without a very compelling reason.

[(Divine Regeneration): Harness celestial energy to rapidly heal wounds and recover from injuries. The regeneration rate is increased when out of combat and can be further enhanced by high [Divinity] or by being within the presence of strong celestial energies.]

Bust.

This one she got rid of immediately. [Regeneration] worked just fine.

[(Angelic Bulwark): Summon a celestial barrier that protects you and nearby allies from harm. The shape and size are determined by

the User's will. The strength and duration of the bulwark depend on your celestial attunement and the amount of [Power] invested in its creation.]

This seemed useful.

So far, she had been using her [Demonic Aura] for the same purposes, but it was limited in what she could do.

Especially over time, since keeping a certain level of [Power] in the aura took constant input to maintain.

[(Divine Mending): Mend the wounds of allies using celestial energy, restoring a portion of their vitality and granting them a temporary regenerative effect. The mending can be cast at a distance and can be empowered to heal more grievous wounds at the cost of increased celestial energy consumption.]

The memory of the wounded guard hit her hard. She'd been lamenting the lack of ability to heal. What if it had been Yolani calling out for water?

She'd have been helpless.

But... it was actually useless for helping her with the fight on her hands.

[Divine Resilience] seemed like the option she needed for that. Her next milestone for a perk point was another 100 levels.

Elania glanced at the cards one last time, her mind racing. She didn't need to decide right now.

Anton and his paladins charged forward, their weapons flaring with magical energy.

Fighting them was optional, too.

She crouched and then leaped straight up into the air, her wings snapping open. The paladins skidded to a halt, their faces contorted with surprise and anger.

"After her!" Anton roared.

Magic slices whizzed past Elania as she climbed higher, the wind whipping through her hair. She rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding a glowing blue whip that tried to snag her ankle.

[Skill Gained: Aerial Evasion (Rank E)]

The corner of her mouth twitched. She'd finally gained a skill on her own!

She pushed herself to go faster; the attacks growing sparser as she gained altitude.

Elania glanced down at Bannon, still locked in combat with Elder Holt. She could help him, but—

Movement caught her eye. Anton and his paladins were charging down the wall, heading straight for the retreating guards.

“No,” she growled.

She angled her wings and shot forward, determined to reach the chasm first. The guards were vulnerable, exhausted from the battle. They wouldn't stand a chance against the fresh paladins.

Elania poured [Power] into her wings and even formed a blade in front of her with her aura to streamline the air friction. Her passage left behind a golden trail of light motes.

The chasm loomed ahead in less than a minute.

Elania glanced over her shoulder, realizing there was only one real choice she could make to slow them down. Without engaging them in a fight on their terms.

As soon as she reached the other side of the chasm, she flipped around to face her pursuers. Scattered friendlies remained on the other side, but the paladins were cutting them down without even pausing.

Most had already made it across.

Elania's gaze locked onto Anton, the wall, and the city watch citadel, all lined up in a perfect shot. She held out her hands, her fingers tingling with anticipation.

[Power] surged through her veins as she drew from her mana shards, this time using seven instead of six. The word 'exponential' echoed in the back of her mind.

The energy coalesced into an orb before her, massive and unwieldy. Elania gritted her teeth, struggling to compress the raw power into a manageable form. It fought against her control, threatening to explode in her face.

Finally, the orb relented, transforming into a blinding laser. It tore through the air, as wide as the seraph's beam had been.

Elania's muscles strained as she fought to keep the attack from pushing her back, her wings flaring to hold her in position.

The [Power] poured out of her in an unrelenting stream, and she had to consume another mana shard just to maintain her own reserve.

Just when she thought she couldn't hold on any longer, the laser abated. Elania doubled over, panting heavily as she surveyed the destruction.

The wall, the city guard fortress, everything before her was gone. A gash nearly a hundred meters wide carved through the city and into the cavern wall beyond.

Molten lava seeped into the newly formed chasm, filling the air with an angry hiss of yellow sparks.

Elania's heart sank as the realization hit her. At this rate, there wouldn't be much of a city left to save or defend.

A flicker of worry crossed her mind as she remembered Anton's teleportation magic. A foe like that wouldn't be felled so easily.

She steeled herself, knowing the battle was far from over.

But for now...

She gained altitude and flew down the line. Enemy attacks had halted, and guards from the Magistracy had sallied out from the district



to assist with the withdrawal. Cannons from the walls blasted anything that moved.

It seemed that the enemy had finally been bloodied enough to need a breather, despite their numbers.

The retreat was over.

She was too numb to count the survivors.

Her wings flickered slightly.

She just wanted to go back to the tower and Yolani.

To close her eyes and rest.

# CHAPTER 73 - GUTTERING FLAMES

Elania touched down on one of the emplacements built into the side of the Magistry tower, her wings folding around her like a starry cloak.

She stumbled slightly, catching herself on a nearby wall. The exhaustion hit her like a physical blow, the events of the past hours - or was it days? - catching up to her all at once.

The guards manning the cannon emplacement paused in their work, nodding at her in acknowledgment. Elania nodded back, too tired to do more than that.

Then she did a double take.

The cannon they were manning wasn't a cannon at all. It looked like something she'd seen in a history book. A Gatling gun, like the ones used in the American Civil War.

"Where did you get that?" she asked, her voice hoarse.

One of the guards grinned. “The artificer made it. She’s been working non-stop.”

Elania blinked. “Yolani made that? In just a few hours?”

The guard shrugged. “Guess so. We’ve tested it several times already. Works like a charm for laying down suppression fire at a distance.”

Elania shook her head in amazement. She knew Yolani was talented, but this was beyond anything she’d expected. Actually, the elemental bombs had proven to be far more potent than she had expected as well.

She waved at the guards and headed inside.

The corridors and hallways seemed endless, especially since the elevator was in use and she took to the stairwells. There were enough people everywhere that any time she wasn’t sure on which path to take, there was guidance.

When she finally reached the floor with the workshop and her and Yolani’s quarters, she felt relief. Everything felt like it was pressing down on her, and she needed rest.

Just a little further...

“Elania!”

The sharp voice stopped her in her tracks. Magister Keswick stood in the corridor, her face a mask of barely contained anger.

“Magister Keswick,” Elania acknowledged. “I just returned. I—”

“What were you thinking?” Keswick demanded, cutting her off. “Why did you destroy the City Watch?”

Elania blinked. “I took out the causeways, as planned. They can’t make it across now.”

Keswick waved a hand dismissively. “Yes, I saw that. Good work. But that doesn’t explain why you leveled the City Watch Fortress!”

Elania bristled. Who did this woman think she was to be shouting at her like this?

“I had no choice!” Elania’s voice rose, booming in the hall. “Elder Holt and Arch-Paladin Anton were there.”

“And Magister Bannon?” Keswick pressed, her eyes narrowing. “Where is he?”

Elania’s heart sank, wings flickering. She looked away. “He wouldn’t come with me. I tried to get him to retreat, but he insisted on staying to cover the guards’ escape and fight Elder Holt.”

“You should have brought him back alive,” Keswick said coldly. “That was more important than a few thousand more soldiers.”

Elania’s hands squeezed into fists. “I asked him. I practically begged him, but he wouldn’t listen!”

She spun on her heel, storming away down the corridor. Her wings flickered and sputtered, the turmoil disrupting her seraph transformation. She didn’t care. She just needed to get away, to find Yolani, to...

Keswick didn’t follow her. As soon as she had turned through a few intersections, Elania paused and placed a fist on the wall, barely holding back tears. It wasn’t just Bannon that she’d failed to save, but so many more people... so many more.

Worse, she’d unleashed another attack that had likely slaughtered even more.

Wiping her face with her forearm, she blinked the tears away. She couldn’t break down, not here, not now.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed herself off the wall and continued; her steps heavy. The tower was enough of a maze that she could pick another path to her quarters.

She just hoped Yolani was there.

Elania stirred, her eyes fluttering open. She found herself lying with her head cradled in Yolani’s lap, the other girl’s gentle arms enveloping

her. A sense of calm and peace washed over Elania as she pressed her cheek against Yolani's leg, savoring the familiar comfort.

Yolani's fingers wove through Elania's hair, the soothing motion easing the tension from her body. "Are you feeling better?" Yolani asked softly.

Elania drew a shaky breath. "If I didn't have Crisis Management and the [Divinity] numbing my emotions, I think I'd break." The words spilled from her lips in a whisper, the weight of the recent events pressing down on her.

"The battle, the bombings, the killings... thousands of killings. And Bannon..." Her voice cracked, the pain still raw.

Yolani listened intently, her fingers never ceasing their gentle strokes through Elania's hair. She didn't interrupt, allowing Elania to pour out her heart, to unburden herself.

When Elania fell silent, her voice hoarse and her eyes glistening with unshed tears, Yolani spoke. "Do you want to hear what I think?" she asked gently, her tone devoid of judgment or expectation.

Elania shook her head, a small, grateful smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "No, it's enough that you listened. Thank you, Yolani."

The gentle strokes continued, the rhythmic motion a silent reassurance of her presence, her support.

In that moment, Elania allowed herself to simply be, to exist in the quiet comfort of Yolani's embrace, the world and its troubles momentarily forgotten.

Elania's eyes opened, her consciousness snapping back with clarity. She stretched, her hand instinctively reaching out for Yolani, but found only empty space beside her. The sheets were cool to the touch, indicating that Yolani had been up for some time.

With a sigh, Elania pushed herself up, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. The events of the previous day weighed heavily on her

mind, but she forced them aside. It felt slightly further away, but still raw. She needed to focus on the present, on what she could control.

She made her way to the bathroom, turned on the hot water for the tub, and stripped off her underwear. Then she sat down and let the water slowly fill up around her. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the simple heat.

When she emerged, she felt refreshed, her mind clearer.

She selected a fresh outfit from the closet, the fabric soft against her skin. As she dressed, she couldn't help but notice Yolani's scent lingering on everything - the sheets, the towels, even the air itself. It was a comforting presence.

Her cheeks heated. Was it normal to think of someone's... scent like that? Maybe it was the darkwalker pushing through again.

A thought struck her then, an idea that had been nagging at the back of her mind. If she transformed into a darkwalker, would she have different perk choices? The seraph ones hadn't been appealing other than the healing one, and the prospect of exploring new options was tempting.

But she hadn't been able to utilize the [System] while transformed into a big black panther thing...

Plus, with her massive [Divinity] essence overload, she doubted she could transform into something else at all. She focused inward, accessing her [Soul Management] interface. The numbers glowed: [Divinity] essence at 88%, the rest equally divided between human and darkwalker.

Elania grimaced. She knew she needed to transfer some of that [Divinity] to the Celestial Engine to keep it running smoothly.

But the thought of facing Keswick again made her feel sour.

No, she decided. She would deal with that later. For now, she'd find her partner.

She made her way to the adjoining workshop, the sound of tinkering and the hum of machinery filling the air as soon as the door cracked open. As soon as she was inside, she caught sight of Yolani hunched over a workbench, the other girl's brow furrowed in concentration.

Elania paused in the doorway, taking a moment to watch, a smile sliding onto her lips on its own.

Not everything was a nightmare.

# CHAPTER 74 - LULLS AND BEATS

Elania turned from the doorway, her attention drawn by the sound of approaching footsteps. Magister Keswick strode into the workshop from another door.

The little bit of good mood she had regained evaporated immediately.

“Yolani,” Keswick said, her tone clipped. “Some members of the Syndicate have arrived. They wish to deliver some items and equipment.”

Elania blinked, her brow furrowing as she joined them. “How did they get across the city?”

Keswick’s lips pressed into a thin line. “There’s an ad hoc truce. Both sides are tending to the dead and wounded. Civilians are being allowed to move around, and the Syndicate secretly brought in supplies while covering it up by evacuating civilians from the Magistracy District.”



A chill ran down Elania's spine. She had slept for much longer than she thought.

Yolani leaned forward, her eyes bright with curiosity. "What did they bring?"

Elania folded her arms, her gaze fixed on Keswick. "Why are they helping at all?"

Keswick frowned. "It's a complicated situation, Elania. The Lightbringers invading have messed up the Syndicate's business, and they aren't pleased. They have some protection because the Lightbringers don't want to make them enemies, but the Syndicate doesn't want to let this go off lightly."

She turned to Yolani. "As for what they brought, there are mana shards, magical devices from the dungeon, and other goods I'm not sure about. But I'm certain a master artificer like you can find a use for them."

Elania's mind raced, trying to make sense of the new information. The Syndicate's involvement added another layer of complexity to an already convoluted situation.

Yolani seemed energized by the prospect of new materials to work with. She stood, brushing off her hands. "I'll take a look at what they've brought. Maybe there's something we can use to bolster our defenses."

Keswick nodded. "That would be appreciated. We need every advantage we can get, now."

Elania's hand on her arm tightened slightly.

Keswick turned toward Elania, her eyes flashing. "You need to recharge the Celestial Engine. It's been too long, and we have no way of knowing when this truce will end. I imagine they'll use the Chained One again."

Elania's stomach twisted, a wave of unease washing over her. "I didn't fully recharge my mana shards and **[Power]** before coming back."

Keswick waved a dismissive hand. "No matter. We have prisoners you can use."

Elania bristled, her shoulders tensing. "I'm not going to do that to prisoners."

Keswick's face contorted with anger, her voice rising. "You will do as I say!"

A menacing presence emanated from Elania as she stood her ground. "I am not your slave or servant."

Yolani stepped forward, her hands raised in a placating gesture. "Fighting doesn't help! It only serves the enemy's purposes. Perhaps Elania could fight more enemies instead? That way, the prisoners remain unharmed."

Keswick seethed, un placated. "Breaking the truce now would be disastrous. We're already on the edge, and your 'morals' will be our downfall."

Yolani's brow furrowed in thought. "What about using some of the stored mana shards to recharge? We can refill them during the next battle."

A tense silence stretched between them before Keswick gave a curt nod. "Fine. There doesn't seem to be any other choice."

Elania turned to Yolani, her eyes pleading. "Will you come with me to recharge the Engine?"

Keswick cut in, her tone sharp. "Yolani's time is better spent being productive."

Elania's heart sank, a mix of anxiety and unhappiness settling in her chest. She glanced at Yolani, hoping for some sign of support, but

found only a resigned expression and then a weak smile of support on her friend's face.

With a heavy sigh, Elania turned towards the door. "Let's get this over with."

"Let me get you the mana shards," Yolani said apologetically.

\*\*\*

Elania strode into the workshop, her brow furrowed with unease.

The absence of Eziel or any message from him gnawed at her, a stark contrast to the vivid vision he had forced upon her during her last visit to the Celestial Engine.

The workshop buzzed with activity, artificers hunched over various projects, their hands deftly crafting pieces of metal and crystal into what she assumed was ammunition.

A familiar figure rolled out from beneath a hulking machine gun, her face smeared with oil and grime.

Despite her foul mood, her heart skipped a beat at the sight of Yolani and her artifice-tinged mechanic outfit.

Elania quickly averted her gaze as her friend approached, wiping her hands on a rag. Seriously, what was wrong with her head? If there hadn't been so many witnesses, she would have pounced.

"You won't believe what we found in the Syndicate's cache," Yolani said, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Tons of mana shards, enough to power our defenses for weeks. And that's not all - there was a map showing the locations of more hidden caches."

Elania nodded, trying to maintain her neutral expression. "That's incredible. But how are we going to retrieve them?"

Yolani's grin faltered, her expression turning sheepish. "Well, that's the catch. They're hidden in the sewers."

A groan escaped Elania's lips, the memories of the foul stench and absolute horrors she had encountered in the city's underbelly flooding back to her. "Of course they are."

"I know it's not ideal," Yolani said, placing a hand on Elania's shoulder. "But we need those shards, and we can't risk them falling into the wrong hands. We'll have to be part of the retrieval team to ensure their safety."

Elania sighed, the weight of responsibility settling on her shoulders. "You're right. We need all the ammunition and weapons we can get."

Yolani nodded, her expression turning serious. "I'll send word for the guard to assemble a team. We'll need people who can carry things."

Elania's brow furrowed, her lips pressed into a thin line. "How sure are we on the validity of these caches? The Syndicate could be playing some type of other game."

Yolani nodded, her expression thoughtful. "We can't be sure until we check them out, but they brought the cache of things already, and that will help a ton... and need those shards, if they are out there."

Elania sighed, her shoulders slumping. "I suppose you're right. But I still don't like it."

"I know," Yolani said, placing a comforting hand on Elania's arm. "But we'll be prepared. I'll send a messenger to Keswick to let her know our plans."

That didn't help make her feel any better, either. Elania tried to not let it show, though.

Yolani turned and moved to find a waiting messenger to send. Elania's gaze lingered on her retreating form, her eyes tracing the curves of Yolani's body. While she was talking to the man and telling him what to do, the other girl wiped her face with a rag.

Elania took in every little detail.

Her heart raced as Yolani caught her staring, a little smile playing on her lips. Elania finally looked away, her cheeks heating.

After the messenger left, Yolani went to work preparing their gear. There was a lot of it.

Approval from Keswick for their mission came next, and Elania grunted in acceptance that they'd be going back into the blighted sewers.

She found a corner to sit in that was out of the way from all the working artificers and where none of them seemed to go. An overwhelming desire to transform into a darkwalker hit her, so she could curl up and block them all out and nap.

Elana resisted, barely. It would have probably caused a commotion and throw everyone off their work.

So she sulked on a chair instead, flipping it around and sitting on his backward, her eyes following along her favorite human's path.

If Yolani felt the stare boring into her, she didn't let it be noticed. That wasn't to say the other girl wasn't aware of her presence. Every little glance her way improved Elania's mood just a little.

When Yolani turned and finally came over after something like an hour of work, her arms were full. The glint of excitement in her eyes was impossible to miss. "I have something for you. Maybe it will make you feel better?" Yolani's lips turned up in a smile.

Elania grunted, wanting to tell her that her smile was all she needed, but the mix of leather and metal Yolani held up was very interesting.

It was a mix of soft and hard leather, with bronze colored metal scales embedded on its surface. They were interleaved to provide an overlapping cover.

"I customized it for you, to replace your damaged leathers," Yolani said.

Elania reached out, her fingers tracing the intricate design. “It looks complicated. Are you sure it will fit?”

Yolani laughed, her voice melodic. “Of course it will. I’ve taken your measurements multiple times, and even personally confirmed their accuracy.”

Elania’s face flushed, her mind flooded with memories of Yolani’s hands roving—Abort.

Elania coughed into her hand. “I’ll believe in your skills.”

“You should still try it on,” Yolani urged. “I’m pretty good, but there might be some adjustments needed. Let’s go to our room?”

Elania nodded, her heart speeding up as Yolani’s fingers brushed hers as she handed her the armor.

The convenience of the adjoining room couldn’t be understated, and a few minutes later, Elania had the new armor over her head while Yolani worked on tightening the side straps.

Elania marveled at the way her new armor clung to her form, the scales shimmering in the light. Yolani’s fingers danced across the metal, tracing the intricate runes etched into each scale.

