

Herosae Kitsune

By Danial Andrew LeBlanc

A small write up by the author.

It is amazing the capability of the mind, that within a moment, everything can change. Every memory is lost, and in its place is a new one, one with an entire backstory devoted and held so closely to you that your own fades in comparison. You believe it to be true, your illusionary past, is you. There is a place, a sight more captivating than any picture and developed beyond its very walls with a longing sense of understanding. Like for a moment, you could convince yourself that you have lived here and recite every fictional event of your life in this fantasy. Every inch you've travelled, every person you've met, the taste and feel of every wood grain you chewed on as a child in your bedroom alone. All of this sight beyond words can express, made for you, by you, in a fraction of a second in nothing more than a dream. It is mystifying, the glimmering untapped splendour that the mind can produce without effort.

In an instant, unhindered, I awoke, manifesting what I had seen into words. From there it was born.

I was actually still writing my first released novel at the time this piece came to me in a dream. When I came close to the ending of this text, all I could hope for was another emotionally binding dream to accompany me, as all my que fled in connection. I again confirmed that, a dream is a wonderful thing to walk.

Index

- Chapter 1: Herosae Tower – 2*
- Chapter 2: Company – 6*
- Chapter 3: The breakup – 15*
- Chapter 4: Crunch time – 23*
- Chapter 5: Protocol thirty three – 34*
- Chapter 6: Following the Fuse – 45*
- Chapter 7: Can of worms – 57*
- Chapter 8: Sisters – 67*
- Chapter 9: Reunion of the Revenants – 78*
- Chapter 10: Home – 93*
- Chapter 11: pursuit – 104*
- Chapter 12: Crisis – 114*
- Chapter 13: Closing – 122*
- Chapter 14: The World Anew – 138ish*

Information and reference

Page 141

All names, locations, and specifics to this world can be found at the bottom of the book for reference. If you forget or have trouble understanding a concept, please refer to script below.

Chapter 1:

Amber evening sun set in dark orange over the tower apartment. She was there by herself pondering over a set of books. Each one short and a part autobiographical, part fantasy. They called to her there, Sarephel, Daughter of the tower, guard of their home. Casual formal, she wore very little, she was about to dress for an event. She poured over her attire, unfitting for the event. Perhaps she would adorn herself to a festive appearance with someone in mind. First an inner suit, then a formal skirt, a tank and an opened crimson vest with a white blouse. She was particular to keep herself well fit for contention and yet retain plentiful to the eyes. Especially one in particular. A moment of emotion swept her away to fantasize the moment ahead before leaving her room. Her peace was broken, her apartment alarms had been pulled. Her father no less with another simulation scenario.

Sarephel withdrew two standardized side irons and within a fraction of thought she began to dispose of the intruders. Her father loved giving her these challenges, she was after all one of his prized daughters and high ranking home front guard. Each shot taken at the drop of a coin flew straight and true. In only seconds she had left toward her balcony having not missed a beat, reloaded and continued relentlessly. Thirty men had fallen, each shot critical, both guns schizophrenic with a sight of their own. Though her arms were only mildly toned they could withstand the recoil through thoughtless muscle memory and precision of technique.

The intruders fell swiftly yet it still remained buoyant, her frustration of this intrusion. More men climbed the walls, inhuman structured people appearing to be Saguin units from the bordering islands. Their specialty was their resistance to firearms. Leaping out she kicked one down and followed the other up with a grasp on his head, dragging him with her.

They all fell for many stories before landing, one with two heels around his neck, the other more likely to recover. Surely enough he did, soon returning facedown with a cracked neck. Another appeared behind her with blades. Sarephel made poor parrying daggers out of her fire arms as she leap planting two feet below the balls of his shoulders and a cold set of shots were fired until he fell back.

Three more in sight all targeting her, she was tired of this charade and left to continue her decent down the tower, surely enough they followed. More appeared by the edges, her father was definitely trying her patients. She locked both arms of her victim and jarred his neck, another was redirected and parried with a deathblow, another received a shattered spine as her heel bent his back like a wet stick. It seemed the training had come to an end, sure enough the bodies had disappeared, vanished by the homes computer matrix. At last she could return to her life and job.

Falling off the edge of the tower she landed from rooftop to rooftop of the great monolith. The mist cleared from the ominous dusk sky as she descended it's massive climb. She was no ordinary person of interest, baring three tails behind her she was only part human, as were most inhabitants of her father's estate. At last, a balcony appeared of familiar appeal. She landed gracefully, her hair still firmly in a bun, her clothes not tattered. She was ready.

Entering the building she snooped around. All aesthetically pleasing, a giant golden dragon in the centre, seating all around, people merry before a drink of pleasure. Some faces noticed her and smiled back before returning to their rest. Where could she be Sarephel wondered. The restaurant seemed content, the lounge inhabited by everyone but her. She had to look all around before finally

running into her target. Out from the kitchen she came with two trays and a glee.

“I didn't see you come in, I would have greeted you formally.” Aera welcomed

“I came in from the side.”

“You never come by the easy way, do you?” She said passing by to drop off her load and return. “I'm very glad you showed up.”

“I could not miss this, finally you have somewhere close by for me to visit.” Sarephel congratulated

“Thanks to you that is. I'm grateful your father could give me a place to work this high up the tower. Especially with such an astonishing view.”

Sarephel could not deny the feng shui of this arrangement, perhaps her father had done a little more than he admitted to. She was dragged out to the balcony by hand and shown the view once more. “It's beautiful.” Sarephel confessed. The ground was only now becoming visible. On this great home they were high above the hills, though they could see them in the distance, the island was a massive chunk of solid earth surrounded by a smokey lake.