“Each scale has its own rune,” Yolani explained, her voice filled with pride. “They interlock with each other, creating a seamless barrier against magic and physical attacks. And if any scales are damaged or lost, the others will continue to function at a slightly reduced capacity.”

Elania’s eyes widened as Yolani placed a necklace around her neck, the mana shard nestled against her collarbone. “This necklace holds the mana shard that provides the [Power] needed to maintain the armor’s anti-magic properties.” A quick tuck put it under the armor.

A smirk tugged at the corner of Elania’s mouth. “It’s a good thing it works when damaged. All my clothes and armor tend to get demolished and torn in combat.”

Yolani leaned on Elania's shoulders, staring at their reflection in the mirror with a frown. "You need to be careful, Elania. Even with [Regeneration], you're not immortal."

Elania turned, sliding her arms around Yolani's waist and pulling her close. She pressed a gentle kiss to Yolani's lips, savoring the warmth of her skin. "I'll do my best."

The two girls smiled at each other, their eyes locked in a moment of tender understanding. Yolani's expression softened, her voice barely above a whisper. "I appreciate you, Elania."

Heat crept up Elania's neck, her cheeks flushing a deep crimson. She ducked her head, mumbling under her breath. "I appreciate you, too."

Yolani's laughter filled the room, the sound rich and warm. "Come on, we need to keep getting ready."

Elania nodded, her heart still racing from Yolani's words.

She turned back to the mirror, admiring the way the armor accentuated her body.

The hope that Yolani felt the same way about it filled her.

When her friend looked back over her shoulder and looked at her, it seemed like she did.

# CHAPTER 75 - SEWERS, EUGH

Gaston gaped at Elania and Yolani, his eyes wide with disbelief. “You want to go into the sewers? Are you out of your minds?”

Elania crossed her arms, her jaw set with determination. “We need those mana shards, Gaston. The city’s defenses depend on them.”

Yolani placed a hand on Elania’s shoulder, her voice calm and measured. “We understand the risks, but we’re prepared to face them.”

Gaston shook his head, his brow furrowed with concern.

“You already got the escort ready. I don’t see what the problem is,” Elania added.

“The message didn’t say what it was for, just that they were needed,” Gaston replied.

Yolani shrugged. “That’s not really important, either, is it? Besides, Keswick approved of the mission.”

Gaston deflated, totally defeated. “Fine. You both outrank me now, anyway.”

“All the captains are dead?” Elania asked, a frown appearing on her face.



Gaston grunted. "Captain Harik is missing, along with some of his cohorts. We do not know whether they are dead or found a corner to hide in until things blow over."

Yolani and Elania shared a look. The green-eyed girl looked back at Gaston. "How is Henri recovering? I meant to go see him, but I haven't had the chance yet."

Gaston's shoulders relaxed, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "He's recovering fine. The injury to his arm isn't serious."

He paused, his eyes sweeping over the lobby, taking in the weary faces of the guards. "Everyone who was hurt at all is being given extra rest and light duty. We're hoping to prepare and restore enough men for defending the district."

Yolani nodded, her eyes filled with understanding. "That's good to hear. We'll do everything we can to help."

Elania turned to Gaston, her brow furrowed. "Are the troop count numbers in yet?"

Gaston grimaced, his eyes darting away for a moment before meeting her gaze. "Almost three thousand made it to safety."

The words hit Elania like a punch to the gut. She froze, her mind reeling. Three thousand. Out of over ten thousand. The weight of the loss settled on her shoulders, threatening to crush her.

Yolani's hand on her shoulder was a gentle anchor, pulling her back. Elania leaned into the touch.

Gaston cleared his throat, his voice cutting through the heavy silence. "By destroying the causeways, you've bought us some time. The Central District troops made it back nearly unscathed."

Elania's head snapped up, her eyes narrowing. "How many do we have in the district now?"

"Approximately eleven thousand," Gaston replied, his tone measured.

Elania frowned, her mind already racing ahead. “We’re going to need supplies for everyone.”

Yolani nodded, her expression grim. “First, we need to go get the Syndicate caches. Without them, we won’t have enough ammunition.”

Elania nodded, her mind already racing ahead to the challenges they would face in securing the city’s defenses. Ammunition was just one piece of the puzzle.

Gaston waved them on, and they exchanged their goodbyes before departing with a dozen armed men.

They followed the guards out of the room, weaving their way through the crowded hallways of the Magistracy tower. Soldiers lined the hallways, their faces drawn and weary. The sight sent a chill down Elania’s spine, reminding her of the Watch Fortress before it fell.

But the tower was different, she reminded herself. It was protected by the Celestial Engine. It would be difficult for the enemy to breach it. Hopefully.

Outside the tower, guards patrolled in tight formations, their eyes scanning the surrounding area for any sign of trouble. Others had taken up quarters in the nearby administrative buildings, transforming them into makeshift barracks.

Their escort led them to a heavily guarded section of the district, gesturing towards a small set of stairs leading downward near the wall. “This is the entrance to the sewers. It’s under heavy watch, as you can see.”

Elania frowned, eyeing the opening with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. “I guess it’s a security hazard, having a sewer route going under the wall.”

The guard looked at her. “But so heavily warded, it’s unlikely even one of the monk elders or paladins can get through.” He paused, his

brow furrowing. "But once we go through, we won't be able to use the same way to get back in. There are some points near the outer wall to come out at, near the gates."

Yolani and the guard fell into a discussion about the logistics of their mission, but Elania tuned them out. Her gaze swept over the assembled guards, taking in their weary faces and slumped shoulders. The mission was important, but everyone was already exhausted from the fighting.

Once Yolani sorted things out, the only thing left was to dive into the muck.

Elania stepped into the sewers, her nose wrinkling in anticipation of the foul stench that usually accompanied such places.

To her surprise, the air remained clean and crisp. She glanced around, taking in the pristine walls and spotless floors, a sense of unease creeping up her spine.

"Is it just me, or does this place seem a little too clean?" she muttered, her voice echoing in the narrow tunnel.

Yolani shrugged, her eyes scanning the area ahead. "The wards keep everything in check, including the smell."

Elania nodded, her brow furrowing as they approached the first set of wards. The air seemed to thicken, the magic palpable against her skin. She pushed forward, the sensation of walking through thick gel enveloping her body.

"What the hell?" she grunted, struggling to move her limbs.

The guard looked over his shoulder. "It's because you're magically dense, lady Elania. The wards don't affect the rest of us like that."

Elania scowled. Some warning would have been nice!

She focused on putting one foot in front of the other; the effort draining her energy. By the time they reached the other side of the wards, she was panting, her skin slick with sweat.

The guards led the way, their steps sure and steady.

Elania hung back, her eyes darting over her shoulder every few seconds. The thought of encountering Lightbringers in the sewers made her anxious. A paladin would be bad news and she couldn't exactly fly.

There was a clear, visible sign when they left the Magistracy district. Clean stone turned into green muck.

The smell hit her like a physical blow. She gagged, her stomach churning as the stench of waste and decay filled her nostrils.

"Oh, god," she groaned, her hand flying to her mouth.

Yolani glanced back, her expression sympathetic. "The wards only extend so far. We're in the real sewers now."

Elania nodded, her eyes watering as she fought the urge to retch.

Why wasn't everyone else dying like her?

She knew the answer.

Fucking darkwalker traits included enhanced smell.

# CHAPTER 76

## - RANOLF'S

### LEGACY

Elania surveyed the cache, her eyes scanning the sheer volume of equipment packed into the small space. Boxes, crates, and barrels filled every available inch, stacked haphazardly on top of each other.

“Wasn’t it illegal for anyone other than the guard to have firearms?” she mused, her voice echoing in the confined space.

Yolani nodded, her expression grim. “This cache appears to be highly illegal.”

The soldiers wasted no time, each one filling their weight-reduction packs with shock crystals. They started to strap the muskets to the outside of the packs.

Elania didn’t like it. They were already tired, and the weight reduction wasn’t going to help the things outside the packs. It was going to slow them down if they were overloaded.

She stepped forward, her voice cutting through the clatter of metal on metal. “Leave most of the muskets. We already have mostly enough guns. It’s the ammo that’s critical.”

The soldiers exchanged glances before nodding, adjusting their loads accordingly. Elania watched quietly. Tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition... and there were supposed to be more caches.

“Was the syndicate preparing for a rebellion too?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Yolani shook her head, her expression thoughtful. “We’re going to have to make multiple trips. This was just the first cache. There are four more.”

Elania nodded, her jaw set with determination. She turned back the way they had come. “I’ll take the lead on the way back.”

The soldiers fell into step behind her, their packs laden with the precious cargo. Elania’s mind raced as they navigated the twisting tunnels.

What else would they find in the other caches?

The way back was as uneventful as the path to the cache. Her time navigating the deep caverns below Neftasu proved its worth as she navigated flawlessly. When they reached the point near the Magistracy walls, Yolani pointed her toward their exit.

The door leading out was a vertical manhole. Elania looked at the others. “I’ll go first. If it is safe, I’ll send a sign.”

Yolani handed her a ball. “Use this. It’ll light up if you squeeze it. Just toss it into the hole. You’re great at throwing things.”

Elania took the object and smiled. Well, of course she was. She had Rank S+ in it after all.

Climbing the ladder, Elania pushed up on the metal cover, only to find it didn’t want to budge.

“Do we need another exit?” Yolani asked.

Elania grunted and hit the cover harder. There was a thump as it moved slightly. Something heavy was lying on it. She braced herself and then shoved hard. Whatever it was gave way and the metal banged open.

The sound was much too loud to her ears, and her heart pounded in her chest as she popped out to scan the area for any signs of danger.

The Magistray District walls loomed over her, and she spotted the guards on the wall. Two of them were looking down at her, rifles visible. She extended a wing and waved. That calmed them down.

At least if they got ambushed now, they'd have cover fire.

Elania looked back down the ladder. "Looks good. Wait another minute for the sign."

Maybe it wasn't strictly necessary, but she wanted to be sure. The ammo and Yolani were worth the extra precautions.

She jumped and climbed up the side of the nearest building, avoiding using her wings for flying. That would draw attention for sure. Once on the roof, she checked the nearby streets.

The city was a sprawling maze of narrow paths and towering buildings in the area. Her vantage point gave her a pretty good view, though, and there really was hardly any activity to note in sight.

Coast clear.

Elania activated the little glow ball Yolani had given her and then tossed it to the manhole. It went right down the center. Thirty seconds later, the first guard emerged.

Once everyone was out in the open, they hurried toward the nearest wall gate. There was a small door in it that opened for them, and they rushed inside.

Once they were in the district walls, Elania let out a sigh of relief.

Mission Accomplished.

A few other soldiers joined them on their route back to the Magistry tower. Outside the building, a waiting group of men were ready to sort their spoils.

Elania watched as the soldiers unloaded the packs, passing them off to the waiting guards. They immediately began dividing it up and carriers hurried to rush the ammo toward the walls wherever it was needed most.

The sheer volume of the haul was staggering, and she could see the immediate effect it had on morale. Faces that had been etched with worry and despair now held a glimmer of hope, a renewed sense of purpose.

She couldn't help but smile, feeling a sense of pride in what they had accomplished.

When the packs were empty, Elania took a deep breath.

"Alright, everyone, listen up!" Elania's voice rang out, cutting through the chatter of the soldiers. "We're heading back out. Get your gear and be ready to move in five minutes."

The soldiers scrambled to obey, their faces set with grim determination. Yolani looked at her with a serious expression, then nodded.

Elania led the way through the dank, dimly lit sewers. The previous three trips had gone smoothly, the soldiers working efficiently to retrieve the precious cargo from the hidden caches.

The men had been exhausted, though, and they had been dismissed and replaced with a new group. That had changed the dynamics completely.

As they made their way towards the last location, she could feel the tension in the air, the weight of exhaustion and fear pressing down on the men.

Yolani shared a worried look with her.



Elania paused and looked back at them. “Keep moving,” she urged, her voice echoing off the narrow walls. “We’re almost there.”

Despite her words of encouragement, she could see the hesitation in their eyes.

It seemed contagious. Even she couldn’t shake the feeling of unease that crept up her spine, the sense that something was watching them from the darkness.

“Did you hear that?” one of the soldiers whispered.

Elania paused, her head cocked to the side as she listened intently. But there was nothing, only the distant drip of water and the scurrying of rats in the shadows.

“It’s nothing,” she said, her voice firm. “Keep moving.”

A few minutes later, she was proved wrong.

A high-pitched screech echoed through the tunnels, sending a chill down her spine. The soldiers froze, their eyes wide with terror as they scanned the darkness for the source of the sound.

“Cluck! Cluck, cluck, KLUK!”

Elania’s mouth dropped wide open. At the next intersection, a horde of feathered chickens turned the corner straight toward them.

She recognized them instantly.

Ranolf’s Demons!

They had obviously missed some of them when they had cleared his kennels.

“Not again,” Yolani hissed.

“It’s fowl indeed,” Elania replied, a grin spreading on her face.

Yolani jabbed her in the side, the scale armor clinking. “That’s not funny.”

It was funny, but only because the demons weren’t really a threat anymore.

Elania took a breath and then released her [Demonic Aura] with a pulse of [Power].

“Behave.”

The horde of little demons aborted their charge, feathers flying as some stopped so fast they rolled in the muck, while others collapsed.

# CHAPTER 77 - DEMONS AND TRAPS

The chicken demons all laid down, their feathers ruffling as they settled into the muck. The command worked better than Elania had imagined it would.

They all seemed calm, and much less murderous. She didn't even need to keep pressing [Power] into her [Demonic Aura] to maintain it.

"Well, that's great and all," Yolani said, her voice echoing off the narrow walls, "but now we've got an additional problem. The path's blocked, and I don't think anyone's keen on walking through that mess, behaving or not."

Elania nodded, her brow furrowed. The soldiers shifted uneasily, their eyes darting between the demons and the darkened tunnel ahead.

"Why are they listening so well?" Yolani asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Elania shook her head, just as perplexed. Even after she let up on her [Demonic Aura], the creatures maintained their docile behavior. It made little sense.

“Maybe...” Elania hesitated, the words feeling strange on her tongue, “maybe they were trained?”

Yolani raised an eyebrow, skepticism etched on her face.

Suddenly, a prick at the edge of her [Demonic Aura] set Elania on high alert. She squeezed Yolani’s arm lightly in warning. “Something is coming.”

At the intersection behind the chickens, a figure emerged from the shadows.

Elania squinted, barely recognizing the filth-covered demon. Tessa’s red eyes glowed in the darkness, her maid outfit completely missing, replaced by nothing but a layer of grime.

“Leave my babies alone!” Tessa screeched, her voice reverberating through the sewers.

Elania and Yolani shared a confused glance, their eyebrows raised in unison.

The chicken demons, as if on cue, began to screech and run back to Tessa, their little feet pattering against the damp stone. They danced around her, huddling close as if seeking comfort.

Tessa’s arms wrapped around as many as she could reach, her eyes never leaving Elania and Yolani.

“Your babies?” Elania asked, her voice laced with disbelief.

Tessa nodded vigorously, her matted hair bouncing with the motion. “Yes, my babies. I found them, lost and alone.”

Elania’s mind raced, trying to make sense of the situation.

She glanced at Yolani, who seemed just as perplexed.

Taking a deep breath, Elania stepped forward, her hands raised in a placating gesture. “We didn’t hurt your babies... much. They were just a little too eager to greet us, and we had to discipline them.”

Tessa hissed, her arms tightening around the demons as she stroked their feathers. The chickens cooed, nuzzling into her touch.

Yolani opened her mouth to speak, but another sharp hiss silenced her. Elania’s eyes narrowed, and she flexed her [Demonic Aura] heavily, the power rippling through the air.

Tessa flinched, her eyes widening as she sensed the shift in Elania’s demeanor. The chicken demons scattered, their feathers ruffling as they darted behind Tessa’s legs.

“If you threaten my human again,” Elania said, her voice low and dangerous, “I’ll end you and your chickens without hesitation.”

Yolani tensed at Elania’s side, her cheeks heating in the dim light at the mention of ‘her human.’ She glanced at Elania, a mix of surprise and something else flickering in her eyes.

Tessa’s gaze darted between Elania and Yolani. “You should be free,” she said, her voice rough. “Not tied to a human.”

Elania shook her head. “I’m not chained by my contract. It’s a mutual one of friendship.”

Tessa didn’t respond, her eyes narrowing as she studied the guards behind Elania and Yolani. “Too many humans in the sewers now,” she said, her voice echoing off the damp walls. “You should go.”

With a final hiss, Tessa and the chicken demons bolted down another corridor of the intersection, their footsteps fading into the darkness.

Elania turned to Yolani. “Please tell me that’s not the way we have to go.”

Yolani shook her head, relief washing over her face. “No, we’re good. We need to go the other way.”

Elania nodded, her shoulders relaxing. She glanced back at the guards, their faces a mix of confusion and unease.

“Let’s move,” she said, her voice echoing through the tunnels. “We’ve got a job to do.”

With a final look at the corridor where Tessa had disappeared, Elania turned and led the group deeper into the Slum district sewers.

It wasn’t that much longer before they found their destination and prize.

Something bothered her, though. Tessa’s parting words echoed in her mind. The mention of other humans in the sewers set her on edge, a nagging feeling that something wasn’t quite right.

“Yolani,” Elania said, her voice low as they approached the final cache, “Tessa mentioned ‘too many humans,’ but we haven’t seen any at all. And we’ve been down here for hours.”

Yolani nodded, her hand moving to rest on one of her wands. “Agreed. It’s been too quiet. I expected to see a slum-dweller or two, at least.”

The men gathered the ammunition, their movements efficient and practiced. Elania and Yolani kept watch, their eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of trouble.

This cache, the furthest they’d ventured from the Magistracy, lay on the far side of the slums, bordering the Syndicate district. Hours had passed since they’d entered the sewers, and hours more stretched ahead for the return journey.

Yet, not a single human had crossed their path.

Elania’s instincts screamed, the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end. She snagged a bag of shock crystals from the cache, hooking it to her belt.

Yolani raised an eyebrow, her gaze questioning. “Why those?”

Elania shrugged, her fingers brushing the rough fabric of the bag. “They could be useful in a fight.”

A smirk tugged at Yolani’s lips as she opened a box from the cache. She plucked out a half dozen fully charged mana shards; the crystals glinting in the dim light.

“Wouldn’t these be better?” she asked, holding them out to Elania.

Elania grinned. “I’ll take all the pretty gifts from you I can get.”

Yolani rolled her eyes, but a smile played at the corners of her mouth as she handed over the shards.

With everything packed, they prepared to leave; the men shouldering their loads. But as they turned to go, Elania’s intuition proved correct.

A paladin emerged from the shadows, his armor glinting in the faint light. He stood before them, blocking their path, a short sword and shield drawn and ready.

“Behind us!” one of the guards shouted, his voice echoing off the damp walls.