“I should attend to my customers, I'll see about getting Karelyn to cover for me while you are here.” Aera promised, parting rather quickly. “Seat yourself wherever, I'll find you in a little bit.” She charmed.

Sarephel smiled, she took to the once aforementioned synthetic spring to the corner, a hot tub with convincing soft stone decor. She began to strip away her outfit until she was left with her inner suit and prepared bikini. She sunk in as a waitress arrived asking for a request. “A maeuwberry cocktail, please.” and the waitress left with the order. The water was soothing warm, it flowed well within her as she felt her energy mellow and unwind. She exhaled deeply, slowly, calmly. Her eyes slit narrowly, peering out. Someone stood in front of her, Aera.

“Your drink.” She responded. “Halana told me to give it to you.”

“That was fast.” Sarephel astonished, reaching for the drink.

“She remembers you well, you would always ask for one when you came to see me so she had one ready to be made as soon as she heard you were going to come.” Aera kicked off her shoes and high socks. Two tails twirling behind her. She sank the lower half of her body into the water.

“Come on, you don't want to play in the spring?” Sarephel toyed. Irking Aera to join.

Aera responded with a koi sideways glare, a less interested facade to her burning desire to comply. Slowly unbuttoning her work suit in it's classy attire until she was in just as much as her friend. Sinking in deeper, she wandered over and sat adjacent. Reaching over, grasping Aera's off arm and moving it closer, Sarephel broke the silence “I really like this place you have here.” Aera gave a noting gesture, rolling over.

“I guess it has benefits to know someone like you.” Aera softly thanked, resting her arms on the

stone around Sarephel's neck. Sarephel assisted in lowering Aera into the water and the two became as one, snuggled together. Her skin was tender as Saraphel graced her girlfriend's neck and was returned with a lip planted on hers. Two tails floated in the air, three more struggled to relocate themselves more comfortably. "I'm very glad to be here but..." Aera said veering away. "But I would rather have my dream a little farther away."

Sarephel raised a brow, slowing the romance. "And what is wrong with here?"

"You know I dreamed of having a place of my own in the hills, remember? This place is nice but it's too busy for me. I could pursue a lovely estate in a small settlement where I know everyone, I don't know an..."

Saephel interrupted "But we would not be able to see each other if you did. You know that."

"I don't know anyone here... I feel like a foreigner in my own home, in my own dream. I love it here but it seems like someone else's fantasy and I'm just here to make it happen."

"You are my fantasy..." Sarephel nodded, massaging Aera's back.

"Someone else's, I don't mind being your's but I suppose I just thought it would be more exciting on my opening day." Aera's deep gazed spoke her discomfort more than her words could.

Saraphel signed to reason her "You will know people more."

"That is easy for you to say, you know everyone." Digging deeper into her loved one's arms

"I know you, you know me, your staff adore you, regular customers will come by and you will have that homely experience you always wanted. Just give it time." Saraphel promised. Aera supposed "It's still a lot better than the shack you worked in at poor district. Less angry drunks, less leches trying to chase you after work, less asses for me to hand just to get you safely home."

Returning the favour, Aera began to mould her hands around the enticing waist beside her "I guess. I just wish I had more of a family that could kick their asses for me, like you is all."

"You will have all the family in the world here, daddy takes care of everyone."

"It's still so busy here, how do you deal with it?" Aera's head nestling into Sarephel's neck.

"It's just life." Saraphel replied, now quiet intimate with her girlfriend.

"You know, I really wish we had more privacy." Immediately after, Saraphel released her hold and retracted her hands back to the shoulders.

"Your drink." The waitress announced, placing the second glass down and clearing her throat. "Mrs... Aera..." She nodded in respects and returned to her business flustered.

"Would you like to take this business elsewhere?" Sarephel asked, returning her attention to Aera's back.

Aera tried to push it away but couldn't escape the thought. "Twenty minutes." She uttered. "Then I need to return to work." Both retracted. Reaching for the towels they left. Wrapped, they rang their wet garments and made a bee line for the entrance. Sarephel guiding with her knowledge of the estate. Down the great stairwell, getting a few looks along the way they ducked into the service chamber. A white rinsed maintenance hallway took them into some less cleanly places. One door lead into an alley for the fifty eighth floor shopping district, a place well off camera. This was an excellent place to hide. Most shops closed around three hours prior, not a peep could be heard. Checking the back doors, Sarephel was certain of something. Finally, she stopped at one of the doors, this one unlike the rest opened. Eerily they peered Inside to find the back of a mechanical store with boxes of scraps and other components. Making sure no one was there after hours, the coast looked clear, just a few dim lights and all the privacy in the world.

Aera wrapped around to grasp a feeling of Saraphel's damp chest. Starting from the stomach, past the ribs, and working underneath her bosom. A pin dropped.

Both of them stopped, Sarephel's breath disappeared, ears perked. Past her heart beat they could hear something tinkering around, oddly quietly for a repair shop worker. Aera silently kissed her girlfriend's exposed shoulders and the back of the neck, feeling the warmth on her lips. Sarephel crept ahead, searching the store. Small and narrow, with two stairs into the foyer, the back was small. In the far back a door lead to the storage closet which they slowly snuck towards. A foot scuff to their side, someone was here, close at that. They heard it though an opening on the side, a window for passing parts though to behind the counter. Sarephel peered through the hole to see someone in the dark hunched over. She could see his face clearly as he turned around. Stagnant air was boding ill mischievous and gull. Her mind recalled the face "Daz?" she whispered under her breath. She knew him from long ago, he worked in the guard when she was starting out. He went though training and though she could been able to hear him clearly now, he was oblivious. Maybe he dropped out of training, or was too focused on something else to mind his adapted sense. Their intimacy either way was cut short.