Elania spun, her eyes widening as she took in the scene. More figures appeared, their weapons glinting menacingly. They were surrounded, the realization hitting her like a punch to the gut.

It had been a trap, and they’d walked right into it.

# CHAPTER 78 - COUNTERS

Elania's heart pounded as she stepped in front of Yolani, her eyes locked on the paladin before her. His sword and shield gleamed in the dim light, the nastiness somehow failing to adhere. That was really, really unfair.

There wasn't any time to delay. [Power] gathered into her palm, and Elania focused it into a lance of energy before releasing it at him.

It struck the shield with a crack, spending itself on the shining metal. The force of the impact shook the sewers. Rocks crumbled from the ceiling, splashing into the foul water. Everything around them groaned, a warning of the section's fragility.

Elania cursed under her breath. Powerful attacks were off limits, at least not without risking the collapse of the entire sewer on top of them.

Maybe she'd survive that, but... Elania glanced at Yolani, an icy panic grabbing her chest.

Behind them, the crack of muskets filled the air as guards released a volley down other corridors.



Elania's focus was ripped back to her opponent as he charged. Before she could come up with something, the sewer stone exploded inwards, sealing off the tunnel.

Elania gaped, her eyes widening as she turned to Yolani. "When did you learn Keswick's magic?"

Yolani was clearly rattled, but managed a grin. "After last time of course I'm going to bring my new stone shaping wand."

Elania nodded. They turned to assist the guards, only to find more paladins emerging from the shadows. The sound of the sword and shield paladin pounding on the shaped stone echoed beside them.

Elania's mind raced, trying to formulate a plan. They were outnumbered, in enemy territory, and trapped in a confined space with limited options.

It wasn't ideal.

She glanced to Yolani, who had her wand leveled at the approaching paladins. The guards reloaded their muskets, their faces grim in the faint light.

"Any ideas?" Elania asked, her voice low.

Yolani shook her head, her eyes not leaving the enemy. "Not unless you want to bring everything down on our heads."

Elania blinked. Maybe that was an option actually?

The guards did their best, and Yolani sealed off several more tunnels, but it was ineffective.

The paladins burst through some of the sealed passages with brute force, and the second any of them reached within arm's reach of the guards, the Magistry's men were slaughtered.

Shock crystals and packs spilled into the muck, the prizes of the cache lost.

Elania's heart raced before she grabbed a handful of shock crystals and tossed them into the paladins. She compressed them with [Power]

as they left her hand and they exploded like little fiery blasts of popcorn.

That knocked the paladins back, but didn't maim or kill them.

"Yolani!" Elania shouted. "Remove all the stone over our heads!"

Yolani's eyes widened. "That won't be easy!"

"Just do it!" Elania grabbed a musket and shoved a shock crystal into it, aiming at a charging paladin. Unlike her auto rifle, the musket was a one-shot weapon. But she could overcharge the crystal.

She did so, the energy crackling dangerously. The shot punched through the paladin's breastplate, knocking him back as the musket barrel exploded and peeled backwards like an abused banana.

It got tossed like a javelin at the next one; the metal clanging against a shield. The sewer walls shook as Yolani worked to reshape the stone, but the process was agonizingly slow.

Abandoning the remaining few guards, Elania moved back to Yolani and grabbed her by the waist. She pulled out one of the mana shards Yolani had given her and reached toward the ceiling.

"What are you doing?" Yolani shouted, her voice laced with panic.

"Speeding things up!" Elania replied.

The mana shard glowed, and then a beam of energy punched through the weakened divot of stone Yolani had made. When it punched through the ground, it easily burnt through the building above as well.

Melting stone, dust and debris, all of it rained down on them as the laser cut the path. Most of it missed them, forming a ring around their feet, but Yolani buried her face in Elania's shoulder to avoid the heat.

Elania tightened her grip around Yolani and then unfurled her wings in the confined space. The paladins charged towards them, swords glinting.

"Hold on," Elania whispered.

They shot upwards like a rocket. Yolani clung to her, with wand still in hand. It pulsed brightly and suddenly the sewer below them began to collapse. The paladin's shouts faded into the rumble of falling stone.

They burst through the floor of the building above. It took only a split second for Elania to recognize it was a burnt out building, and she turned and they shot out a missing wall.

Yolani glanced to the side, her eyes widening as they gained altitude. "That was..."

"Insane?" Elania supplied.

"I was going to say brilliant, but insane works too," Yolani replied.

Elania managed a giggle, the sound almost foreign considering the destruction and fighting.

The relief was short-lived.

Below them, she spotted several circles of monks as they lit up, the man in the center turning into a familiar golden ball. They launched themselves toward her and Yolani like golden comets.

Elania's heart raced as she flew fast, her wings straining with the effort. A quick roll was required to avoid one of the siege orbs, and Yolani's grip tightened around Elania's torso.

The other girl's breaths came in quick gasps.

The other siege projectiles shot after them from behind, slowly gaining. Somehow, Yolani got a wand into her hand, though.

Energy missiles shot out from its tip, streaking behind them to intercept the homing projectiles.

Elania angled to gain more altitude and slowed down slightly, and the color returned to Yolani's face.

Just as she thought they were clear, Arch-Paladin Anton snapped into existence directly in front of her, his massive sword already in motion.

Elania rolled more in reflex than anything else. They narrowly avoided being bisected by inches. Yolani screamed anyway.

Anton reappeared above them and forced Elania to dodge again. Then to their side. Then below. Elania jerked and weaved, her wings flashing repeatedly as she avoided his strikes as best she could.

Yolani's screams turned to whimpers, her body shaking.

Panic gripped Elania as she realized just the maneuvers were hurting Yolani, the speed and sudden changes in direction too much for a human to endure.

Another sword slash was narrowly avoided, blade passing just a hairsbreadth away from its mark. She couldn't stop or slow down, not with Anton appearing endlessly around them like some type of angry teleporting bird.

Yolani went completely limp.

Elania froze in place. Anton appeared in front of her, his sword presenting her with a heavy downward cleave.

In a split-second decision, she raised her hand, catching the blade in her palm. The sword punched through her [Demonic Aura] and cleaved through flesh, running down her forearm in a spray of blood and flesh.

Gritting her teeth against the flaring pain, she used the momentum to deflect the blade to the side. With her other arm, she released Yolani and punched Anton squarely in the chest. Her fist punched through the armor with a shriek, and then she opened her fingers in his flesh to leave a mana shard nestled within the wound.

Then she crushed all the [Power] hiding inside of it.

He winked away, and she turned to catch Yolani, the motion smooth enough that it was almost like she never let go.

Nearby, an explosion rocked through the air, and Elania dived downwards toward the buildings in the direction of the Magistracy. They were still on the wrong side of the city, though.

Her flayed arm began to re-knit itself together, a terrifyingly grotesque process as the flesh and bone writhed.

Another monk circle lit up in an intersection. Elania fumbled with the bag of shock crystals before dumping it. She used her aura to prick each one, destabilizing them as they scattered in the air.

Before one of the human projectiles lashed out at them, the ground turned into a series of dozens of small explosions.

“Yolani? Yolani!” Elania shouted.

Her companion didn’t reply.

Elania scanned around them for the enemy.

She didn’t see any directly nearby. It was possible for that to change at any minute.

There was no choice anymore. She needed to land.

# CHAPTER 79

## - MENDING AND CRACKS

Flying in a controlled dive that wouldn't impart a stupid amount of G-forces was tricky.

Especially since Yolani's condition was deteriorating rapidly, her breathing shallow and skin pale.

Blood trailed from the girl's nose, and Elania was sure the only reason she didn't have a panic attack was that she had forced [Enhanced Mana Sense] out of a slot in favor of [Crisis Management].

She landed hard, her knees bending to absorb the impact. The roof groaned, and miraculously they didn't plunge through into the upper floor.

Gently, she laid Yolani down on her back, her hands shaking as she took in the extent of Yolani's injuries.

The wind pressure had been hiding a lot. Blood poured from her nose.

[Crisis Management] or not, Elania's breath caught in her throat, fear banishing her seraph wings.

She couldn't lose Yolani.

Without hesitation, [Divine mending] slipped into her perk list, subtracting her available point. She placed her hands on Yolani's chest, closing her eyes and willed her friend to be healed.

A golden aura surrounded them both, but nothing seemed to happen.

"Come on," Elania pleaded, her voice cracking. "Heal dammit."

Yolani's breathing grew weaker.

It was hard to actually panic more, but somehow she found away. Desperation clawed at her chest. Elania's hand shoved into the bag of mana shards they'd collected.

Stealing their stored [Power] one by one she shoved it all into the [Divine Mending].

The surrounding air crackled with power, the building shaking beneath them.

Yolani didn't stir or improve. Actually, she looked worse.

[Divine Mending] was the most useless, deadass worthless perk ever. A fucking slow ass heal-over-time.

Elania's hand shook as she grabbed one of her bracers. Six more mana shards turned dark at once. Light exploded around them, a pillar of light punching into the cavern's ceiling. The energy blazed through the entire city, illuminating everything like a miniature sun.

"Please, Yolani. Don't leave me. I need you. I love you," Elania whispered, the raw confession falling from her lips.

There was a crack in the air as reality finally surrendered.

Motes of light evaporated off Yolani's skin, the blood trailing down from her nose and across her cheek disappearing. Color returned to

her face, and she let out a deep ragged gasp before starting to breathe normally.

Elania held on to her, sitting her up and pulling her into a hug, her heart pounding against her ribs. “You’re okay. You’re okay.”

Yolani’s eyes fluttered open, and then her hand went to Elania’s shoulder. “I’m alright. Are you okay?”

Elania swallowed and then nodded. “Yes. Now I am.”

She wiped her face with her forearm, then scooped Yolani up into her arms.

Yolani’s cheeks flushed. “I’m okay. I can stand—”

Elania shook her head, eyes still glistening with unshed tears. “No, no. We are going back right now.”

Her wings unfurled, and they leaped into the air as smoothly as she could make the transition into flight. Straight up into the light stones before turning horizontal while weaving through the chains and glaring crystals.

Elania’s heart raced as she scanned for danger. The beating of the other girl’s heart and her warmth were the only wards against the terror of the memory of nearly losing her.

When they passed over the Magistracy district’s outer walls, it was hard not to shake. Far below, soldiers were roiling like ants, moving with purpose to the ramparts.

“What’s going on?” Yolani voiced.

Elania shook her head. “I don’t know.”

As they lowered down toward the top of the Magistracy tower, she spotted Keswick on one of the larger cannon emplacements.

Elania brought them down gently, and she set Yolani down with care. The other girl glanced at her, then they approached the Magister and the group of guards that has clustered to the side.

“What’s going on?” Elania asked, reiterating Yolani’s question.



One of the guards looked at her, then pointed toward an open square below. Elania followed his direction before she froze, eyes widening. A wagon stood in the center of the plaza, a pole erected in its midst. Hundreds of civilians were chained to it in long lines.

It was the figure impaled on the pole that made Elania's stomach churn. Magister Astolf, stripped naked and covered in filth, hung limply, the pole piercing his body from groin to shoulder.

The Lightbringers paraded the gruesome display before the defenders, a cruel taunt.

Keswick trembled with rage. She reached up towards the cavern's ceiling, eyes blazing with fury. The cavern shook minutely.

One of the massive light stones that illuminated the city flickered and then broke free from its chains, plummeting towards the display below. It struck the ground with a deafening boom that shattered the surrounding area. The very foundations of the city shook, and a ripple rolled out from it.

Elania could see a wave of damaged buildings collapsing in response.

The wagon, the chained civilians, were all wiped away in an instant and hidden under the rubble.

The air hung heavy with the weight of the atrocity committed by the Lightbringers and the brutal response it had provoked. No one spoke.

Keswick turned towards her and Yolani, the Magister's face blank. "The truce has ended," she declared. "Prepare for a siege."

One of the guards pulled out an artificed horn and blew on it. All around the district, identical horns repeated the sound.

A cannon erupted nearby, the blast echoing through the air as the first shots of the renewed conflict rang out. The staccato of one of Yolani's gating guns joined the cacophony.

Monk siege orbs curved upward from far away, and then shot toward the tower, their trajectories locked on the emplacements. She tensed as she prepared to spring into action, but the orbs slammed into an invisible dome that spread out all the way to the district's outer walls.

The Celestial Engine would prevent a repeat of the City Watch's downfall at least.

Yolani leaned heavily against Elania. "We need to get to the workshop," she said with a strained voice. "I had some ideas we haven't put in place yet."

Keswick looked at them and nodded. "Make it so, artificer."

The Magister left without another word, her escort going along while the emplacement guards began their work.

Elania frowned at Yolani. "Can you walk?"

Yolani grimaced, but nodded. "I'll manage. I think my... I think my second wind ended. I feel... really bad."

Elania nodded, then slipped the other girl's arm around her neck. "Lean on me."

Yolani fell asleep before they made it to their destination, and Elania lifted her up again and carried her to their bed.

# CHAPTER 80 - CONTEMPLATION AND LINES

The siege continued for days, a constant exchange of long-range artillery, and direct assaults. The enemy's attacks battered the district relentlessly, but the divine barrier generated by the Celestial Engine held strong, repelling each assault.

The ammunition they'd collected from the Syndicate helped, too.

Elania stood atop a rampart of the Magistracy tower, her eyes scanning the battlefield below.

The weight of the mana shards in her hand tingled, their smooth surfaces cool against her skin as she played them through her fingers.

Her [Divinity] was running low, and she hadn't recharged the engine.

She needed to. But she hadn't been able to go out and collect more [Divinity]. Elder Holt and the Lightbringer Paladins had stood in reserve, ready to counter any move she made.

And she couldn't beat them. Not as she was. And assistance that would make a difference wasn't available.

So, the Guard and the enemy army squared off, tossing death and destruction at each other. Attrition for both sides claimed its due.

It had left her listless, moving between vantage points and the workshop.

Yolani was hard at work, crafting new weapons with new ideas and solutions. Elania helped as much as she could, but the painful gnawing that she should be doing something else bit at her hard enough to make it uncomfortable.

Elania's gaze slid across the walls. Machine gun fire spat out over them into streets. Cannons boomed, elemental shells obliterating blocks of buildings whenever too many enemies gathered in one place.

Musket-wielding guards moved from wall section to wall section whenever an enemy platoon snaked through the rubble close enough to attempt a scaling.

Sometimes the enemy would make it onto the wall, but every time so far they had been pushed back with no help from her.

Keswick had spent the entire time avoiding her, only checking in with Yolani while marshaling the forces and staying close to the Celestial Engine.

Elania sighed, rolling the mana shards between her fingers. The [Power] was there, waiting to be unleashed. It just wasn't what they needed to bolster the engine.

If she couldn't go out to collect more [Divinity], there was only one solution, temporary as it was, to boost the divine shield protecting the district.

She'd outright rejected it multiple times, but with the memory of Yolani nearly dying, combined with a complete absence of... guilt?

For the first time, she considered it.

That was enough for her wings to flicker slightly.

It felt like she should hate herself.

But there was nothing, nothing, nothing that she wouldn't sacrifice to keep a certain emerald eyed girl alive.

\*\*\*

Yolani wiped the sweat from her brow, her fingers stained black from oil and powder.

The lamps lighting the room flickered temporarily with each shake of the tower as weapons rumbled. Failed experiments and discarded cannonballs littered her workbench.

The black powder bombs hadn't been very successful. She sighed, recalling Elania's words about the gunpowder's slow burn rate and low velocity.

Which was a good reason the bombs weren't nearly as effective as the artifice versions.

But it had sparked a new idea. She examined a shock crystal, its facets glinting in the dim light. With careful precision, she embedded it in a new custom casing. The bullet was too large for a musket, but it was perfect for one of the 'Gatling' guns that Elania had helped her figure out.

In the space between the shock crystal and the lead, she poured the black powder. Sealing the two halves shut without turning it into an explosion was a nightmare only solved by the very careful application of a melding wand.

When it was done, though, she let out a breath.

"Smaller bullets, faster delivery," she muttered to herself. The crystal would convert to energy on impact, then ignite and consume the

black powder without any delay. The melding of the two forces would theoretically increase the power and velocity of the explosion.

The outer shell of the bullet was smooth for the flight characteristics, but underneath it was a series of spiked ridges alternating.

When it exploded, those would turn into slivers of metal. Elania had called them flechettes.

It took nearly two hours for her to finish enough for a test magazine. Accomplishment momentarily overrode exhaustion as she wiped her face with a rag. When she stood up, the room swayed around her.

Strong arms caught her, and Yolani found herself looking up into Elania's concerned eyes.

"You need to get some rest," Elania said, her voice gentle but firm.

Yolani shook her head, leaning into an embrace. "We need to keep fighting," she mumbled, her words muffled against Elania's shoulder. "As hard as we can."

Elania's grip tightened around her. "And we will. But you won't help anything if you collapse."

It was easy to let the other woman guide her away from the workshop to their room. Elania helped her into a nightgown and then into bed.

"Sleep," Elania whispered, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. "No matter what happens, we'll fix the shop."

The words were like a hot poker into the back of her neck, and Yolani's fingers twisted into Elania's shirt, knuckles turning white.

Tears streamed down her face. "I don't care about the shop. It doesn't matter... It doesn't matter. I just want us to be okay. I don't want you to get hurt."

Elania's hand made little circles against her back as she leaned in close, lips brushing against her ear and temple. Little promises of safety and comfort acted like a balm.

But the panic clawing at her chest didn't relent. "I lost everything," Yolani choked out. "And then you appeared. And now you're all I have left. I'm terrified of losing you too, more than anything."

It felt like a vise had been tied around their necks for as long as she could remember, slowly increasing in pressure.

The face of Lightbringer West flashed through her mind, the memories of the torture, the flaying and healing, repeated over and over again. It was impossible to still the shaking even as Elania clutched her tighter.

"We'll find a way to be okay. Together." Elania's voice was soft, but firm.

Yolani closed her eyes. Fingers carded through her hair, the gentle touch releasing tension she hadn't known had turned into a knot.

She wiped her face with her arm, then turned to look up at Elania. "I love you," she whispered.

Elania continued to pet her. "I know." She leaned in to press a kiss to the top of her head. "And I love you too."

Exhaustion crashed over her like a wave, and she surrendered to the warmth and safety of the embrace.

\*\*\*

Elania stood at the window of their room, her gaze fixed on the war-torn city below. She glanced over her shoulder. Yolani slept quietly in their bed, her breathing soft and even.

Her heart ached at the sight of her lover. She had spent hours holding Yolani close, trying to ease the fear and pain that had crushed her.

The entire time, Elania's mind raced with thoughts of escape.

The idea of abandoning the city, of leaving behind the people, Magister Keswick, the Lightbringers, the monks, and everything else, gnawed at her.

The elevator was supposedly indestructible, but after witnessing the devastating weapons employed by both sides, she doubted anything was truly safe.

Even if she couldn't take control of the device, maybe it would be possible to fly straight up the elevator shaft and cut their way free. Like they had in the sewer.