Aera could detect the silence. "I'm not sure how I feel about this place. I don't want to cut myself on some old metal." Her voice withering cinder.

"I agree..." Sarephel wanted to leave but her training kept her still, her duties persisted well past her instincts which had been shaken off by the disturbance. The storage closet was left open Saraphel noticed, it wasn't her expertise but she wanted to know more about what was going on. Darkness was all that awaited inside. Aera wedged at the doorway into the darkness and peered out. Sarephel felt her way through, the occasional box or shelf showed up to hinder her but what could be expected. Nearly naked she left her equipment by the hot tub. A board alerted her touch, tilting as she stepped on it. She put more weight on it and it tipped down farther. Sarephel stepped back, the board seemed to cover something, a hole, a rather large hole. She lowered her hand into the gape only to find a coarse lip on the underbelly. It was oddly dark and could have been deep enough to gap the floor to the lower level but where was the light. Perhaps a sewer channel, but neither smell nor sound could prove it. It was a tunnel of some sort. Lowering herself, Sarephel was at the end her reach but the floor couldn't be felt on her feet. She pulled herself back up and crept carefully out of the storage to her girlfriend.

"What did you find?", Aera whispered to the best she could. Sarephel planted her a kiss on her favourite lips, parting with her finger on the same lips and hushed as they snuck out. Sarephel lead them back to the maintenance hallway, and they recalled.

"I found a massive hole in the back."

“Are you okay?” Aera worried.

Sarephel tilted her ears aside “Yes, they did a shotty job of covering it though...” glaring indirectly.

“You're not really into it right now, are you?” catching Saraphel's attention, “It' in your eyes, you're distracted.

She looked away, Saraphel hated the thought. “I'll... See you tonight, right?” Assuring her reservation.

“Yes. You are going to investigate it, aren't you?” Knowing the answer anyway.

Solemnly obligated “I might stay a while, pay for my drinks.”

“They are on the house...” Aera assured, more understanding.

“I need to report this, a team should come by after he's left, not to disturb anything. If something is going on there, we can't let them know we are on to them.”

“What could it be?” Aera recomposed, honestly curious. “Part's swindling?”

“I can't tell. It's definitely underhanded.” Seraphel left to her mind, disrupted, distracted. Aera started to walk off, she needed to return to work. Quickly Saraphel returned. “Sorry.” She said, picking up her love. “We were doing something weren't we?”

“We're not in the mood any more, I need to...” Silent, liplocked.

“Tonight, I swear.” Sarephel vowed.

Beside the hot tub was a third drink added to the unfinished first one, a fortune cookie adjacent and a heart shaped candy. Sarephel grabbed her stuff, and redressed. The elevator ride back up cured Sarephel sober to her duty and mentally she prepared.

Returning, equipped after a short call Sarephel slipped back in. Empty building, fresh lit storage room, and shamelessly covered tunnel. Descending, she lit the way. A short drop. Letting go two surveillance drones, she embarked as a team was on their way.

Chapter 2:

Moans in the darkness. Dim moon light cast burning through glass before subtle silence. Two glasses at the bedside, both empty.

Sarephel wrapped tightly, tails entwined, bare skin against skin. Sweet gentle yangery fruit filled the air, soft satin sheets with silk blankets, faux fur pillows and long heavenly dark chestnut hair against face and lip; two lovers doted in bliss. The sun risen and no one wanted to move. Both switched their positions constantly squirming about to get comfortable, too lazy to make the day, too restless to stay put. An hour blanked away without conscious memory, to be disrupted by a knocking. Aera rolled onto Sarephel. "Maybe they'll go away." her dry throat begged.

Sarephel could only wish. The knocking continued. "I could see what they want." She reasoned.

"Nnooo." Aera cried, hugging tighter "It's nice and warm here." The knocking stopped. "See..."

The door lock beeped and the handle was turned from the outside. Sarephel's ears rose, reaching under the bed. A man walked through the doors announcing himself. "Good heavens daughter, it is almost noon, what are you doing still in bed?"

"Father." Sarephel astonished, pushing herself up quickly "What drops you by?"

"Master Herosae!?" Aera embarrassingly uttered in disbelief, quickly covering herself behind his daughter.

"I was due to pay you a visit." He said, pouring over a photo on the coffee table of the two together. "I'm also here on business, about that hole that you found in shop fifty eight, twenty seven 'B' and your experience with what you found down there."

Sarephel began to dress herself. She turned to Aera and assured her. "As long as you are my girlfriend, it's okay, he's blood."

"I am not embarrassed of the mortal body dear." Herosae added, "Don't be so shy."

Still unable to be at ease, Aera dressed herself in the other room as quickly as she could.

Gripping the door casing of her quarters Sarephel inquired farther. "What did the investigation team find out Dad?"

He nodded and retracted from the frame. "They found a little more worrisome evidence that you overlooked."

"I'm sorry." She apologized, pulling back.

"No need. It is a very cunning illusion that took a few hours to discover. It appears that the entire thing is a very elaborate underground drug trafficking operation. We are not sure to where yet. Maybe you can shed some light on it. You said in your report that you found something and that caught my eye, an abandoned stairwell?"

“Yes, it was a very old one, most the metal was rusted and not sturdy.” Walking out. “Most likely a maintenance shaft.”

“That is the thing, I have no records of such a structure existing. My great grandfather who remodelled Herosae Tower over eighty years ago had archives of details and maps of the entire tower as it was back then. He needed them so he that he could structurally build up the ninety more floors that we have today. He left all of which in the special archives which have not been tampered with since their arrival. Those maps could not provide any proof of such a stairwell ever being there.”

“Are you sure?”

“I reviewed them myself, they could not have been manipulated, the digital maps are identical to the prints, and their copies printed over eighty years ago.”

“I don't get it, did any teams scout the tunnels? Maybe it's not where you think it is.”

“Not yet, for now they have requested this matter be handled more delicately. For now I want this to be a solo operation. Rather a duo, I have one of my finest stealth explorers working on it but he's requested to speak with you on your findings in person. I also have a small detective unit working on whatever they can find on the area and former second tier guard Rolaund Ebord Daz.”

“Former?” Sarephel asked stricken.

“Yes, he dropped out after two consecutive failed examinations to the higher rank. He seemed discouraged and in a lack of determination he took up mechanics. It's too soon to confront him about this so this is all under your hats.”

Silence plagued the room in void. It seemed to match up; Daz worked there most likely but he was mischievous in the dim light and would certainly know about the tunnel in his own work place. Nothing could be done yet, Sarephel wanted to have an answer but she was just a guard. She was no investigator. Her specialization was armed and unarmed combat and heightened senses.

Wandering in, Aera woke the vacant conversation “Sir, Do you always make special home visits like this? I imagine you must be very busy,” She approached respectfully shy.

“Not always...” He replied, “Drug trafficking is not a problem that can be necessarily dealt with, but I'm more concerned about there being large holes in my house. The integrity of this tower is greatly important for everyone... And I wanted to see my daughter every chance I can.”

“I see...” Area collected herself nervously.

“And maybe get a chance to meet her girlfriend that I hear plenty about.” His warm voice fluttered proud.

Aera blushed. “She talks of me does she? What does she say?”

“We can discuss that another time. I need to be heading out... Do keep your PDA turned on, I'd hate to have to wake you with another hologram invasion.” Stroking his goate in ponder. “You should

hear from Garath soon about what you found there. I entrust this situation to you two entirely...” Herosae walked to the door, nodding as he left. “Oh, and one more thing. I do hope you two have a well endowed life together and an enriching relationship.”

Sarephel waved her father off gratefully. Aera walked up, laying her hand along her waist. “Did... Your dad just give us his blessing?”

“So?” Sarephel brushed off.

Aera held a quirked expression “I, just didn't think it would be that easy is all.”

“Why wouldn't it be?” She returned resting her hand against the chair. “I'm a skilled woman, I can make my own choices, and deal with their outcome.”

“So it's because I'm just a weak 'ol waitress, isn't it?” Aera huffed playfully.

Sarephel smiled. “I like to think more that he just respects my decisions.” Reaching under Aera's hand covered waist. “Now, what shall we do with him gone?” Taking hold.

“Shouldn't you turn on your PDA?” Aera asked, being pushed back into the chair.

“I'll get the messages eventually.” She finished before crawling up onto her girlfriend's lap.

“You sure took your time.” The man, assumingly Garath, said as Sarephel walked though the door.

“Had to slowly escort my coffee pot to an elderly facility, the new one's giving me sass. You'd be Garath?” She looked around the dark room.

“Correct, Sarephel.” He said turning around in his chair. “Second highest ranked, tier 6 unit of the special guard and personal daughter of Master Herosae the Eighth, am I correct?”

“Wow, you didn't need to be a complete smartass about it but yes that's me.” Standing just inside.

“I do my research.” He said, irked. Getting up, he walked over to offer his hand. “It's a pleasure.”

“Sure, likewise.” Sarephel replied, suspiciously.

“Shall we get to business?” Asking rhetorically optimistic. “What exactly did you see down there?”

Sarephel recalled her findings formally “I saw very little, there were no lights. When I returned with a light the halls were plaster, the ground was old warn turf carpet and the passage was very narrow. It went both ways, I sent a drone behind me on silent so it captured the layout but nothing more. The drone flew for forty seconds before returning from a dead end. The way I went however had a split. I went one way, the drone went the other.”

“Were there any doors?” he incited.

“None, just hallway.”

Pulling away to himself he remarked coolly “Very strange.”

“My drone detected life so I was cautious. When I later viewed the feed, there wasn't anything there so I don't know what it picked up. The way I took lead to an abandoned stairwell which Father explained should not exist. It went both ways, I didn't use it, it seems too unstable.”

“How tall was it?” Returning to face her

“Roughly five floors. The second drone had not returned yet, I continued along the path that lead adjacent to the stairwell. I then found a room at the end which was locked and the door rusted. I then returned the way I came, cautious of whatever tipped off the drone I then headed out and handled my data.”

“In other words, you got breezed though it and left it for the professionals.”

“Uh... Yeah, it's not my field, what did you expect?” She expressed straightening her back.

“Something, anything else.” holding his tablet and papers in hand. “I have all the layout from your drones, I was just hoping for some small details that they couldn't pick up. Maybe what else you saw in the stairwell...” He asked, inciting her memory.

“It was just a normal metal stairwell.” returning logic, suspiciously “And what about the dead end at a rusted metal door that was locked. that wasn't on the drones.”

“Were there any signs?”

“None, flat painted plaster walls and carpet, same all the way though. No markings, no text.”

“Would you care to accompany me back down there?” Garath opted

Sarephel shrugged. “Why? You should have all the data and I've told you everything I know.”

“The company, a trained guard.” He reasoned

Sarephel flopped her ears forward, “Isn't stealth your specialty, that's why Father put you on the job. You shouldn't need a guard.” She replied sympathetically.

“Then what do you plan on doing?” He asked, intently studying her.