It would be an escape. But doubts crept in. What would await them on the surface? Would it be any safer than the Magistracy tower, as besieged as it was?

The world above was a mystery. Sure, she'd read some textbooks on it.

She'd read the textbooks on the depths around Neftasu as well.

The words and drawings on the pages did the caverns no justice, and she doubted the overworld treatises were any better.

How long before the Lightbringers or monks caught up with them? Because she doubted they would be satisfied with letting them go. Not after she'd bloodied both of their groups by the thousands. Not while they searched for a sword that had been consumed.

Maybe if Yolani went by herself...

Elania crushed the thought. They'd promised. Together. Together. Together.

Her hands clenched, and she forced them to relax.

How far would they have to run to find a place that wasn't filled with enemies? Far enough they couldn't follow or send their agents? A place that wouldn't persecute them for what and who they were?

What they were to each other.



Her mind drifted to Darius and the Black Candle cultists, wondering what had become of them in the sewers. Had they survived the onslaught? His warning had gone unheeded, but he had been right.

Elania's eyes slid to the distant slums on the far side of the city. Harlock, Kael, Lucas, and the other Ironfist mercenaries were somewhere out there, if they were still alive. Were they still locked in the Ironfist headquarters? Or had they fallen victim to the devastation that had visited the city repeatedly?

Elania slipped her hand into her pocket and played with the loose mana shards. The tingle of [Power] played over her skin as her emotions poked through her defenses.

Closing her eyes, she rested her forehead against the cool glass of the window. Through it, the vibrations of cannon hummed quietly.

When she opened her eyes, it was to a wave of golden orbs slamming into the divine barrier, the quiet of the room distinctly at odds with the display.

The dome shimmered, and Elania's pulse spiked as one of the orbs didn't wink out of existence immediately. It burned, suspended in the air, as if it were trying to worm its way through the protections.

It finally died a second later.

The divine barrier was weakening.

She hadn't recharged the engine.

Elania's mouth went dry.

She knew what needed to be done.

Even if it would only buy them a few more days.

Elania let out a tight breath. She moved to the bedside and with gentle hands she pulled the sheets over Yolani's shoulder, tucking her in with tenderness.

Then she turned and marched out of the room.

Despite her refusals, Keswick had made sure she knew where the dungeons in the tower were located.

# CHAPTER 81

## - ETHICAL

## CROSS

Elania's footsteps echoed through the hallway as she left the third cell block behind, a trail of golden light motes floating in her wake.

The screams and pleas of the monks still rang in her ears, but she pushed them aside, focusing on the task at hand. Each step felt heavier than the last.

The artifice light flickered and dimmed as she passed, the excess [Power] crackling and interfering with their delicate stores.

Elania barely noticed.

The final cell block was just like the last, the terrified faces of the monks peering out at her from the shadows.

They huddled together, their robes dirty and tattered, their eyes wide with fear. Some of them babbled. Others clawed at the stone. Or pried at the bars.

Elania didn't ask for permission as she approached the cell door, the steel shrieking in protest as she took hold of it and slid it open.

The monks scrambled back, pressing themselves against the far wall as Elania stepped inside. The air was thick with the stench of fear and desperation, the monks' labored breathing filling the cramped space.

One tried to rush past her. She took his head.

The golden light illuminated her features and filled her eyes with the callousness of the divine.

"Please," one of the monks begged, his voice trembling. "Have mercy."

Elania's gaze snapped to the monk, her eyes narrowing. "Mercy?" she asked, her voice cold and flat. "Where was your mercy when you attacked? When you tortured Yolani?"

The monk flinched, his face paling. "I... I have no idea what you are talking about," he stammered. "We didn't do anything wrong!"

Elania's lips curled into a sneer. "You chose to follow a path of destruction and death. And now, you'll pay the price." Her words felt hollow, but there was no turning back.

She stepped forward, her hand outstretched, the golden light motes swirling around her fingers.

The monks cowered, their eyes wide with terror as they realized what was about to happen. Elania's heart clenched, a part of her recoiling at the thought of what she was about to continue.

She pushed the feeling aside.

Golden threads flashed out, punching through skulls with ease. Screams were cut short as they weaved through the huddled flesh, leaving the bodies behind to fall to the ground. Immediately the mass began to disintegrate, her will pulling away the [Divinity] that had suffused them.

She moved to the next group, and the next. The process repeating itself as she cleared the cell.

The rush of [Divinity] flowed through her veins like molten fire.

She paused as she neared the last four monks huddled in the corner, recognition sparking in her eyes as she met the gaze of one of them. “Taniel,” she said flatly, her voice devoid of emotion.

Taniel gaped at her, his arms wrapped protectively around his companions, who wept silently into his robes.

His shock quickly morphed into a glare, his eyes burning with hatred. “Demon,” he spat, his voice dripping with venom. “I should have destroyed you when you were weak.”

Elania’s lips curled. “You contributed to making me what I am now,” she said.

Taniel recoiled as if she had struck him. He recovered quickly.

“Joren helped you,” he snarled, jabbing a finger at her. “You should have been thankful.”

A harsh laugh escaped Elania’s lips. “Joren? He helped torture the woman I love.” She leaned in close, her eyes glowing with a malevolent light. “I threw him into the abyss and obliterated his body.”

Taniel’s scream of rage filled the cell as he launched himself at her.

Her hand lashing out and slapping his head clean off his shoulders.

It hit the wall with a sickening crunch, his body crumpling to the floor in a heap.

She turned to the remaining monks, their faces pale with terror as they cowered before her. She ended it swiftly and the golden light of their [Divinity] flowed into her, their bodies withering and crumbling to nothing in seconds.

Elania turned and stormed out of the cell, her footsteps echoing through the hallway as she made her way toward the Celestial Engine room.

The mix of [Power] and [Divinity] swirled around her like a cloak, the wings on her back curling around her, as if to shield her from the weight of what she had done.

The Celestial Engine's chamber was empty as usual. Elania skipped the small elevator and floated down through the space on her wings, landing by the control room's instruments.

The pedestal loomed before her, its surface glowing. She moved towards it with purpose, her mind focused on the task at hand.

A flicker of movement caught her eye, and Keswick materialized from the shadows. Elania turned toward her immediately.

Keswick's face twisted into a sneer. "The Magisters made a mistake trying to work with you," she spat, her voice dripping with contempt.

A prickling sensation of danger crawled up Elania's spine. Instinctively, she began to form a light spear in her hand; the energy crackling at her fingertips.

But before she could consider unleashing it, Keswick opened her arms wide.

The room erupted in a blinding flash of light, and ghostly chains whipped out from the walls, snaking towards Elania.

The chains latched onto her throat, legs, and arms, yanking her off balance. Her summoned spear dissolved harmlessly.

Elania stumbled, the metal biting into her skin as she struggled against the restraints.

Keswick's lips curled into a cruel smile. "The conclave isn't the only ones who know how to deal with out-of-control celestials," she said, her voice dripping with malice. "Whether they're true or demonic copies."

Elania's eyes widened as realization dawned. The geas sigil on Keswick's forehead was conspicuously absent.

Gritting her teeth, she strained against the bonds, her arm reaching for the collar around her neck. Her fingers scrabbled at the metal, desperately trying to find purchase, to tear the accursed thing apart.

Keswick watched her struggle, a cold gleam in her eyes. "You'll pull your head off before you can find a way to remove it," she said, her voice flat and emotionless. "You'll be a good little demon from now on and obey."

Elania coughed, the chains constricting her throat. "How?" she rasped out, her voice hoarse and strained.

Keswick's glare was filled with unadulterated hatred. "You don't even know how your own magics work, demon," she snarled. "You slew Bannon and freed me from your compulsion yourself."

Elania struggled, but it was impossible. Her strength was draining fast.

Her eyes slid down to the pedestal.

She reached down and touched it with the last of her freedom.

# CHAPTER 83 - DEMI

E lania's gaze locked onto the golden scarab as it stared back at her. It floated forward slowly, landing on her cheek. She wanted to flinch, to flick it off, but she and everything else were locked in place.

Her skin burned as its legs slid across her skin, leaving little golden footprints behind. It moved toward her lips. Panic and revulsion flared.

Her mouth was shut, but the insect was undeterred. It pulled her lips open with a gentle insistence that couldn't be resisted. Then it pried her teeth apart and slipped into her mouth.

Her entire body tried to squirm instinctively, to no avail. It tasted like someone had dumped a pepper spray into her mouth and she couldn't even flinch away.

Suddenly, the scarab darted down her throat, and she gagged, her eyes widening in shock. It settled deep within her core, a searing heat spreading through her body like wildfire.

Heat consumed her.



An ethereal figure materialized before her eyes. It was Eziel, his form shimmering and translucent. Elania screamed silently in fear and confusion, but the phantasm remained impassive.

He moved forward, his form overlaying hers as he knelt down. When the shadow of his golden sword touched her palm, the sensation of the hilt hit her.

It was solid and real. The phantasm winked out; the sword materialized in her hand.

[Godling! The chains of mortals might bind seraph and lesser kin, but you hold inside of you the seed of true divinity. The only thing that might hold you are things you allow.]

Elania looked up. The collar around her neck shattered like spun glass. Time began to resume, and the rest of the chains split asunder as she flashed forward.

When she reached Yolani, Keswick's ballista bolt was still only halfway to its target. Elania placed Eziel in its path and reality finally returned to enforce time's march.

The stone ballista bolt struck the flat of the blade and stopped.

Return to sender. Elania swung.

The disintegrating stone reversed course and slammed into Keswick like a spray of buckshot.

Shock, terror, and confusion played across the Magister's face. Elania turned away, tossing Eziel aside to scoop Yolani up in her arms and pulling her away from the jagged stone spikes on the ground.

There was a 'tsk' sound that filled the air as the golden blade caught itself from clattering to the floor and beginning a hover in the air on its own.

Elania searched Yolani's wide eyes.

"Elania?" she asked hesitantly, a hand coming up to touch golden locks of hair.

Wings flared around them as they began to hover out of the crumbling control room. “Are you okay?”

Yolani nodded quietly, but there was pain in her face.

Elania pulled on [Divine Mending] and a golden glow surrounded them.

Yolani’s breath hitched as relief hit her. “Thank you.”

Below, Keswick staggered to her feet. Blood poured from gaping wounds. Elania watched impassively as it looked like the woman tried to shout at them, only for blood to pour out of her mouth.

The memory of Elder Winx coming back after she had kicked him into the chasm hit her.

Reaching down, she aimed her open palm at Keswick and then clenched it into a fist.

The entire engine control room squashed itself into a round ball of gold and bronze colored metal with a crunch.

[You have slain Arch Magus - Human - Level 677]

[For slaying a being over 450 levels higher than you, extra experience is rewarded.]

[You have gained 27 levels!]

Golden lightning crackled through the chamber, disintegrating everything it touched. The astrolabe of the Celestial Engine shuddered and groaned before the spinning metal tore itself apart. Shells of golden metal exploded in gouts of divine flame that melted the tower’s walls like wax.

Reality ripped in great tears, alternating portals to realms of inky black and golden light opening on their own.

Yolani clutched at her while Eziel flew on his own, following their ascent.

Elania rose into the air, her body weightless as she floated upwards and out of the crumbling control room. The golden energies swirled around her, caressing her skin like a lover's touch.

"Elania, what's happening?" Yolani whispered.

Eziel answered.

[The Celestial Engine has fallen. Its share of reality's maintenance now rests upon the remaining engines.]

Eziel's voice echoed through the chaos, his words cutting through the noise like a blade.

"What do you mean?" she asked, her arms tightening around Elania's neck.

It was a good question. Elania listened for the answer, too.

[The concept seed has settled within Elania. She is Demi-Divine.]

Uhh. Oh. She wanted to ask what the concept seed was doing inside of her. Because she already had a good idea of what it was. The thought made her stomach turn queasy.

Elania's arm tightened around Yolani's waist as they floated upwards through a gaping hole in the Magistracy tower. The structure was riddled with massive tears and golden cracks, reality itself seemingly shattered. The engine chamber itself fell away into a collapse, sending plumes of golden light into the air.

For some reason, the rest of the tower stood firm, as if nothing had happened. Elania bit her lip. Somehow, that had more to do with broken rules than any strength present in the stonework.

At least, that was what it looked like to her.

They landed on a floating piece of roof that wasn't attached to anything. Elania set Yolani down gently, her eyes scanning the chaos below.

The district was under a massive assault. The monk's siege weapons were no longer impeded by the divine shield. Golden orbs smashed

into cannon emplacements while machine guns attempted to silence their sources.

A breach formed in one of the gates and Lightbringers poured into the district, thin lines of Guards rushing to meet them with sword and shield. Musket fire from the walls began to erupt both outward and inward.

Around the district, sections of the city crumbled as high-powered elemental cannon shot scoured the area clear. Whoever was in charge of the ammunition selection had decidedly determined that collateral damage was no longer something that could be avoided.

Yolani's voice trembled. "The city is lost."

[The Lightbringers cannot corrupt another Engine now.]

Eziel's words hung in the air, a cold comfort. Elania's brow furrowed.

Her senses expanded, and she could feel something closing in on them. Slowly, but steadily. It would take days, but...

"The pocket is crumbling," she said, her voice steady. "It's starting at the edge of the depths and working its way inward."

A light stone cracked and then fell before a second one joined it. Suddenly, across the city, all the sources of light began to crash, exploding like bombs upon impact.

Each one taking with it a portion of the light that was quickly fading.

Yolani buried her face in Elania's shoulder. Elania looked out across the city and raised her hand.

The gesture was simple, but the surrounding air warped, as if there had been a hitch in the light. The crashing light stones froze, some mid-fall, and hung like blazing stars.

As she gazed across the ruins of Neftasu, Elania's vision shifted.

Ethereal golden lines appeared, thin ropes that ran from the city to touch her. Some even ran out of the cavern itself. The thickest one was the shortest of all, a blazing tunnel of light connecting her to Yolani.

Elania reached out and Eziel floated into her hand. She raised the sword and a golden dome slid down from the top of the Magistracy tower and reformed its base around the outer walls.

The monks' siege projectiles slammed into it without success.

As the dome solidified and turned transparent, pillars formed around the tower's damage, struts acting as reinforcement to a place that had been sundered.

"We can leave the city," Elania said. "We can fly up through the elevator to safety."

Yolani squeezed her, a single, hesitant nod.

[The task is not yet complete. Elder Holt must be dealt with, and my brother must be granted peace from his enslavement.]

Eziel's words echoed in the air, and she realized he was referring to the chained seraph the Conclave had used.

She had no real idea of what torments or suffering the seraph might have endured, or any concept of how long. But when she thought of what they had done to Yolani without a second thought, her resolve hardened.

A sudden sense of purpose washed over her.

"You're right," she said, her grip tightening on Eziel's hilt. "We can't leave until we see things to the end."

# CHAPTER 84

## - SILENCE, MORTAL!

Elania scanned the besieged district as she considered what to do next. The monks' siege weapons pounded relentlessly against her newly formed barrier. It didn't stop the troops on the ground, though.

But it looked like the defenders had rallied and surged forward to push them back with her reformation of the defenses.

"What are we going to do?" Yolani asked.

"I'm not sure," Elania replied. She glanced at her partner. "I can't bring you with me, though."

Yolani's lips turned into a frown. "Why not?"

"I'm not sure how strong the seraph is, and I feel like I'll need to focus on the fight," Elania replied.

Beside her, Yolani tensed. "I'm not—"

“—helpless. I know that! You’re amazing, and wonderful, and brilliant, and beautiful, and I wouldn’t want anyone else in the world to have my back!” Elania’s exuberance silenced the complaint.

Yolani blinked, her cheeks heating in the chaotic flickering of the light stones.

“But right now, there is something inside of me, and it’s burning me up. I’m not sure I can control it, and I don’t want to hurt you by accident,” Elania said. She looked away, out toward the Conclave fortress. “Besides, you need to pack our things and pick what we are taking with us. I’m not sure there will be much time after the fight.”

Yolani turned toward her and pressed a kiss against her lips. Elania responded, her arm pulling the other girl in close.

“Okay,” Yolani breathed. “Are you sure the tower isn’t going to collapse if you put me running around in it?”

Elania glanced to the floating piece of roof they were standing on. “As long as I’m alive, the tower and barrier will hold. Just don’t go outside of it.”

Yolani stared into her eyes and Elania gazed back for several more seconds. Finally the artificer nodded. “Okay! Let’s get this over with so you can come back to me, and we can go find some sandwiches and drink large amounts of sugar-milk and fru juice.”

Elania blinked rapidly, surprised by the outburst. But... it wasn’t something she’d object to.

[Further reinforcement is advised, Godling. The divine remnants are yours to manipulate and control. You should do so while they remain.]

Elania looked back down at the Magistracy district. He was right. Her power was amplified by the release of energies from the engine bursting, and her will was supreme in its realm—Neftasu and the sur-

rounding depths. Stronger and more potent the closer to the engine's center.

It wouldn't last forever. As much as the [Divinity] essence running through her wanted to pretend, she wasn't a goddess.

Just... half of one?

Elania reached out toward the outer walls. Stones that had been shattered by the monks' weapons reformed across the entire circle of fortifications. They floated up into the air and then replaced themselves, melting into the remaining stonework like they had never been damaged at all.

Every guard inside the dome began to glow with golden light as [Divine Mending] took hold of their flesh and bodies, removing wounds and restoring their stamina. Exhaustion reversed course, and everyone affected would be sharper.

The district was still far from pristine, but it was no longer on the brink of collapse.

Elania's wings erupted from her back, the golden feathers nearly solid. Yolani reached out and grabbed one, running her fingers through it. "They're soft."

"Not as soft as you," Elania quipped, a grin appearing on the edge of her lips. She scooped Yolani up, eliciting a yelp, and then they moved back toward a more solid section of the tower.

"Elania! That's not fair!" Yolani protested.

Elania let out a giggle, like the world around them wasn't a fucked up place and falling apart in real-time. Eziel floated around them both protectively, like a ward.

There was a sturdy balcony near to where their workshop and quarters were located and Elania picked that as their destination. She set Yolani down and her expression turned serious. "You should get our things packed up."



Yolani nodded, her emerald eyes flickering. “Uh...Uhm. If you are leaving, are you sure there is a way down?”

Elania glanced down at the ground far below. “If the elevator isn’t working, and all the stairs are taken out... are you going to let that stop you?”

Yolani closed her mouth. The resolve Elania knew was there, appearing.

“I can figure something out,” Yolani said.

Elania nodded. “I’ll be back soon.”

She started to turn away, but then Yolani grabbed her and kissed her greedily. Elania’s wings curled around them and glittered even more brilliantly on their own.

“Just so you remember to come back for me,” Yolani breathed, when they finally came apart.

“My wings didn’t flicker out...” Elania said without thinking.

Yolani raised an eyebrow.

[Emotional disruption is a trait of seraphs, Godling. You are no longer transformed into one.]