Confidantly she replied. “Waiting until I'm needed. There is still plenty going on in the background, I should be ready the moment the signal is sent.”

Garath reached out, forwardly. “You said there was life but the drone couldn't find it; maybe someone knows you were there, maybe they could be following you, maybe you could use someone specialized in stealth to watch your back? Someone who can tell before they strike or threaten someone

you...”

“Garath, stop the charade.” Sarephel asserted, narrow eyed and fed up. “What is your motive?”

Garath halted. Setting his documents aside he pondered, and at last walked past Sarephel. Leaning against his shelf with his arm propped against his head he finally confessed awkwardly cool like. “You know, you are a very beautiful woman and I wou...”

“I have a girlfriend.” She cut off.

“Damnit!” Garath swore aloud. Sarephel nodded gently confirming, with some false regret. “Wait, lesbian, lesbian, or...” He tried again.

“Just lesbian.”

“GREAT!” he announced, frustrated. “Boss offers me a chance with a beautiful woman and she's a freaking dyke.”

Half her face glared sadistically. “Yeah, and this dyke gets a hell of a lot more than you creep!”

“Aahh!” Garath groaned, recollecting himself as he returned to his desk. “Sorry about all of this... You can go now.”

“W-WHAT?!” Sarephel exclaimed, “Is that the whole reason I came here, just for you to try and pick me up?”

“Don't credit me as such a villain,” He uttered carelessly with his hand over his shoulder waving her off. “My line of work is very lonely.”

“Yeah and I bet you do a lot of peeping in your line of work too!”

“Hey,” He returned, extending his finger. “That's just speculation! I have a fully respectable job and I take great pride in it.” Boldly reminding.

“Fine, then take your job and... And do it yourself.” Sarephel stormed out. “Call when you need me.”

“Yeah, and why do I need a dyke like you anyway?” Slouching on his arm right rest.

Leaning back in. “Father entrusted this job to both of us need I remind you.” She asserted.

“I can handle it all on my own, thank you.” He smiled falsely

“Yeah, but I'm not going to let you just screw it up with my name on it.”

“I'll call you, alright...” Pulling away “This never happened.”

“Pervert.”

“Dyke.” He returned.

Garath palmed his face. The noise of machines in his office irking him. The wide open door echoed the humiliated murmur of people outside. Getting up to close the door, he was reuniting with his new enemy. “Oh yeah, and by the way, this dyke could hand you your ass a heartbeat!” She informed slamming the door shut.

The stress was bottled off and in desperate need of uncapping. The seventy third floor took forever to get to her, it was roughly Sarephel's usual time to run some scenarios in the simulator. Her card went into the slot unlocking the door with a satisfactory clicking tone. On her side was Tanis the technician and Jaero the weapons expert having a conversation. “Hey, Sare, you look like you could use a little combat exercise.”

“Run 'S38”

“I'd hate to ask who riled you up.” Tanis commented

“Yeah, well hes a jackass who is going to ruin my chance to prove that I'm capable of this shit.”

“I'm sorry but we've restricted the gun usage for that sim after last time.” Jaero informed

Cracking her joints, Sarephel assured. “I don't need guns.”

“Yup” fixed on Tanis, “Defiantly one of those days alright.”

An hour past, finally wearing on Sarephel's endurance. “You know...” Jaero admitted, “I rather not be the guy that pissed you off.”

“It's fine.” Sarephel replied. “I got that out of my system long ago.”

“If those holograms had emotions, I'd feel very sorry for them.”

“Huh?” Sarephel wondered. “Oh... Yeah, that.”

Putting his water aside. “You know,” Jaero continued to inspect his arsenal. “I'm pretty sure that you could rank up to tier 7 if you really wanted to.”

Sarephel shook her head. “Nope. Tier 6 is as high as I can go. Father gave me special privileges, otherwise I'd always be busy. If I ranked up, I wouldn't be able to walk around while on duty. Tier 7 requires standing in one place and guarding one of two places and that's just a waste of my time.”

“What about tier 8? That lets you walk around more.”

“Huh, yeah right.” She chuckled, accessing the refreshments. “As if I want to walk around with my father every waking moment of my life. Besides, he already has Kaunzi my sister to do that for him. How is she doing anyway?” Pouring herself a glass. “I don't really see her around much.” Sarephel admitted.

“She comes by every so often,” Grabbing some ice out of the empty picture. “She's a lot better,

not as scary though, but better.”

“Than me?”

“Who else?” crunching on the cube.

“I'm going to head out, I have an arrangement.”

“This early?”

“I'd love to stay and fight holograms all day but I got things to do.”

With that she made her way down to the fifty ninth floor. The restaurant wasn't open until supper, but she knew that she would find Aera there.

old chapter start

Closed solid red wood immobile doors towered like lifeless castle walls *insert name* restaurant. She knocked but no answer, someone was bound to show up to address the disturbance eventually but no one came. Her ears flopped and eyes shifted. No one came even now, no sound nor aura. Pulling away hesitantly, ever attracted to the gateway Sarephel scampered off determined.

Light from the outside world darkened the dining area with the ambient bloom of brightness peeking just barely past the deck. One shadow appeared above, a stalker, clinging to the roof and blind as all mud to the voided space. The inside was just as dark as her shadow cast, Sarephel tried to adjust her sights to make out the details in the back but nothing living could be found.

The door clanked a metallic sound, an irking squeak and then creaked with it's hefty mass as it swung open. Inside was beautiful, a romantic room and a contrasting sunshine into the dream she once wished for. Aera finally arrived, a few bags in hand. A moment she relished in the the bliss of her quiet restaurant before noticing someone in the tub. Aera could have heard the crackle of ice form, all was awakened in her stone standing body.

“Took you long enough.” The familiar voice teased.

“Sar... You, how did you get in? The door was locked.”

“Your patio isn't.” She replied, pointing in it's direction.

A forgiving tone calmed Aera's irritation. “And who would try and break in that way?”

“Theives, burglars...”

“And who would do that?” Aera restated, hinting at her peaceful new living.

“...Girlfriends.” Sarephel continued.

Dragging in a large cloth bag from the entry. “How long have you been waiting?” She asked setting it aside.

“Long enough to warm the water after I got bored.”

"I can't get in quite yet." Aera informed retrieving some stock from the slanted sack.

"You know you want to" Sarephel toyed, splashing water out at Aera's feet.

"I need to put things away, then I'll play with you." She promised, moving into the other room. "I have an hour before opening, and my staff will be here much sooner." Quickly opening cupboards, Aera impatience began to wear on her hot tub fish.

"How are you enjoying your new home?" Sarephel asked, half wet peeking towards the kitchens closest express.

"It's very nice, not as nice as yours though." Aera Admitted, under classed as she pulled the rest of the bag in. "Still kind of empty apart from the bed, the kitchen, a luxurious couch that's too damned hard, and a monitor system with nothing on it." She lamented,

"I could probably put in a word about a new couch." Flopping outward, Sarephel's laziness eagerly tying her to the ground.

"No need, I've already ordered a newer, much cheaper one, it's bigger too."

Excitedly Sarephel asked. "But how comfy is it?" Kicking the waters surface.

"A cloud, I'd show it to you but I don't have it yet, it would be here already if I didn't accidentally give them the wrong address." Aera poked out of the kitchen, adjusting her hair. "How is the job?"

Sarephel frowned, rolling crooked.

"That bad?" Aera inquired.

"It's gone nowhere." She groaned, sinking back into the waters. "And as far as I'm concerned it can still go nowhere."

"And what about that Garid... Whatever his name was guy."

Sarephel turned her head. "He can burn alive."

"That's harsh." Aera remarked, laying down at the edge of the spring, chin braced. "What did he do to deserve your malice?" beckoning Sarephel nearer.

"He's a perv." She scowled.

"And you aren't?" Aera returned sassy, placing her lips on her partner.

Sarephel's eyes veered guiltily. "I mean, he's the stupid kind. The guy that goes out of his way to pick someone up, and only cares about the sex."

Aera slit gaze and entertained smiled as she said. "That could describe a lot of people."

Jotting up to defend her honour “If anything were to ever happen to you...” Sarephel confined compassionately. “I’d... I’d rip through half this tower til someone put me down.” Yanking out her fury before retreating back, afraid of what she could do.

“Then I guess if anything were to ever happen to you... I should probably do the same.”

Sarephel blushed. “You don’t have to... But, I’d love it a lot if you did.”

Behind them, they could hear footsteps. “It seems my time is up.”

“Shall we continue this later then?” Sarephel adjourned, respecting Aera’s work for once.

“I can take some time off tonight, but only if there are no more workplace interruptions.” Aera conditioned.

Sarephel reached in and sealed the deal with a kiss.

Chapter 3:

The sun fell covered by misty scirms, Aera was much more busy than either of them hoped for. Good word since the night before tripled their service. The odd face from the night before returned for an encore. Still setting set behind the hills, golden skies turned to dark purple, the land illuminated by the night life.

“I managed to reserve the next half hour, but I don’t think I can really do this too often.” Aera mentioned sitting down with Sarephel. “It’s not very responsible of me, my staff could probably think more of it.”

“Sounds like everyone is pretty busy.” Ears tilted a glance.

“Too busy, I feel a little guilty leaving them alone but I’d rather not get my head chewed off by them in the crossfire either. No one is used to working under pressure like this.”

“They can make a mean soup bowl though.” Sarephel admired heartily.

Aera chuckled. “Just a bunch of low class girls who made their way up here with skill.”

Sarephel pulled herself into her knees “I remember when Halana used to work at The Eel, she used to favour me quite a lot.” She reminisced

“Yeah, because you made sure I got home safely. She had no problems handling people but I never really grew up like she did, so... She’s in charge right now, she’d got the most experience, everyone else just lived in the same apartment.”

“I forget,” Sarephel asked, falling into Aera’s shoulder. “Weren’t you the one who taught them how to cook?”

“Ha...” Aera brushed off. “They taught me a lot too. Halana would come by every so often, and everyone would gather around to watch her make things. She should have stuck to making drinks though, so, really we all taught each other.” Unable to take the credit.

“And I used to sneak you some cook books.”

“And I would sneak food out of The Eel's kitchen because I couldn't afford most the things in that book.” Aera smiled mischievously. “All those times back then, and look at me now. Kitchen thief to head chef.”

Both of them fell silent. They leaned together knowing this moment had been long time coming, the day where all the past actually felt like the past. Small traces of light lit the edges of the sky, lights all before them. Many homes and farms in the distance gave mystery to the forest and the sky started to speckle the same. Below them the lake began to glow as every night. Deep beneath the fog, power generators were hard at work delivering energy to the whole tower. Lights shifted through the mist like a second ocean, calmly stroking the eyes like tilde waves of soft fleece babies' blankets. In the distance, even the cities far away began to glow in the atmosphere. Their view from this high up was astonishing.

“You know, it's even more amazing from the top of the tower.” Sarephel mentioned.

Softly enchanted, Aera asked “You've been there?”

“Many times. Daddy used to take me there a lot because he liked to look at the stars too. It's pretty cold that high up.”