“Gosh. Can’t even focus on our goodbye?” Yolani asked in a playful, mocking tone. She reached up and flicked Elania’s forehead. “Go on. Hurry. Don’t keep me waiting too long.”

“Right,” Elania said. “Love you.”

She spread her wings out and floated upward and then turned to flash out into the air.

A “Love you!” floated on the wind after her.

Eziel kept pace with her, the golden blade making a lazy orbit around her. They would reach the other side of the city in just a minute or two at the ridiculous speed they had reached.

She pulled up her [Status] which flickered into place obediently. The static and noise that had been present when she had been transformed into a seraph was gone.

The panel was a deep purple, with lines running through it like a circuit. That was new.

She scanned the information.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

She was still, her. That was good.

[Level 231 Lesser Demon (Demi-Divine)]

Keswick had boosted her levels a good bit, and the ascendant part had been replaced.

[Karma: 1391]

That wasn't the best. She'd nearly lost all of her ridiculous starting stash of karma. Actually, it was a miracle that she had any at all left, but she supposed that most of the people she had killed didn't actually reduce or add to it much.

[Perks: (Divine Mending) (Soul Siphon - Visible) (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration) (Demonic Transformation)]

That looked right.

[Class: Celestial Warrior]

Elania grunted. She didn't like how classes worked, basically just turning to whatever the person thought of themselves. She remembered someone mentioning that it was also governed by one of the Celestial Engines. Would the [System] still work the same now that one had been destroyed?

A frown crossed Elania's lips as she realized something was missing. Something important.

She tried to pull up her normal HUD menu, but it didn't work.

Alarm pulsed through her. "Where's my power gauge?"

[Power is a mortal concept, Godling. You are no longer mortal, at least not while the concept seed lives within you.]

Elania blinked. Did that mean she had unlimited [Power] or that she couldn't use it?

The Conclave Fortress grew in size as they approached. There wasn't much time.

"What about the captured Seraph? How are we going to deal with it?" she asked.

[My brother was chained by the Conclave during the founding of the city as a punishment for a failure. He has served as their source of divinity and power, allowing them to hunt demons and others with abilities beyond their due. I am afraid his madness will not relent. There is no reason to attempt negotiations.]

Elania nodded grimly.

Elania flared her wings as she reached the chasm in front of the fortress. Below, she spotted two hastily reconstructed bridges spanning the abyss, connecting the fortress to the Conclave and Syndicate districts.

Monks moved across them, although nothing like the numbers she remembered seeing during her escape. Most had likely already entered the city.

Her eyes narrowed. There was no reason to leave the connections.

Without a word, Eziel floated into her hand, the blade shimmering with golden energy. She swung it toward the bridge below her gently, a casual warm up swing.

The air pressure turned into a shockwave and sliced into the structure, severing its spine and sending it tumbling into the abyss below along with the monks still crossing it.

Oh. It had been easier than she had thought.

She turned her attention to the second bridge, which was much further away.

[The other is too far away.]

Elania grunted, then slipped her hand into her pouch. A handful of shock crystals glittered between her fingers. [Throwing] rank S+ right?

The crystals streaked through the air like blazing comets, leaving trails of light in their wake. They slammed into the bridge at even intervals, their impacts sending shockwaves rippling through the structure.

Then they exploded.

There were no screams or reactions from the people on the bridge. They simply ceased to exist in an instant, their bodies, and the bridge disintegrating into ash.

Elania turned her attention to the Conclave Fortress itself.

The stone face was battered and deformed from her previous attack with the strategic laser. The hardened lava had cooled, forming a new floor, and the main gates she landed in front of had burst out of their hinges, now permanently ajar.

A crowd of monks hurried inside, seeking refuge from her wrath. She remained unhurried as she landed lightly and then stepped forward.

Halfway to the entrance, a white circle appeared on the lava stone in front of her and enemies began to materialize from within its bounds.

Arch Paladin Anton emerged first, his armor gleaming in the fading light. Elder Holt followed close behind, his face twisted into a scowl.

An entire platoon of Lightbringer paladins followed, their weapons drawn and ready for battle. A dozen senior monks filled out the rank behind them, their robes fluttering in a gentle cave wind.

Elania surveyed them all, her golden eyes taking in the numbers.

Eziel floated around her, then moved to her hand when she held out her palm.

“You have caused enough suffering and destruction,” Elania declared, her voice ringing out across the battered stone. “It ends here.”

Anton stepped forward. “You—”

“Silence. I don’t need to hear it,” Elania said, cutting him off.

The paladin’s hand went to his throat, alarm filling his face.

The monks looked at each other in confusion, trying to speak, but their voices lost.

A smirk appeared on the edge of Elania’s lips.

It was time to take out the trash.

# CHAPTER 85 - RIGHTEOUS TRASH DISPOSAL

The senior monks acted first, their hands moving rapidly in some type of sutra.

Silent sutras.

It was nice that she didn't have to listen to their stupid chanting that had started to grate on her nervous way before the major conflict in the city had ever started.

The golden bells flew at her in a wave, their converging forms melting into each other to form a solid wall of divine energy.

She raised her empty hand and clenched it into a fist.

The arc of gold froze, snapped, and then fell to the ground in tiny disintegrating shards.

Anton led the charge of paladins next. Their armor gleamed brilliantly in the chaotic flicker of the damaged light stones hanging in the air. The charge was done in complete silence, her edict of silence unbroken.

Elania tossed Eziel into the air and then swiped her hand at them. Eziel flashed, making a horizontal strike through their ranks.

The first two paladins were sliced cleanly in half, their bodies falling to the ground in a spray of blood.

A few threw themselves to the ground, while others raised their weapons and shields to block the attack. The force of the impact slammed those that were struck into each other before sending them flying out into the city chasm like leaves in the wind.

The Arch Paladin was the only one remaining standing. A dozen others did their best to pick themselves off the ground. They glanced around, finding two-thirds of their number missing.

They didn't back down, but then she didn't expect that anything would break the paladin's morale. She had firsthand experience of just how far they would go.

Elania raised her hand, and Eziel flew back to her. She caught the hilt effortlessly, her golden eyes never leaving Anton's face.

The Arch Paladin's expression was twisted with rage and frustration. His mouth moved silently as he tried to speak again. Elania's smile turned cruel.

Eziel wasn't the only weapon she had. She reached up and unslung Yolani's artifice rifle off her back. She held it out, and it floated into the air. From her pack, all her magazines floated out to the weapon as well.

One of them clicked into place, and then the weapon swiveled on its own toward the nearest paladin. It opened fire, breaking the sudden lull and sending the paladins diving for cover behind hastily erected shields provided by the monks.

The bullets ricocheted off the shimmering wall of divine energy, sparks flying as the projectiles were deflected harmlessly away.

Elder Holt flashed out of existence, his form blurring and disappearing from view. He reappeared beside Elania, his hand outstretched to strike her down.

But Elania was faster.

She reached out and grabbed him by the throat without looking away from Anton, her fingers closing around the Elder's neck like a vise. Elder Holt's eyes bulged in surprise, his mouth opening in a silent gasp as he struggled against her grip.

Time seemed to slow down around them, the chaos of the battle fading into the background as Elania had an epiphany.

Magic was the power to create change, working against the rules of reality. It was the ability to bend and shape the world around them, to make the impossible possible.

But Divinity... was something else entirely.

Divinity was the power to rewrite the rules of reality itself. It was the ability to alter the very fabric of existence, to change the fundamental laws that governed Eladu.

The Celestial Engines maintained the rules of reality, and lesser uses of Divinity only overwrote them temporarily.

The workings of Elder Holt's abilities became clear to her.

He was using magic to guide the changes he desired—his illusions—and then utilizing his stolen Divinity to make them real. His substitution power was no different.

A flurry of thoughts raced through Elania's mind as she held the struggling Elder in her grasp.

Divinity, she realized, could be stolen, just as the monks had done from the seraph, but it could also be granted.



Mortals could receive divinity from their god, a seraph, or even a machine. Clerics and priests could wield their power without resorting to theft.

She wasn't sure how she knew this. Was it the engine—the concept seed that Eziel had mentioned—speaking to her?

The knowledge felt true, resonating deep within her being, even as she grappled with the implications of her newfound understanding.

Elania's gaze drifted over her shoulder, taking in the intricate web of connections that stretched out behind her.

The threads were clear to her now, each one representing a bond she had formed during her time in this world. Henri, Gaston, Harlock—their names stood out among the dozens of tiny filaments that connected her to the people she had encountered in passing.

But amidst the tapestry of relationships, one thread shone brighter than all the rest.

It was the connection she shared with Yolani; a bond that blazed with an intensity unmatched by any other.

The sight of it brought a smile to Elania's lips, a warmth spreading through her chest as she contemplated the depth of their relationship.

If [Divinity] could be granted, there was only one person she trusted above all others.

Her focus narrowed on the golden thread that tied her to Yolani, and as she concentrated, it began to change.

The delicate filament thickened and expanded, transforming into a sturdy pipe that would reshape itself to accommodate Yolani's needs, whatever they might be.

No matter what challenges lay ahead, Yolani would always have access to the divine power that flowed through her. It was a gift that Elania gave freely, a promise to stand by her side and support her in all things.

Elania's attention snapped back to the battle as Elder Holt kicked at her.

Her rifle continued to fire, magazines floating in the air beside it, swiveling like a turret.

Eziel hovered around her protectively, while the Paladins and Monks were pushed back, their expressions a mix of shock and uncertainty.

With a decisive motion, Elania crushed Elder Holt's throat with her hand and tossed him to the ground.

As his body began to dissolve, she realized his body substitution trick was activating.

Taking a deep breath, Elania spoke, her voice resonating with divine authority. "No. You have no right."

A crack rippled through the air, divinity sparks tearing the fabric of reality.

Elder Holt's body remained solid, his attempt to escape denied.

Without hesitation, she stomped on his skull, the sickening crunch echoing across the stone.

A loud echo reverberated throughout the city, and Elania knew immediately what it was.

The seraph had been released with the death of the last Elder.

She watched as the monks fell over, their divinity ripped from their bodies, leaving them on the brink of death.

Anton charged towards her, his face contorted with rage and determination.

She remained still, her eyes fixed on the approaching Paladin. Eziel floated into her hand, the ethereal blade humming with power.

As Anton swung his sword, Elania moved. Eziel sliced through the air, cleaving through his sword and chopping him in half. His body crumpled to the ground, lifeless.

The other Paladins rushed forward, but Elania's rifle was already in motion.

The weapon fired relentlessly, high-velocity lead balls punching through their armor without mercy. The weapon's aim was laser-like, each shot finding its mark with deadly precision.

The battlefield fell silent as the last Paladin fell, their bodies littering the ground.

It was done. Over.

A weight that had been plaguing her suddenly lifted.

Now the actual fight would start.

Elania spread her wings and floated back into the air, taking flight over the chasm that separated her from the Conclave Fortress.

The wall of the cavern began to crumble.

The Seraph burst forth from the stone, sending chunks of rock the size of city blocks flying into the city.

Elania's eyes widened as she took in the Seraph's size.

He was every bit as colossal as she remembered, resembling Eziel during her vision in the Celestial Engine. The Seraph's wings, now physical and tangible, created whirlwinds with each powerful beat.

"Well, he's free," Elania remarked, her voice tinged with a mix of awe and apprehension. "But I don't think he is happy."

[Tabbris, once the embodiment of justice, has been reduced to a maddened beast. He must be put down, for the sake of all.]

Elania glanced at the Seraph again, taking in his immense form. "He looks a bit big for that," she commented, a hint of concern in her voice.

[This is my battle, Godling. Step back and watch.]

# CHAPTER 86 - REDOUBT

Yolani burst into the workshop, her mind racing as she scanned the room.

Artificers hunched over their projects, tools clinking against metal and the hum of [Power] infusion filling the air.

Somehow, despite the building partially falling apart, it seemed like they had tuned it all out in the process of creating new ammunition for the defenders.

Yolani darted between workbenches, snatching up tools, crystals, and components, stuffing them haphazardly into her pack.

“Hey, what is going on?” an apprentice called out, but Yolani ignored him, focused on her task.

She grabbed a set of precision etching tools, a spool of enchanted wire, and a handful of charged mana shards, shoving them into the pack’s pockets. Her heart pounded as she moved to the next table, rifling through a stack of parchment.

Yolani snatched up her most recent schematics, the ink still fresh on the detailed diagrams of intricate artifice designs.

She rolled the delicate parchment hastily, praying they wouldn't smudge or tear. With trembling hands, she stuffed the rolls into her pack, the weight reduction enchantment straining against the added bulk.

Questions swirled in her mind as she continued her frantic gathering. What dangers would they face? What supplies would they need to start anew yet again?

Yolani pushed aside the doubts and finished her collection. Her pack simply wouldn't hold any more, and she had everything she needed to recreate new tools. That was the most critical thing.

With the basic set of tools, she could recreate more advanced tools that would allow her to create any basic artifice machinery or workbench.

She stumbled as the tower shook violently beneath her feet; the tremors sending shockwaves through her body.

Her heart raced, pounding against her ribs as fear gripped her chest. Was the reality torn tower going to fall after all?

"I have to get out of here," she muttered, glancing around the workshop. The artificers scrambled, some moving toward the exits. Other tried to see if the cargo lift would work. Most of them ignored it.

The elevator was out of commission, and she wouldn't trust it anyway. They were notorious for getting stuck. She'd fixed more than her share of them, even.

Yolani turned towards the hallway, then a stairwell. The maze-like hallways were disorienting in their complexity. She navigated the twists and turns, her breath coming in quick gasps.

As she reached the floor level with the Celestial Engine, the air shimmered and warped. Rips in reality floated randomly, the edges glowing with an otherworldly light.

People rushed past her, their faces etched with terror as they fled the tower. Panic and chaos mixed with the distant sounds of cannon and machine gun fire.

Staircase after staircase greeted her. It reminded her of her infiltration of the tower with Elania, from what felt like an eternity ago.

When she finally burst into the main lobby on the ground floor, she felt a relief from the building claustrophobia.

The once-grand entrance hall was now a chaotic mess of guards rushing about, their faces etched with determination and fear. She scanned the room, searching for a familiar face amidst the sea of uniforms.

Her eyes landed on Gaston. He nodded sharply toward a group of sergeants, which then dispersed to organize their men into new formations. Gaston turned, his gaze meeting Yolani's across the room.

He strode towards her, his expression flat and unreadable. "What have you and Elania done now?" he asked, his tone devoid of emotion.

Yolani felt a flush of embarrassment creep up her neck.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself. "Keswick is dead," she said, her voice steady despite the tremor in her hands. "And Elania... she's a Demi-god now. She went to kill the enemy's leaders."

Gaston stared at her, his eyes boring into hers as if searching for any hint of deception. The seconds stretched on, the silence between them heavy. Finally, he nodded, a slow, deliberate motion.

"I suppose we just need to hold the line and walls long enough for her to finish," he said, his voice gruff.

Yolani nodded.

Gaston's expression grew grim. "That could be a problem," he said, his eyes darting towards the entrance. "Every enemy in the entire city is assaulting as if they are possessed."

Yolani's heart sank. Had they somehow found out that Elania was coming for them and decided to make one last push? A small fear that they might attack while she was gone was impossible to dismiss in the back of her mind.

"You might be able to help," Gaston said, his voice low and urgent. "The primary gate is under heavy pressure. If you could support the guards there to stop their siege equipment..."

Yolani straightened her shoulders. She may not have Elania's powers, but she had her own skills, her own strengths. A few battering rams wouldn't be a problem.

"I'll do what I can," she said.

Of course, Gaston wasn't going to let her go without a guard...

He made her wait to the side, and she watched as Gaston organized a platoon of nearly fifty men.

A figure emerged from the group, and Yolani's heart leaped with recognition. It was Henri, his boyish face breaking into a smile as he approached her. Yolani rushed forward, pulling him into a tight hug.

"I'm glad you're doing better," she said.

Henri grinned, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Thanks to Elania and Uncle Gaston, they basically saved my life."

He pulled back, studying her face with concern. "Are you okay?"

Before Yolani could respond, Gaston's voice cut through the air. "Henri, you're to be her bodyguard."

Henri nodded, turning back to Yolani. "What do you need?"

Yolani shrugged. "Maybe just watch my back and help carry things."

Henri's smile softened, and he reached out to squeeze her shoulder. "I'll always be there to carry your things, Yolani."

The words were sweet, and Yolani felt a surge of affection for her childhood friend. But as she looked at him, her thoughts drifted to

Elania. Worry gnawed at her gut, and she couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible was about to happen.

Yolani watched as Gaston addressed the sergeants in charge of the individual squads, his voice stern and commanding.

"Your primary objective is to protect the Master Artificer and ensure the security of the main gate," he said, his eyes sweeping over the assembled soldiers. "The gate is under heavy assault, and we cannot afford to lose it."

The sergeants nodded, their faces grim with determination.

As Gaston continued to issue orders, Yolani rummaged through her bag, taking stock of the supplies she had hastily gathered.

Her fingers brushed against the smooth surface of mana shards, their energy thrumming beneath her touch. She counted them silently, relieved to find a substantial number. At least they wouldn't run out of [Power] anytime soon.

Nestled among the shards were shock crystals. They were good on ammo, too. Elania had shown her a few excellent uses for the things beyond musket ammo, and she had a containment wand that would work just fine for rupturing their stability at a distance.

Gaston turned to her, and she straightened up quickly, patting her things. He nodded, a silent acknowledgment of the task that lay ahead.

"Good hunting," he said, his voice gruff but sincere.

Yolani returned the nod. She turned to face the assembled squads, ready to lead them into the fray.

Maybe she could just dig a trench in front of the gate.

The rams would have a hard time going over those, wouldn't they?



# CHAPTER 87 - PRIESTESS

Yolani and her guard pushed through the chaos of the district. The once steady light from the stones above flickered and faded erratically. The sound of monk siege orbs slamming into Elania's divine dome echoed through the air, each impact sending a shudder through Yolani's body.

She glanced over at Henri, who lugged her large bag filled with artifice supplies.

"Don't drop anything," Yolani called out to him, her voice firm. "I'm going to need all of it."

Henri nodded. "I've got it. Don't worry."

As they approached the main gate, the sound of battle grew louder. The clang of metal against metal and the shouts of soldiers filled the air. Yolani's grip tightened on her wand.

As the men headed up the tower staircases to the main gate, a sudden warmth enveloped her, catching her off guard.

The sensation felt familiar, like Elania's comforting presence, and she found herself relaxing despite the surrounding chaos. Just as she

was about to question the strange occurrence, a glowing scroll materialized before her eyes.

[You have been granted a conduit of Divinity.]

[You have gained the class 'Priestess of Artifice'.]

[Your patron deity, Elania, thinks of you frequently.]

Surprise, annoyance, and a hint of happiness battled for dominance in Yolani's mind.

What was Elania doing?

"It would have been nice to discuss this first," Yolani mumbled.