“I can imagine. Down below it was pretty warm, but that is mostly due to the generators down there. It's actually kinda chilly here.”

Sarephel rubbed Aera's arms to warm them. “Dad and I had to wear special coats when we were on the roof. It's only as big as your restaurant because of structure or something. It's why Great Grandpa Herosae couldn't make it any taller.”

“How tall was this tower again?” Digging into Sarephel's neck

“I think it was one hundred and ninety three officially, but not many people are allowed to know that.” She recalled, still amazed herself. “Roughly almost four thousand feet tall.”

“That is a long way to go up. I mean it takes like five minutes just to get here from my apartment... Do you ever think your dad will let me go up there with you two one of these nights?”

“I don't know. It's been forever since I've gone up there. The last time I think I was still a little girl.”

“I would love to see the world from up there. I know that it's a lot to ask for but you always need some kind of dream.”

“Yeah.” Sarephel replied “I would like...” Interrupted by the vibration of a little devil “...That... OH YOU'VE GOT TO BE FLIPPING KIDDING ME!”

“What?!” Aera rose annoyed. “Weren't you going to turn that off?”

Sarephel dropped the PDA beside her abruptly. “I was...” and tilted back uncomfortably.

“Can it wait?”

“I wish...” Sarephel breathed beside another rumble. Her eyes dropped like needles. “Oh, and he has the gull to pester me again so I don't miss the first one... Call... Trac... Bad track record.” She recited. “Burn him.” She wished, dropping the PDA again.

“So it can?” Aera assumed before a long pause. “Great.”

“I've been summoned,” Sarephel huffed, patriotically. “He found something only I” She emphasized. “Can help with.”

“Come on! I still got twenty minutes left!”

“Don't think I'm happy about it either.” Sarephel slumped back to her knee caps. Aera cheeks drooped sympathetically. “Well.” Sarephel rose. “I got work.” Leaving the balcony.

“When are we going to have time, without work taking you away?” Aera called.

“You know who your dating. Trouble never rests...” She tossed out prophetically unamused. “I'll come by and check out your new place soon alright? Make sure to leave some muffins by the dresser alright?”

“You'll turn your tablet off this time, right?”

Making a silly face as she turned and smiled. “It's already off.” Sarephel showed, revealing the shutdown screen and continued prancing away.

“And do try to leave him in one piece.

“No promises.”

Crisp evening dew breezed her free fall as Sarephel cut trail down her family's legacy. It wasn't a simple as taking the elevator down, but it was a lot faster. Her eyes voided in memory, Aera was probably right as Sarephel contemplated whether or not she was too judgemental of her new partner. Whether she liked it, he was awaiting her down below by the transit exchange. Rising to meet her, the ground floors spread out from the basin with roads running out of them. Night vendors' lanterns waved to visitors in the fortuitous breeze as another train entered to dock.

Carrying with the wind, Sarephel followed into the station, inconclusively fixing her face as she viewed security post. Before it stood two men, one an older gentleman who dressed for the evening shift and talking to the other, a man who could only be gentle if he tried. The second man took notice. “Your early.”

All composure returned to it's dormant state. “Your annoying.” Sarephel issued.

Garath lifted his arm and shoulders while facing the guard, shrugging some unspoken language and returned to her.

Unimpressed, Sarephel got straight to work. “What's the job.”

“Little private business. We're taking the eleven fifty five to Kalklen and I'll brief you then.”

“More stealth wizardry, espionage and double agents stuff?” Sarephel patronized.

“Protocal.”

She nodded, looking at her watch. “So, I get to stand around here with you for another half hour before I get to hear about the big surprise.”

Garath began to groan, creasing the bridge of his nose “Can we cut the crap and try to keep it civil while we're stuck working together?”

“If it means you won't talk to me on the bus.”

Chuckles came from behind. “I'd love to stay here and see how this goes, but my break is over. Good luck with whatever.” The security guard favoured, budding his ash as he left.

The lanterns swayed with the burden of steel track, passing the eleven fifty five. Quiet cars hummed the line across the open lake towards it's closest shores, following an overgrown woodland black out. “So, spill.” Sarephel requested impatiently.

Garath pulled out his case. “In a moment, I'm waiting the attendant to bring a drink so they can leave us alone.” He said mannerly.

Sarephel retracted her posture into contempt boredom, soon following the arrival of the train staff. “Refreshments?” The lady offered.

“A Glale Sparkling.”

“As you wish.” Reaching for the undercarriage bottle. “Twelve, or twenty ounce?”

“Twenty... And for yourself.” Garath directed to the unattentive fox.

Sarephel looked back with a sheen of thirst. “Dragless Ale.”

“Before a job?” Garath half mothering, blurted.

Mockingly he was returned with a plaster face and the remark “It'll help me focus.”

“I thought we cut that.” Garath politely retorted.

“Oh look, your talking to me.”

“I asked if you wanted anything.” He mentioned a volume louder

“You ain't my boss.”

“What does that do with anything?”

“Two ales.” Sarephel motioned, ignorantly returning to the argument, leaving the poor attendant to carry on unphased and move up to the next room.

A few stabs in, Garath closed the curtain. “Kay, this is the follow up.” He started, replied with a confirming nod. “Good. I need your brawn for this mission.”

“I'm not a weight lifter.”

“Sorry, your combat expertise.” He corrected, jerking back on topic. “When I went into the aperture, everything was just as blatantly as you described it, with a minor variation. It was pretty ominous, I'll give it that; like going into a time lock. Plane walls, turf carpet empty, space and marked up walls. Nothing legible but it was definitely used. Kind of, you weren't kidding about those stairs, nearly took my head off on those things when they gave way.”