If Elania started asking her for worship, she was going to hit her with a stick a bunch of times until she came to her senses and the [Divinity] wasn't in control anymore.

The warmth surrounding her seemed to pulse in response, as if trying to convey a message she couldn't quite grasp. Actually, that was wrong. She could very well feel what it meant. 'I'm still here. I love you.'

Yolani's mind raced as she tried to make sense of her newfound status.

What did it mean to be a Priestess of Artifice? What did a conduit of Divinity do?

"Yolani?" Henri asked hesitantly. All the other guards, except half a dozen that were watching her, had made their way up to the ramparts.

"Let's go," Yolani ordered.

She moved forward with purpose, her steps quick and determined.

Henri kept pace beside her, his brow furrowed with concern. "Hey, are you okay? You're... glowing."

A laugh escaped Yolani's lips, the sound tinged with a hint of disbelief. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just got a new class and stuff. No big deal."

Henri's mouth gaped. "Priestess of Artifice? What happened?"

Yolani shook her head, her focus already shifting to the chaos unfolding ahead.

She pointed up at the gate. "We need to get up there."

The two reached the top of the wall. Chaos was there, waiting.

A Lightbringer rushed straight at her and she quickly aimed her wand, sending a blast of energy that knocked him off the wall and out into the air. Beside her, Henri intercepted another with his sword, the clang of metal against metal ringing out.

Guards fired a volley of muskets into a group of charging Lightbringers, the sound of gunfire mingling with the shouts of the defenders.

Yolani's eyes narrowed as she caught sight of the incoming battering ram, its monk defenders creating a barrier to protect it from her magical projectiles.

Reaching into her bag, Yolani pulled out her assault wand, the weight of it familiar in her hand. A swarm of blue projectiles flashed out, slamming into the monks' barriers.

That wasn't going to work.

Maybe her trench digging plan was a go after all.

Behind the ram, a volley of siege projectiles blazed forward. Their blazing yellow lights winked out and a dozen bodies fell from the sky, slamming into the stone wall in a series of sickening impacts.

Yolani's gaze slammed back onto the ram. The monks that had been riding on its roof had fallen all at once, unconscious or dead.

It was as if an invisible force had struck them down simultaneously, leaving only the Lightbringers to continue their assault.

Instinctively, she raised her wand, focusing her energy on the battering ram that was almost to the gate. She flicked her wand and a giant pillar of stone erupted from beneath the ram, a dozen times larger than she expected.

Its force was so immense that it launched the battering ram into the sky, sending it hurtling away from the gate and back out into the city.

“Why didn’t you just do that in the first place?” Henri asked, his tone a mix of amazement and confusion.

Yolani shook her head, still trying to wrap her mind around the effect. This ‘Priestess’ thing was going to be dangerous until she accounted for...

Gods, she had no idea what to account for.

“I didn’t know,” Yolani replied. She turned to a fallen musket and picked it up.

She turned it in her hands, fingers wrapping around the smooth metal of the stock. She didn’t have a workbench or the right tools for modifying it, but...

She knew exactly what modifications she wanted to make.

A golden light began to flow from her hands, its warmth spreading through her fingers and into the musket. Her eyes widened as the weapon began to reshape itself, the metal twisting and molding to her exact specifications.

In a few seconds, she had what she hoped was a fully working version of her new semi-automatic Guards rifle. The one that she’d figured out thanks to working with Elania and the machine gun, utilizing mana shards instead of shock crystals.

She reached down and picked up a scrap helmet and it morphed into the shape of a magazine, already fully loaded.

Oh, she could do a lot with this.

Without a word, she shoved the newly transformed rifle into Henri’s hands. “Use it,” she commanded.

Henri looked down at the weapon, his brow furrowed in confusion. “What... what is this?”

“It’s a semi-automatic rifle,” Yolani explained, her voice growing steadier as the initial shock began to wear off. “Thirty rounds per magazine. Let’s make some more of them.”

They didn’t have time to get started before a deafening roar of voices erupted in the distance. She gazed out into the city, another surprise presenting itself. A massive wave of people was rushing forward.

She scrambled in her bag for a telescope. It was obvious they weren’t Lightbringers by their outfits, but they weren’t members of the Guard, either.

No, it was a horde of civilians, rushing the enemy from behind with whatever improvised weapons they could find. As Yolani scanned the line, her focus landed on another group.

Ironfist.

She couldn’t make out individuals, but she wanted to imagine Harlock, Lucas, and the others out there, joining the fight, having survived the devastation in the city.

Her hand froze when she spotted the black robes.

Black candle cultists?

The Lightbringers were caught in the crush by the various groups, while the Guard on the walls pushed off the siege ladders and began to open fire into the masses mulling below the defenses.

She didn’t know how it had happened, but one thing was for certain.

The tides of the battle had certainly shifted.

She needed to do more.

Yolani rushed from one guard to another, her hands moving with a newfound purpose and skill.

She took their muskets, one by one, and focused her divine energy into each weapon.

Each one transformed in her hands, and then she went ahead and modified their ammunition as well.

“What are you doing?” one of the guards asked, confusion written all over his face.

Yolani didn't pause in her work, her voice steady as she replied, “Blessing your weapons. They fire thirty times now, without reloading. More firepower, faster reload.”

The guard stared at his transformed rifle, a mixture of awe and disbelief etched on his face. “How... how did you do that?”

“I'm a Priestess of Artifice now,” Yolani mumbled.

As the guards received their upgraded weapons, they turned their attention back to the battlefield.

The sound of gunfire intensified, the volume of shots fired increasing dramatically as the semi-automatic rifles unleashed a relentless barrage upon the Lightbringer assault.

At some point, she had to stop modifying the weapons just to keep up with the ammo usage.

The enemy soldiers fell in droves, their advance faltering under the crushing weight of the improved firepower.

It was all interrupted by a blinding light exploding in the distance, drawing everyone's attention.

Yolani squinted against the glare, her eyes widening as she saw a colossal seraph materialize, its form towering over the city near the Conclave Fortress.

The divine being's laser flashed out, its beam carving a deep gouge through the cavern's side-walls.

A massive laser lanced out, striking the city and then passing over the Magistracy district. It bit into Elania's divine dome, which protected the entire district and not just the tower. The hostile energy didn't pierce it, although the protective light flickered angrily.

The rest of the city was not as fortunate in their protections. It was just as bad as all the other devastating strikes, carving up another portion of the city.

The destruction wasn't over.

The seraph reached up and punched the cavern ceiling. A ripple ran through the city cavern, and the light stones that Elania had suspended began to plummet towards the ground.

The earthquake hit next, and Yolani braced herself by holding onto a crenulation. Henri shouted at her and they both clung to the wall desperately.

The protective shield would protect them inside the district, but...

The falling light stones froze mid-fall again, caught by an invisible force.

Yolani felt her heart pounding in her chest. "She caught them again."

"What?" Henri asked.

"Nothing," Yolani replied, standing back up and dusting herself off.

She turned and looked out at the Lightbringers' lines. Or rather, the lack of them.

They'd completely crumbled between the relentless deluge of aimed rifle fire and the unexpected onslaught from the rear. Ironfist mercenaries sliced their way through the center, and had divided the enemy into two main pockets.

For the first time, cannon fire and the staccato of the Gatling guns were silent, the gunners unable to fire without risking friendly fire.

There was nowhere for the Lightbringers to break and flee.

The mob showed no quarter.

The civilians unleashed their pent-up rage and frustration. A part of her felt a grim satisfaction in seeing the Lightbringers receive the punishment they deserved.

Another part of her recoiled at the sheer brutality of it all, but the memory of Lightbringer West's face made it remain very, very quiet.

As if everything going on wasn't enough already, a pillar of red light blossomed in the center of the city.

Yolani's breath caught in her throat as lava poured out in a rapid, relentless flow from the city's main elevator. The molten rock engulfed the highest level of the Noble district in seconds.

It spilled down each terrace, transforming the spiral pillar into a cascade of glowing, angry red steps.

Even at a distance, the air shimmered with intense heat, before pouring into...

Yolani did a double take.

There was only a shallow pool of water surrounding the district, the natural waterfalls of the city having ceased. The lava spread out as it began to form a new hellish moat of melted rock.

The seraph's wings dug into the ceiling, carving another scar into the city cavern, sending a spray of chunks into the nascent lava lake.

She needed a better vantage point. Yolani turned and gestured to Henri, who stopped watching the Lightbringers and followed. There was a nearby tower, and she climbed the staircase inside as fast as she could.

The seraph was easy enough to see, but she wanted to see Elania. She pulled out her telescope and searched.

She knew Elania was there, fighting against the divine being with her newfound powers. But even with her enhanced abilities, could her angel truly hope to stand against a force of such unimaginable might?

"What are we doing?" Henri asked.



“Watching the battle,” Yolani replied.

Henri laughed, a hint of exhaustion in his voice. “Which one?”

“Elania’s fighting the seraph,” Yolani said.

Henri grunted.

A wave of helplessness washed over her as she watched the fight rage on.

“Please,” Yolani murmured, her voice thick with emotion. “Please, let Elania win.”

# CHAPTER 88

## - SOMETIMES YOU NEED HELP

E lania hovered in the air, her wings beating steadily as she watched the titanic battle unfold before her.

Eziel clashed against his maddened brother Tabbris in a dizzying display of divine power. The city of Neftasu trembled, thousands of once-proud stone buildings reduced to rubble by the shockwaves of their passage.

Eziel flew like a missile, sliding against the irate Seraph's skin. Golden light evaporated from the wounds, but they were far from deep.

Papercuts. That's what the injuries reminded her of. When Eziel attempted to jab deeper, Tabbris grabbed him and tossed him into a wall. That left a bloody welt on the Seraph's hand, but that was far, far from stopping it.

Elania felt a chill fill her chest. The city would collapse before that. A spray of rocks hurtled towards Elania, dislodged by Tabbris' wings. She dodged nimbly, her enhanced reflexes allowing her to weave through the debris with ease.

A glimmer of light fell from above—a light stone, jarred loose from its moorings and plummeting towards the battered remains of the city below.

Elania reached out with a hand, seizing the stone with her will. It hung suspended in midair, its soft glow pulsing gently as she held it aloft.

With a flick of her wrist, she sent it hurtling towards Tabbris.

The light stone exploded in a brilliant flash as Tabbris batted it away with a massive fist, momentarily blinding the divine being. Eziel pressed his advantage.

[Stay out of this fight, Godling. It is my duty to put my brother down. This is not your burden to bear.]

Elania gritted her teeth in frustration, watching as Eziel struggled against Tabbris despite his words. The golden sword was outmatched.

That feeling only built as Tabbris unleashed another devastating laser blast, the track of which seared through the city in an attempt to track the flashing sword. She grit her teeth as it impacted her protection of the Magistracy district, the sudden drain feeling like a sucker punch to her stomach.

Eziel seemed frustrated as well, because the former Arch Seraph launched a renewed assault.

Golden circles appeared behind the sword's path. Energy swords and spears pushed through the portals to fling themselves at Tabbris. Each one made a small explosion, bathing the seraph in a flickering fire of [Divine] energy.

Rather than put the seraph down, it only made it angry. Tabbris moved away from the Conclave fortress, moving into the actual city. The movement churned the stone of the city cavern, dislodging more rocks and chunks that hurtled towards her.

Elania twisted and turned, narrowly avoiding the projectiles as she gained in altitude. The city below was not so lucky.

“Eziel!” Elania shouted. “We need to take him down together! You can’t do this alone!”

[This is my fight.]

“And you’re losing!” Elania retorted, dodging another spray of rocks. “Let me help you! Together, we can end this!”

Eziel ignored her, flashing around Tabbris in a dizzying display of speed and power. The shimmering circles of light emitted a barrage at an even faster rate.

Red circles finally appeared, countering Eziel’s assault with a spray of their own projectiles. The two divine beings clashed in a cacophony, their attacks ricocheting off each other and slamming into the city below at random.

The cavern shook violently, and shockwaves in the air were so intense that Elania struggled to maintain her balance. Lava poured down over the noble district, the molten rock consuming everything in its path.

Tabbris snatched Eziel out of the air and then punched into the Noble district. Elania’s heart hitched as the burning limb came out of the fire, but Eziel was nowhere in sight.

Seconds ticked, and Tabbris let out another burst of its laser, randomly scouring the city.

Elania realized it was now her fight. “Fucking sword!”

No time to hold back. She amped herself, pushing a surge through her body. Her golden aura flared like a newborn sun, and her wings

grew out of her back to an immense length. The feathers shimmered with their own light, each one as sharp as a razor's edge.

Her wings beat once and she shot forward like a rocket.

Tabbris roared in defiance, his own wings unfurling to their full span.

Elania twisted as she avoided a grab. Her wings spread out wide, though. Her feathers cut into Tabbris' flesh and the seraph let out an angry cry. She darted upward, summoning a cluster of shimmering light spears.

They slammed into Tabbris' face; the explosions blasting away the seraph's hood and reveal a grisly visage.

She paused as she stared at his face. Skin and bone were warped and rotted, as if the seraph had been rotting for a long, long time.

Red energy appeared in its eyes, and she darted in a circle to avoid the laser strike. The beam's energy dumped itself into the city cavern's periphery.

Undeterred, Elania continued her assault, dodging and weaving as Tabbris swatted at her with increasing frustration. She could feel the force behind each blow, the sheer power of the seraph's strikes sending shockwaves through the air.

The seraph's resilience was astonishing, his body absorbing the attacks. As far as she could tell, it wasn't healing... but nothing was damaging enough to disable. She needed to bring out a heavier weapon.

Elania reached out to her bracers, and the mana shards contained inside of them and refilled them all from herself. She hated being a one-trick pony, but she didn't think the seraph would be able to ignore her own laser.

He was big enough that it would be hard for him to dodge like she was.

Before she could charge the attack, a thunderous crack split the air. Eziel burst forth from the noble district in a shower of flaming stone and rubble. The golden blade hurtled towards Tabbris' heart, blade flashing in the dim light.

The sword was swatted away once again.

As Eziel tumbled away, Elania reached out her hand and darted forward.

“Stop being an ass!” Elania shouted.

Eziel stopped his spinning just as her palm reached his hilt. The divine weapon hummed with power as she gripped it tightly. She could feel more than hear the deep sigh of resignation roll through her.

[Together.]

That was more like it.

Power blazed through her, and as Tabbris' fist flew at her, she battered it away with a flick of her extended wing.

Elania turned to the seraph and pointed Eziel's tip toward it.

“Time to end this.”

# CHAPTER 89

## - SHOWDOWN, REVELATIONS

**E**lania gripped Eziel tightly, feeling the divine power surging through her as she channeled into the blade. The runes on the sword lit up with a brilliant light, pulsing in time with the beating of her heart. She could feel his presence within the weapon, waiting to strike.

The energy built up, and Tabbris seemed to realize something was happening because he lunged toward them.

Elania released the swing in a wide arc. A massive wave of energy exploded out from the attack in a golden arc that crackled with lightning and lethality. It sheared through Tabbris' left arm and wing like a knife through butter.

The limbs crashed to the ground while the seraph let out an agonized roar, golden light motes and energy bleeding into the air from the wounds.

He staggered back, his remaining arm flailing wildly as he tried to maintain balance. His eyes blazed with the fury and madness of the undead, fixating on Elania as she hovered in front of him.

The rage felt like a tangible force that seemed to press down on her from every direction.

Tabbris let out a deafening bellow and charged forward, his massive form shaking the ground with each thunderous step.

He stomped through the city, crushing buildings and structures beneath his feet with abandon. The sight reminded her of a scene from an old movie; the seraph a giant ape wrecking havoc on a city.

Elania grit her teeth and hissed in anger, and she pulled from her new pool of divinity as fast as she could, charging up for another devastating strike.

When Tabbris reached them, Eziel guided her flight, dragging his blade down the seraph's arm as they flashed behind it. She raised the sword high above her head, energy forming a sphere at the tip of the blade.

It fell like an executioner's axe, the golden energy slicing through the seraph's remaining wing. Like a scythe through wheat, the strike sent the appendage tumbling to the ground in a shower of sparks and light.

Her momentum carried her forward, a second strike missing Tabbris' neck by a hair's breadth as the seraph flinched away in pain.

Elania cursed under her breath as they flashed past. Tabbris turned to face them, the seraph's face splitting open to reveal a glowing orb of energy. Instead of a laser, it was a widespread pattern of dissolution.

Elania' curled her wings around her and focused on protecting herself from the deadly energy.



“I thought seraphs weren’t supposed to be emotional!” Elania shouted, her words nearly lost in the roar of wind as she tumbled through the currents of the attack.

[Try being tortured and enslaved for thousands of years while tiny creatures suck on your blood and soul. Your composure would be shaken.]

There was no time to discuss the specifics. The energy around her faded, but it had devastated the city cavern’s ceiling. A shelf the size of a city district fell and crushed the conclave district behind them, and boiling water from the abyss splashed upwards in spikes high enough to nearly scald her.

She circled, looking for an opening to strike again, but before she could find an opening, a nearby light stone exploded, slamming into her like a physical blow. She tumbled in the air, plummeting toward the ground.

Before she could recover, Tabbris’ massive hand closed around her, crushing her in its grasp. Elania screamed in pain as the seraph’s fingers tightened, the pressure threatening to snap her bones like twigs. Her wings strained to prevent her from being turned into pulp.

Eziel’s voice whispered in the back of her mind that she should fight back, but the thought was quickly drowned out.

It felt like she was being encased in stone, her entire body failing under the immense pressure. Despite her resistance, the seraph’s strength was overwhelming. Terror gripped her as she realized she might not survive this one.

Everything narrowed to a singular point.

And then the sound of a familiar voice washed over her. Yolani was praying for her safety and success. The sound of her heart’s voice flowed over her.

She couldn’t give up now.

An epiphany hit her hard. She'd been neglecting her other skills, focusing only on her new Demi-Divine powers.

Closing her eyes, she focused on her mana-shards. Her bracers immolated, glowing with an intense, fiery light as she compressed the energy inside of them.

She stretched out her [Demonic Aura] to shape the flow of energy when the compression finally failed.

With a defiant shout, Elania cried out, "Exponential, motherfucker!"

The compressed energy from the shards exploded outward in a supernova of [Power] and force. It ripped through Tabbris' hand while tearing apart the seraph's forearm and flinging Elania away from the seraph's grasp.

The shockwave of the explosion propelled her at incredible speed. She spun wildly, her wings struggling to stop the tumble and bend her trajectory. Until she hit the ground with a crack, sending a spray of stone and rubble into the air as she embedded into the rock.

Her head felt light as she scabbled at the debris and picked herself out of the divot she had dug across a street. Panting heavily, one of her wings flickered as she jumped back into the air. Looking down, she realized she was covered in slowly healing gouges and slashes that bled golden light motes just light the wounds Eziel had dealt Tabbris.

When she managed enough altitude to look back out into the city, Elania's heart quivered.

A quarter of the city had been reduced to a giant crater, a gaping wound that was in the process of sucking up the last of the water and now the lion's share of the lava pouring into the city cavern from above.

Steam and smoke warred for control of the upper half of the chamber, the city's filtration systems having stopped working at some point.

Stone chunks fell at random as aftershock tremors rocked everything. The light stones floating in the air flickered randomly, adding to the insanity.

Eziel floated back to her, returning to her hand.

[Focus.]

Elania's gaze darted across the landscape, searching for Tabbris. She spotted him climbing up the side of the crater, its movements sluggish and labored. It was bashing its bloody stump on the stone, spilling golden ichor and light across the rock.

As she watched, she realized the seraph's destination—the Magistry district was right there!

[Are you still able to fight, Elania?]

“Let's finish this,” Elania breathed.

[Agreed.]

Her hand tightened on Eziel's hilt.

Elania surged forward, her wings propelling her through the air with incredible speed.

She held Eziel above her head, the sword's blade expanding and taking shape as divine energy crackled around it, forming a massive phantom blade.

The urgency in her movements was palpable, driven by overwhelming need.

Tabbris reached the divine dome, its massive fist slamming into the barrier with a resounding impact.

Cracks spread across the shield's surface, threatening to shatter under the immense force.

Elania's heart raced as she pushed herself to fly faster, determined to close the distance before it was too late.

Elania swung Eziel with all her might, the phantom blade slicing through the air with a deafening hum.

The divine energy blade cleaved through Tabbris' body, splitting the seraph in half with a sickening crunch.

A blinding flare of light erupted from the seraph's severed form, engulfing the area in a massive explosion of energy.

Elania felt the rush of power surging into her as she absorbed a portion of the released energy, her body thrumming with the influx of divine might.

Elania reached out with her free hand, channeling her newfound power into the weakened barrier. The divine dome shimmered and pulsed as she reinforced it, the cracks slowly mending under her influence.

She could feel the strain on her body as she poured every ounce of her strength into the task, determined to ensure the protection of those inside.

Elania's focus was shattered as she slammed into the cobblestone streets below, the impact tearing up the stones beneath her.

She bounced and skidded across the rough surface, her body battered by the unforgiving ground. In a desperate attempt to slow her momentum, Elania dragged Eziel's blade against the stone, the sword's edge screeching and sparking as it carved a jagged path through the cobblestone.

Finally, Elania came to a halt, her body aching and bruised from the violent landing. She remained on her knee for a moment, gasping for breath as the adrenaline coursed through her veins.

She realized a guard was trying to help her, and she waved him away. "I think I rolled a nat 20 to constitution, or something."

He looked at her without understanding.

Elania stood up, her wings helping her prop herself up as she leaned on Eziel for support.

A light stone plummeted and shattered against the barrier, but Elania reached up with both hands, reinforcing it once more. Things tried to repair themselves as she pushed [Divine Mending] but they just didn't go back properly, and the only thing she managed was to keep the debris from above sliding off the dome and out of the Magistry.

Yolani and Henri came running towards her, their faces etched with concern.

Yolani jumped at Elania, wrapping her arms around her neck in a tight hug. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" Yolani's words tumbled out in an incoherent rush, her voice trembling with worry.

Elania's heart swelled. She pulled back slightly, cupping Yolani's face in her hands. "I'm alright, love. It's over now."

Without hesitation, Elania leaned in and captured Yolani's lips in a tender kiss. Her wings curled around them reflexively, and the world around them seemed to fade away as they melted into each other's arms.

Henri's eyes widened in shock. "What the..." He trailed off, his mouth hanging open in disbelief.

Elania and Yolani broke apart, their cheeks flushed and their eyes shining with affection.

Henri stammered, struggling to find the right words. "I... I had no idea. You two are...?"

Yolani took Elania's hand in hers. "Yes, we are. I love Elania, and she loves me."

Henri ran a hand through his hair.

Elania squeezed Yolani's hand. "I know it's a lot to take in, Henri. But I hope you can accept us for who we are and the love we share."

Henri took a deep breath, his expression softening. “Of course. Congratulations? If you’re happy together, then that’s all that matters.”

Yolani beamed at Henri, her eyes shining with gratitude. “Thank you, Henri. Your support means the world to us.”

# CHAPTER 90

## - HOPES AND FEARS

“**W**hat are we going to do?” Yolani asked.

Elania turned, her brow furrowed with concern as she processed the question. The enemy was defeated, the maddened seraph put down, but there was no denying the city was dying.

It was shaking apart underneath their feet, and the calamities falling on it had only sped up with the divine clash.

“I... I don’t know,” Elania admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. She ran a hand through her hair, the golden strands tangling between her fingers. “The lava has sealed the elevator, and the city is falling apart.”

Elania glanced at the not inconsiderable amount of guards visible on the walls and around the tower. “We need to find a way out, but...”

As if to punctuate her words, a minor tremor shook the ground, causing Yolani to stumble. Elania caught her, but it was impossible to ignore the situation they—everyone was in.

[The pocket is unstable. Neftasu and the depths surrounding it are doomed. We must escape while we still can.]

A stream of people began to flow in through the open district gate. Elania did a double take as she recognized the faces of Ironfist Mercenaries, and even a gaggle of cultists led by Darius. Confusion raced in the back of her head.

Where the hell had they come from?

Elania swallowed hard, her throat tight. "There's no way I can fly everyone out. I'm not sure how easy it will be to breach the lava, either."

In the back of her mind, she'd already come up with a plan. To grab Yolani and Eziel and carve through the earth until they reached the safety of the surface. It left a bitter taste in her mouth, and guilt gnawed at her, but it was there.

As much as she hated the thought, it was probably the only thing keeping her from devolving into a mad panic.

Yolani and her would be safe no matter what.

But everyone else...

Shock rippled through her when Henri voiced her own thoughts.

"Elania, you need to take Yolani and get out of here," he said, his eyes boring into hers. "The city's falling apart, and there's no way to save everyone. But you two... you have a chance."

Elania didn't know what to say, but Yolani tensed up immediately.

"We can't just abandon everyone, Henri!" she protested, her voice trembling. "Everyone fought together. The dead bled and died so we could survive only a bit longer? We can't leave them behind!"

Elania hesitated. There was the 'right' thing to do, and then there was the 'right' thing to do...



“We’ll try everything we can,” Elania said finally, her voice firm. But if nothing worked... if it came down to it... she would drag Yolani to safety herself, even if she didn’t want to go.

Yolani smiled at her.

Gaston arrived, his face grim. “What’s the plan?”

Another minor tremor shook the ground.

[Act quickly.]

Elania took a deep breath, her heart pounding in her chest as she surveyed the growing crowd.

“Bring everyone you can into the Magistracy District,” she ordered, her voice ringing out with authority. “The barrier will keep people safe for a while, at least. We need to get as many as we can out of the city and here.”

To her surprise, no one questioned her command. Gaston saluted and went to his sergeants. Word quickly passed down the line.

The Guard sprang into action, hurrying out of the safety of the barrier to try to bring people back. Elania frowned, a sense of unease settling in her gut as she watched them go.

Ironfist Mercenaries followed quickly.

Darius approached with nearly a hundred men and women in black robes, all of them going onto their knees and bowing to her before jumping up and jogging after the soldiers and mercenaries.

Elania blinked. Even Yolani was speechless.

Worse, the little golden glow around both of them seemed to strengthen slightly, as if the cultist’s worship had actually... done something.

“I should watch from a vantage point,” Elania said, turning to Yolani. There was a hesitation, but then the other girl nodded.

Elania took to the air, her wings carrying her up to the top of the tower. She landed on the roof and held onto the metal spire for balance.

From her perch, she could see the full extent of the devastation that had been wrought upon the city.

Almost everything was crushed into rubble. Once-proud buildings had been reduced to nothing more than piles of stone and debris. There wasn't a single area that hadn't been touched by the destruction, and Elania felt her heart sink.

How were they supposed to find any survivors in that?

She closed her eyes, reaching out with her mind to try to sense if there were any survivors at all.

To her surprise, she could feel a faint flicker. A sense of life scattered throughout the city, small pockets of grief scattered amidst the destruction.

Elania bit her lip and then alighted into the air, soaring out of the barrier. She cupped her hands and shouted into the city.

"Anyone that seeks safety, come to the Magistracy District!" she called, her voice echoing with a divine tenor. "Come quickly, before it's too late!"

Her eyes scanned the ruins for any sign of movement. In the distance, she could see small groups of people emerging from half collapsed buildings.

She lost track of time as she repeated herself throughout the city.

It wasn't until Eziel interrupted her that she paused.

[You have the ability to save those connected to you. A portal out of the pocket. It will drain the last remnants of the Celestial Engine, however.]

Elania froze, her brow furrowing. What the heck were the remnants of the Celestial Engine, anyway?

“What do you mean?” she asked. “How?”

Her perception of the thing golden threads suddenly filled her vision. Gossamer threads of gold, stretching out in thousands of thin wires that dug into the rubble. The barest of connections, created because of her shouting out to the people of the city.

They were fragile, nothing like the massive burning conduit that was her connection to Yolani. But they were still there, all the same.

“I can save them? Even if they can’t get to the district?” Elania asked.

Other threads were thicker, too. They ran to the members of the Guard in varying degrees. To the Ironfist Mercenaries. Even the Black Candle cultists led by Darius. They were all there, all connected to her.

Elania took a deep breath. Maybe they could save everyone. She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted out to the city once more.

“Believe that you can survive!” she called. “Try to find safety! I will save you! Just keep your hope alive in your hearts!”

As if in response to her words, Elania saw new threads jump into existence, connecting her to even more people throughout the ruins.

Spreading her wings, she flew through the city faster, doing her best to spread the message.

\*\*\*

Yolani stood amongst the commanders - Lieutenant Gaston, Cultist Darius, and Captain Montlas of the Ironfist Company. She listened intently as they discussed their efforts to rescue civilians trapped in the devastated city.

Gaston wiped the sweat from his brow, his voice strained with exhaustion. “Our space and supplies are limited. We’re doing our best to accommodate the influx of survivors, but we’re reaching capacity.”

Darius nodded grimly, his dark robes swaying as he gestured towards the rubble-strewn streets. "Locating people under all this debris is proving to be a monumental task. Progress is slow."

Captain Montlas, his armor dented and scratched from battle, chimed in. "There are roving groups of Lightbringers still out there. They're killing anything that moves. Sometimes even each other."

Yolani's gaze flitted between the three commanders as they turned to her expectantly. Gaston's voice cut through the tense silence. "It might be time to call off the search and bring everyone inside the shield."

His words hung heavy. She swallowed hard, acutely aware of the responsibility placed upon her.

Priestess. She was Elania's priestess, a title that immediately promoted her to being the One In Charge in the small circle.

"Can Elania do anything more to help?" Gaston asked, his eyes searching Yolani's face for an answer.

Yolani's heart raced as she contemplated the question. Elania had been distant for the last few hours. It had even been possible to feel the emotional turmoil boiling off of her, leaving Yolani feeling uncertain.

She took a deep breath. "We should bring in everyone. The tremors are getting worse, and we're losing more people than we are bringing back."

The commanders nodded solemnly, their faces etched with the weight of their responsibilities. Yolani continued, her voice growing stronger with each word. "I'll talk to Elania and see if there's anything more she can do. But in the meantime, do what you can."

Darius put his hands together. "We'll do our best, Priestess. The Black Candle will not rest until the Dark Queen's command is carried out."

Captain Montlas and Gaston murmured something inaudible.

As the group dispersed to their various tasks, Yolani's thoughts turned to Elania.

She needed to reach her heart. Turning toward the wall, she hurried.

Yolani climbed the steps, her heart pounding with each step.

As she reached the top, she scanned the devastated cityscape, searching for any sign of Elania.

A flicker of gold caught Yolani's eye.

She squinted, her gaze locking onto a familiar figure soaring through the sky. It was Elania, her wings spread wide as she carried two small children in her arms.

Elania gracefully descended, gently setting the children down before launching herself back into the air.

Yolani cupped her hands around her mouth and called out, her voice straining against the distance. "Elania!"

To her surprise, Elania stopped abruptly, as if an invisible force had yanked her back. She hovered in midair, her head turning towards the sound of Yolani's voice.

With a powerful beat of her wings, Elania flew towards her, closing the distance between them.

Elania landed softly beside Yolani, her eyes filled with concern. "Yolani, what's wrong?"

Yolani took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts. "I just spoke with the commanders. Things are getting worse out there. The rescue teams are coming back injured, and fewer survivors are being found."

Elania's brow furrowed as she listened intently.

Yolani continued, her voice trembling slightly. "They're considering calling off the search, Elania. It's becoming too dangerous."

Elania's gaze drifted towards the city, her eyes scanning the ruins. "There are still people out there, Yolani. I can see them, trapped and waiting for help."

The other girl started to turn away, ready to launch herself back into the sky, but Yolani reached out and grasped her arm, holding on tightly. Elania paused, her eyes meeting Yolani's, a flicker of surprise crossing her face.

"Elania, please," Yolani pleaded, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's time."

Elania's expression softened, her shoulders sagging slightly as the weight of Yolani's words sank in. She glanced out at the city once more, a pained look in her eyes.

"I had given up on them. I was going to abandon them. This feels like doing that again," Elania whispered.

Yolani hugged her. "You've done everything. You've done more than anyone could hope. We need to go now."

Yolani's heart ached as she watched Elania's eyes fill with tears.

She reached out, gently cupping Elania's face in her hands, her thumbs brushing away the gold-tinged droplets that spilled down her cheeks.

"Elania," Yolani whispered, "you're so very kind. Your heart is so big, and I love you for it."

Elania's lips trembled. Then she pulled back, her gaze drifting towards the devastated cityscape.

Light stones, once the center of their troubles, shattered and fell to the ground, their light extinguished forever. In the distance, an entire fifth of the city lay beneath a massive shelf of rock.

Elania nodded. "Let's get the district to safety."

Yolani took a hand and squeezed it in support.

A weak smile turned up on Elania's face. "You packed our things, right?"

"Uhm. I'm not sure how much we need the basic tools anymore," Yolani replied. Reaching into her pouch, she pulled out a bronze gear. It suddenly glowed gold and morphed into a round flower.

She slid it into Elania's hair at the temple.

Elania could only stare, and Yolani smiled. It was nice to be able to surprise her friend still.

Even under the circumstances.

# CHAPTER 91 - TRAVERSAL

Elania stood at the top of the stairs of the Magistracy tower, surveying the plaza below. Behind her, the massive doors had been pulled open as wide as possible. Everyone had been evacuated out into the open.

They stared at her with a visceral mix of fear and hope.

Yolani stood beside her, a comforting hand squeezing her shoulder.

Eziel floated nearby, his sword glinting in the flickering city lights.

[It is time.]

“It’s time,” Elania agreed. “How do I make this work?”

[You must visualize a portal that will lead to safety. Focus your mind and will it into existence.]

Elania turned to face the gate, closing her eyes. She tried to picture a portal, a swirling vortex of energy that would take them all to safety.

Nothing happened. She furrowed her brow and glanced at Yolani.

There wasn’t any fear in the other girl’s gaze. Just love and trust.

Elania tightened her hands into fists and tried again. Taking a deep breath, she focused all her energy on visualizing the portal. She imag-



ined it in vivid detail—deep blue, shimmering edges, a rush of fresh air.

Her and Yolani, on the other side, together.

A click echoed out into the city, like a rusty key had been forced to turn in an old lock.

[You have done it.]

Elania opened her eyes. The portal was there, just as she had pictured. A cool breeze flowed through the deep shimmering blues, caressing her face.

Elania and Yolani turned to face the gathered crowd.

“Everyone must go through,” Yolani announced, her voice carrying out over the crowd.

[Elania must be the last to traverse.]

Elania stood beside the shimmering portal, her hand entwined with Yolani’s as they watched the survivors stream through.

Groups of the Guard and Ironfist mercenaries went first, their weapons at the ready, prepared to secure the other side. Then the civilians poured through, their faces etched with a mix of fear and relief.

Darius, the leader of the Black Candle cult, approached Elania, his eyes shining with reverence. “Dark Queen, is there anything your devout followers can do for you before we depart?” he asked, bowing his head.

Elania felt a flicker of agitation at his words. She wasn’t comfortable with people worshiping her, viewing her as some sort of divine figure. “No, Darius,” she said, her voice firm. “Just go on through with the rest of your people.”

Darius nodded, a flicker of disappointment crossing his features before he turned and joined the throng of civilians passing through the portal.

Yolani squeezed Elania's hand, drawing her attention. "You did amazing," she said, her voice soft and sincere. "You saved so many lives today."

Elania sighed, the weight of the city's destruction heavy on her shoulders.

Despite the thousands of survivors streaming to safety, she couldn't shake the feeling that she had failed.

The threads of gold still reached out into the ruins of Neftasu, a reminder of the lives she couldn't save.

Elania watched as the last of the guard detachments filed through the shimmering portal.

Gaston and Henri paused before entering, turning to face her and Yolani. "Stay safe, both of you," Gaston said, his gruff voice tinged with genuine concern.

Henri nodded, his eyes meeting Yolani's. "Stay safe," he said.

Yolani returned the smile, her hand still clasped tightly in Elania's. "We'll be through soon," she replied, her voice steady despite the emotion welling up inside her.

With a final nod, Gaston and Henri stepped through the portal, disappearing into the swirling blue vortex.

Elania and Yolani were left alone in the empty courtyard, the silence broken only by the faint hum of the portal.

Elania closed her eyes, reaching out with her senses to the threads of life still scattered throughout the ruins of Neftasu.

She could feel them, faint but persistent, clinging to the edges of her consciousness. The weight of their suffering pressed down on her, a heavy burden she couldn't shake.

She'd been so ready to abandon them all, just so she could be happy with Yolani. Guilt burned at her like a damning torch.

Yolani wrapped her arms around Elania, pulling her close. “You’ve done everything you can,” she whispered, her voice soft and soothing. “You can’t save everyone.”

“What... what if I can?” Elania whispered.

Yolani pulled back and stared into her eyes, blinking. “Well, that’d be great, too. Can you?”

Elania let out a terrified laugh. “I don’t know.”

Yolani squeezed her hand. “I love you either way.”

Elania turned to look out at the city, then closed her eyes. She focused her mind on the threads, picturing them being drawn toward the portal, towards safety. She could feel the what Eziel had meant about remnants.

Shards of the Celestial Engine’s power flowed around the Magistracy tower like a vortex, divine echoes of all the energy, souls, and people who had lived within its confines coming undone to disperse into the world, no longer held in its unrelenting orbit.

[What you are attempting is too dangerous. You are not ready.]

Elania opened her eyes and stared at the sword. “When has that ever stopped me?”

Yolani’s arms tightened around her, and she leaned into the embrace, drawing strength from her partner’s presence.

“Do what you feel is right,” Yolani whispered, her breath warm against Elania’s ear. “I’m here with you, no matter what.”

Elania focused all her strength on the golden threads, pulling them towards the portal with every ounce of her being.

Something inside her mind suddenly gave way, like a pipe bursting open under immense pressure. A torrent of energy surged through her, raging and uncontrollable.

The rush was going to drag her away.

The sensation of a hand pressing in the small of her back, holding her steady, was unmistakably Eziel.

She might have panicked, but Yolani was in her arms, holding onto her tightly as they spun through the mist. They clung to each other, anchoring themselves amidst the chaos.

Elania instinctively folded her wings around them. The vertigo intensified, the world spinning in dizzying spirals of light and shadow.

Yolani retched, her stomach rebelling against the motion, but the vomit dissolved into motes of golden light, dissipating into the swirling mist.

Through it all, Elania never let go.

Safety... safety... safety!

Elania's wings flared out, catching the air and halting their tumble. The maelstrom abated, and they were in a gold chamber.

She held Yolani close as they slowly descended towards the polished marble floor. The chamber was in chaos, with shouts and the clashing of weapons echoing off the walls.

As Elania's feet touched the ground, her gaze was drawn to a circle of Mushroomums, their spears pointed outwards in a defensive formation.

They were surrounded by Ironfist mercenaries and City Watch guards, who seemed confused and agitated by the spores the Mushroomums were emitting.

The air was thick with tension, and the 'glua-glaa' sounds from the Mushroomums only added to the sense of impending violence.

Elania took a deep breath, gathering her strength.

"Truce!" she shouted, her voice imbued with divine authority.

The command echoed through the massive chamber, causing the fighting to falter as everyone turned to look at her.

The silence highlighted the humming sound that permeated the room.

Her eyes widened as she realized they were in the presence of another Celestial Engine, its energy pulsing at the center of the chamber. The revelation sent a shiver down her spine, and she tightened her grip on Yolani's hand.

[Now is not the time for conflict.]

Smartass. That much was obvious.

They needed to figure things out, and fast.

# CHAPTER 92 - PARTIES

Elania's reflexes kicked in as a teenaged darkwalker leaped at her, its claws outstretched and fangs bared.

She caught the feline mid-air, its fur bristling against her skin as it thrashed in her grip. The darkwalker snarled and snapped, trying to sink its teeth into her flesh. The effort was futile.

A flicker of recognition sparked. It was the cub. The memory of slaying its parents flashed through her thoughts. She'd fed him a chunk of ralfot out of guilt.

Elania's grip remained firm, but she reached out to stroke the cat, her fingers running through its coarse fur in a soothing motion. The darkwalker's struggles intensified, its ire palpable as it tried to twist away from her touch.

"Enough," Elania commanded, her voice stern yet calm. She locked eyes with the darkwalker, her golden irises gleaming with an otherworldly intensity. "I am the alpha here, and you will behave."

She set the darkwalker down, releasing her hold on its scruff. He backed away, a low rumbling in its throat. Elania responded with a growl of her own, a primal sound that reverberated through the air.

The darkwalker's ears flattened against its skull, and it tucked its tail between its legs. With a whimper, it turned and scampered away between people's legs, knocking some of them over as it fled.

Elania nodded as it found an abandoned corner of the chamber partially hidden by a shadow.

"Uhm," Yolani mumbled, taken aback by the exchange.

"I need to look around," Elania said.

Yolani nodded.

Rising into the air, Elania's hair billowed in the wind. She reached out and ran her fingers through it. Crimson red locks entwined with golden ones. What she needed was a nice hair dye that blocked magic color changes.

Her natural black that didn't change every other day would be a pleasant change.

The Mushroomums still brandished their spears, their fungal faces contorted with confusion and anger as they threatened the guards.

The din of humanity filled the chamber, a cacophony of voices expressing their bewilderment and fear.

Her enforced [Truce] was dissipating.

She flew over to the mushroom people. With a wave of her hand, she sent out a pulse of energy, her words resonating through the minds of all present, bypassing the need for spores to communicate with the Mushroomums.

"Calm yourselves," she commanded.

The Mushroomums turned toward her, most of them lowering their spears. Their hostility was replaced by a mix of awe and trepidation as they gazed up at her.

“The world you knew was ending,” Elania continued. “I brought you here to save you from that fate.”

She paused, letting her words sink in as she studied them.

“If you are upset with my actions, if you cannot accept the reality of your situation, then you are free to end your existence here and now,” Elania declared, her tone devoid of emotion. “But know that I offer you a chance at a new life, a fresh start in a world that is not doomed to oblivion.”

Elania’s gaze snapped to the prince Mushroomum as he stepped forward, flanked by his guards.

In a swift motion, he hurled a spear directly at her, its sharp tip glinting in the dim light.

Elania’s eyes narrowed, and with a mere thought, she engulfed the group in a blaze of searing flames. The spear disintegrated mid-flight, and the Prince and his followers crumbled to ash, their last screams echoing through the chamber.

She turned her attention back to the remaining inhabitants, her voice resonating with a chilling calm. “Let this serve as a reminder. Attacking me is tantamount to embracing death. I offer you aid, but the choice is yours to make.”

Slowly, the Mushroomums retreated to their own group, their hostility tempered by the display of Elania’s power.

The guards and Ironfist mercenaries moved to create a buffer between the civilians and the fungal beings, a fragile armistice settling over the chamber.

Elania’s attention snapped away from the Mushroomums as a piercing screech filled the air.

The sound of frantic chickens reached her ears, and she quickly spotted Tessa, huddled beneath a writhing mass of demonic poultry.



The cannibal-elf demoness hissed and growled, her wild eyes fixed on a group of guards who had their spears drawn and pointed at her.

In a flash, Elania was there, raising a hand. A golden dome materializing around the chickens and the irate demon, effectively shielding them from the guards' weapons.

"Stay back!" Elania yelled, her voice commanding and urgent. "Don't do anything!"

Startled by Elania's sudden appearance, the guards hesitated for a moment before reluctantly lowering their spears and taking a step back from the golden dome.

With the immediate threat averted, Elania slipped into the bubble shield, her presence causing the chickens to flutter and squawk in agitation.

Tessa's eyes narrowed as she hissed at Elania, her demeanor growing more erratic and hostile. The demonic chickens, sensing their mistress's distress, ruffled their feathers and clucked menacingly.

Elania took a deep breath, her mind racing as she considered her options.

She knew she had to work fast to prevent the situation from escalating further.

As she opened her mouth to speak, Tessa erupted into a wild, raving fit, her words incoherent and her movements frenzied.

Well, reasoning with her wasn't going to work. She raised her hand at the other demons.

"Sleep," she ordered, her voice infused with an otherworldly authority.

Tessa's resistance was palpable, her eyes widening as she fought against the command... but her demonic willpower was no match for Elania's still overflowing [Divinity].

Within seconds, Tessa and the demonic chickens collapsed, their bodies going limp as they succumbed to the enforced slumber.

Elania's chest heaved as she panted, the exertion of using her abilities taking its toll. The sleep wouldn't last forever, but for now, the dome would keep them confined and prevent any further chaos.

Elania jumped back into the air, looking through the chamber for any more fires to put out. When she didn't spot any, she returned to Yolani.

"Any idea on where we are?" Elania mused, her brow furrowed.

Yolani's hand gently tugged at Elania's arm. "You need to see something," the artificer urged, her emerald green eyes alight with a sense of urgency.

Elania raised an eyebrow but allowed herself to be led away, following Yolani's lead. The throng of survivors parted to let them through.

Their destination was a side room, and for a second Elania felt her cheeks heat as her thoughts worked overdrive. No kisses appeared, but the balcony almost made up for the disappointment.

A vast expanse of white clouds stretched out as far as the eye could see, punctured by towering spires that pierced through the fluffy veil. The buildings glowed with ethereal light, and their surfaces were adorned with intricate designs that pulsed with energy.

Realization dawned on Elania as she took in the breathtaking view. "We're on a floating island," she breathed, her voice tinged with wonder.

Yolani nodded, a smile playing at her lips. "Not just any floating island. We're on the flying city itself!"

Elania leaned against the balcony railing, her eyes drinking in every detail of the extraordinary landscape.

The air hummed with the sound of spinning wind turbines, their blades catching the light and casting shimmering reflections across the clouds.

Flashing lights danced along the spires, a mesmerizing display of advanced artifice that left Elania spellbound.

As they stood side by side, Yolani slipped an arm around Elania's back, a gesture of comfort and shared amazement. Elania leaned into the touch, savoring the warmth of Yolani's presence amidst the surreal surroundings.

"You'll fit right in here," Elania murmured.

Their moment of tranquility was shattered by the sound of shouts and alarms echoing from the chamber behind them. Elania and Yolani exchanged a look, their expressions shifting from awe to concern.

"I was starting to think the welcome party wasn't coming," Elania quipped.

# CHAPTER 93 - INVADERS

Elania strode back into the Celestial Engine room, Yolani at her side, only to be greeted by a scene of escalating chaos.

Unknown soldiers clad in resplendent silver armor, their heads adorned with flat round hats, poured into the chamber through a pair of massive gates. They brandished large shields and short spears, their movements precise and coordinated.

High above, on the balconies overlooking the room, men with crossbows took up positions, their weapons aimed menacingly at the crowd below.

Gaston's voice rose above the din as he barked orders to the city guard, his words sharp and commanding.

The guards moved with practiced efficiency, forming a defensive line to protect the civilians. Harlock rallied the Ironfist company at Captain Montlas' side, his gruff voice cutting through the confusion as he organized their ranks.

Elania's eyes narrowed as she assessed the unfolding situation.

The unknown soldiers' arrival had effectively sealed everyone within the confines of the Celestial Engine room, leaving no avenue for escape.

As the soldiers tightened their formation, their spears glinting under the ethereal light of the Celestial Engine, Elania stepped forward, her demeanor calm and collected.

As the last of the silver soldiers filed into the chamber, a figure clad in purple leathers descended the steps, her movements fluid and purposeful.

Elania's eyes narrowed as she took in the woman's appearance, noting the sickle she wielded with practiced ease.

Elania focused her senses and activated [System Analysis].

The results flashed before her eyes, revealing the woman's true nature.

[Demi-Divine - Human - Lvl 1233]

Well, that wasn't great. Elania looked to Eziel, who hovered near her but remained silent.

The woman's level far surpassed her own. That wasn't a direct correlation to power, but it meant she had a lot more chances to pick good perks.

And perks were the biggest game-changers, even if she had found that [Divinity] could replicate their effects if you were willing to spend enough of it and could force it with your will.

Yolani's breath hitched, her hand tightening its grip on Elania's. The artificer's keen eyes darted between the woman and the soldiers, her mind no doubt whirring with calculations and contingencies.

As the woman reached the bottom of the steps, her gaze locked with Elania's, a flicker of recognition dancing across her features. A scowl started to form.

The air crackled with tension; the room falling silent as everyone waited with bated breath for the next move.

Elania's eyes narrowed as the Demi-Divine's scowl deepened, her gaze sweeping over the crowd with undisguised disdain.

The woman's attention snapped back to Elania, her voice dripping with contempt as she spoke.

"Has the sun-emperor fallen so low as to attempt invasions with slaves now?" the Demi-Divine sneered, her grip tightening on her sickle.

Elania's brow furrowed. She spread her wings and rose into the air, her body levitating until she was level with the other Demi-Divine, their eyes locked.

"I have no idea who or what the sun-emperor is," Elania stated, her voice calm and measured. "And this isn't an invasion. We've come seeking refuge, nothing more."

The Demi-Divine scoffed, her lips curling into a mocking smile. With a sharp gesture, she barked an order to her soldiers. "Shoot them down!"

Crossbow bolts rained down upon the Neftasu people. Elania's eyes widened, her hand thrusting out instinctively. A wave of golden light erupted from her palm, incinerating the projectiles before they could find their marks. The smell of charred wood and singed feathers filled the chamber.

The purple-clad Demi-Divine's eyes flashed with fury, raven-like wings bursting from her back as she lunged at Elania with incredible speed. Her sickle sliced through the air, its blade gleaming with deadly intent.

Elania twisted, her body contorting as she narrowly dodged the vicious strike whistling past her ear, the rush sending a chill down her spine.

A blur of gold streaked through the air, slamming into the Demi-Divine from behind and knocking her away before returning to Elania's hand.

Below, the city guard raised their muskets, their fingers poised on the triggers, ready to defend their people.

The Ironfist mercenaries moved with practiced efficiency, their shields forming a wall.

"Stop!" Elania shouted, her heart pounding as the Demi-Divine launched herself forward again. The purple clad woman didn't listen, and they clashed in a dizzying dance of slice and slash.

It was clear who had the upper hand. Despite her best efforts, Elania felt the sting of the sickle as it found her skin, slicing thin lines across her flesh. Her [Regeneration] kicked in, but slower than usual. Something about the other Divine's magic was interfering with her regenerative abilities.

The two combatants broke apart, hovering in the air as they caught their breath. Elania's chest heaved. Her eyes narrowed as she studied her opponent. The Demi-Divine's face was a mask of fury, her lips curled into a snarl.

"Stop this!" Elania shouted, her voice cutting through the chaos. "We're not here to fight! We seek only refuge!"

The Demi-Divine hissed, her wings beating the air as she prepared to launch another attack. But before she could strike, a shimmering barrier erupted from below, enveloping the guards and civilians in a protective cocoon.

Elania's gaze snapped to the source of the magic, her eyes widening as she spotted Yolani.

The artificer stood tall, her hands outstretched, a large contraption pulsing with energy at her feet.

Elania blinked. What the heck.

The Demi-Divine's attention shifted, her eyes blazing with fury as she took in the sight of Yolani's handiwork. With a snarl, she dove towards the artificer, her sickle poised to strike.

Elania's heart leaped into her throat, a surge of protective instinct flooding her veins.

Her hand dipped into a pocket, her fingers closing around a shock crystal.

With a deft flick of her wrist, she sent the crystal hurtling through the air, her [Demonic Aura] compressing it. The crystal detonated in a blinding flash of light and a deafening boom, the shockwave rippling through the chamber.

The Demi-Divine's head snapped towards the explosion; her attention momentarily diverted.

Elania seized the opportunity, her eyes blazing with a cold, calculated fury as she leveled her hand at the Celestial Engine.

"You might be stronger than me," Elania declared, her voice echoing through the room, "and maybe you could win in a fight. But there is nothing, absolutely nothing, you could do in time to stop me from destroying the Celestial Engine right now."

[The destruction of another Celestial Engine so soon could destroy the world.]

The Demi-Divine's eyes widened, shock etched across her features as she took in Elania's threat and Eziel's warning.

Elania pressed on, her gaze unwavering, her voice laced with a bitter edge.

"So what if it does?" she answered him. "We barely escaped with our lives, and now this one is ready to murder us all. If that's the case, then I might as well take her down with us."

The Demi-Divine's gaze darted between Elania, the Neftasu civilians huddled beneath Yolani's protective barrier, and the Celestial En-



gine. She met Elania's gaze, a flicker of understanding passing between them.

"Truce," the Demi-Divine said, the single word carrying the weight of a thousand unspoken emotions.

# CHAPTER 94 - ENDINGS, AND BEGINNINGS

Elania's feet touched the ground, her heart still racing from the intense confrontation. The purple Demi-Divine landed across from her, the tension between the two groups palpable.

The guards from both sides stood apart, their weapons still at the ready, but the immediate threat of violence had dissipated.

The Divine's voice cut through the murmurs of the crowd, her tone laced with authority and a hint of disdain. "I am Arlois the Purple Wing, one of the four towers and the protector of the Celestial Engine of Contia."

Her gaze locked onto Elania, her eyes narrowing. "Why have you brought soldiers and peasants into this divine sanctum, Spark?"

Elania bristled, her power thrumming beneath her skin.

Before she could respond, Arlois waved her hand, as if brushing aside her own question. "No matter. Your reasons are irrelevant. You have violated the laws of this city, and as such, you shall be forced

to swear allegiance to me. Your followers and divine energy will be devoted to my cause.”

Elania’s jaw clenched, her fingers tightening around Eziel’s hilt.

The audacity of this Demi-Divine to demand her subservience after nearly slaughtering her people and attacking her was astounding. She opened her mouth to retort, but before she could utter a word, Yolani stepped forward.

The artificer’s green eyes shone with determination as she faced Arlois, her voice steady and clear. “If I may, Arlois the Purple Wing, there is more to this situation than meets the eye. The events that transpired in Neftasu were not of our choosing, but rather a result of dire circumstances beyond our control.”

Elania watched as Yolani began to recount their harrowing tale. As her partner’s words filled the chamber, Elania allowed herself a moment to breathe.

When Yolani finally finished, there was silence, other than the indistinct murmur of the wounded and sick.

Arlois frowned, her gaze shifting between the demon and Yolani. “Do you usually allow your priestesses to speak in your stead?” the Demi-Divine asked, her tone laced with condescension.

A smirk tugged at the corner of Elania’s lips as she slipped a possessive arm around Yolani’s waist, pulling her close. “Yolani can speak for us just fine,” she declared, her voice unwavering.

Yolani’s cheeks flushed a delicate pink, but she leaned into Elania’s embrace, reciprocating the gesture.

The Demi-Divine stared at them; her expression unreadable. After a long moment, she spoke again, her words clipped and harsh. “Take your people and leave. You aren’t welcome here. You should be thankful for that much.”

Elania's brow furrowed, frustration simmering beneath her skin. "I don't have a way to take them anywhere else at the moment," she explained. "We need refuge, food, and water."

Arlois ran a hand through her hair, her exasperation evident in the tense set of her shoulders. Before she could respond, Eziel floated up, his blade shimmering in the light.

[I am surprised that Contia has fallen so low that a small band of refugees would be refused. Has the City of Spires truly become so destitute?]

The holy sword's words hung in the air, a damning indictment of the city's apparent lack of compassion... or, well, resources.

Elania watched as Arlois's eyes widened, her mouth opening and closing as if searching for a rebuttal.

The Demi-Divine's pride was clearly pricked by the implication. Elania seized the moment, spreading her wings wide.

"I am Elania, a girl from Earth, who became a lesser-demon, and then a demi-divine," she declared, her voice ringing clear and strong in the vast chamber. "These are my people from the fallen city-state of Neftasu, and we come here in peace, asking for succor in good faith."

The Demi-Divine's gaze swept over the assembled crowd, taking in the weary faces and ragged clothing of the Neftasu refugees. A flicker of something—perhaps empathy or understanding—crossed her features, and she nodded slowly.

"Very well," Arlois conceded, her tone measured and formal. "While visiting the city, you and your people will be subject to its laws and rulers. But for now, welcome to the Flying City of Contia."

Elania's shoulders relaxed slightly at the Demi-Divine's words, relief washing over her.

She glanced at Yolani, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips. The artificer returned the smile, her green eyes shining.

As Elania looked out over the gathered people, a nagging feeling settled in the pit of her stomach.

Somehow, she couldn't shake the sense that their journey was far from over, that the challenges they faced in this new city would be just as daunting as those they had left behind.

[End Book 2]