“To think if I trusted them for a moment.”

“Not sure who could use those, pretty sure I woke the neighbourhood up with it too.” Garath admitted guiltily. “Well, when I made my way down the other levels they turned out just as dreadfully empty. I found another door though, not too pleased with what I found. Inside was a used lab. I swabbed around and got some fresh samples, papers there were messy to sort through. Then I came across some liquid aether, real old science stuff. When the samples came back, it turned positive for Meji Khloe, a long standing member of our black list.”

“So, are they using that lab to brew and supply inside?”

“Not sure actually. That's why we're on our way to capture him. All this time he's been suspected of heading a mafia but he's kept it good and low. Haven't needed to grab him, til now.”

“And you can't catch him yourself, why?”

“Our lead suggests he's in a local gambling house for celebrations, top floor. Currently, it's swarming with crooks and shifty eyed sort, hunch says he ain't using the front door in, so catching him walking is why we ain't got him yet.”

“And I come in how?”

“Break up the party.”

“I like the sounds of that.” Sarephel agreed, legs crossed and leaning outward.

“Cause panic, scare them all out of there, make as much uproar as you can. Once I get a match on him, I'll swoop down, assuming you don't cave his face in first.”

“What happens if he's not there?”

“Then we go in and secure the lab, but we're on a timer. Worst case, they close up shop and relocate. It doesn't fix the problem but it gets it out of there.”

“Any stipulations?”

“Do your stuff, try not to kill anyone unless you have to. It's not that kind of operation.”

“Will there be an in-flight movie on the way back?” She asked, taking a good swallow.

“Yes, it will be me, clapping my hands. Try not to goof around.”

Chill draft poured off the midnight glass like liquid gas, awakening her sensory. Sarephel stared intently out into the abysmal twilight passing her sight. Each tree, every leaf became still frames, pale lit figures. For a moment, the tight passage opened into lake; tranquil bright moonbeams reflecting the breeze skimmed ripples of the evening tide. Livid eyes and pin straight fur, the conduit of night's energy flowing out into the train car. Garath, who's eyes fell back on his partner felt himself open every pour. Before catching himself, his adrenaline tainted his senses in some primal level of flight. Her concentration could dulling a knife. Reassuring himself, his sweat dried. Sarephel was serious after all.

“There it is.” He motioned barely audible, following the synthetic clay tile of a nearby roof, moonlight laminating the side of his skinsuit. “Best entrance would be the vent, following the windows beneath.”

“Signal.” Sarephel demanded.

“Working.” He confirmed, taking his eyes back down again.

“You know who you are looking for.”

“Just find him.” Eyes still fixated on his screen.

As the wind blew, she was gone. One dark figure into the night, the tracking steady to catch up. Unexplainably she was in. Black was occasionally followed by dim brown light corners and flashes of white, however she moved it was hard to follow on screen. Only for a second, she saw someone; a man leaning the wall with a cigarette, void expression of carried thoughts and open weakness, seemingly alone. She continued, clearly now traversing the rafters, occasionally finding holes in the ceiling. Sound echoed the nightlife, laughter and slurred speech. One individual identified himself among the rest, riddled with 'grey venom'. His stuttered words pausing as his adamant voice hollered soft dying breaths of some irrelevant opinions he had. If she ever forgot the sight of addicts, Sarephel would be direly ill herself. Large beams joined the wooden big top like spiders vantage over the lot.

describe the patrons

“I can't see him quite yet.” The bird on the wire informed. “Stay low, you're not completely hidden. These men are shifty, they can spot oddities easily.” Men looking almost directly at her, somehow not noticing.

“What about going loud?” Silence fell Sarephel's reminder.

“There. In the second table along the left wall.” Garath directed. “Advoe 'Clear', he's a man associated with Meji Khloe, starting there is your best bet.”

Before he could finish. Sarephel descended, kicking off the beam through the centre of a worn table, she grabbed a bottle still falling down the splintered sink hole and tossed it. The noise took everyone's attention, as with the two swift kicks made out to the surrounding patrons skinny mugs, adding a few more scars to their features. One of the men who had faced away at Advoe's table found the flying bottle and received his present as it made diplomatic contact with his head. Men from all around sprang to their feet, furiously drawing sword and blunt weapon alike. A swordsman approached, grabbing the heel treadled man's sword, Sarephel stole it from his face clasped blindness and quickly parried. The ground met the swordsman with a busted rib and the family crest of a crooks hilt tattooed along his unbuttoned abdomen. The other tripped, back over a chair in his stooper to strike the swift footed fox.

*Reinsert: Festering Enclave of Animosity

Garath transferred roofs and began to view the feed in a choppy frame rate, his software stopping the video to catch the faces of Sarephel's very own party. Many wanted criminals showed themselves, none were Meji.

Quickly a circle had formed around her, Sarephel impatient of waiting lunged into the crowd taking one guest off guard as he fell over top of her. A man was redirected and kicked off as his punch flew into the growing stack of angry spectators, away from Sarephel. Her elbow made surprise upheaval to one contenders chin and a back flying kick to anothers' pelvis before they received a complementary headache. People were piling in, some still watching to see what opposition had started the riot. Someone reached behind Sarephel and tried to restrain her but let go after her flexible foot flong forward, breaking the bridge of his nose and her grip took over, grappling him over her side. Some guests began to exit, Sarephel's crowd thinning out the cowards and the abandoned followers. Between the circle ramble that broke, one man stood trying to figure her face.

“That's him!” Garath affirmed, assuming to the relative exits below him. “Finish them off if you can.”

Sarephel chuckled manically as goon after goon fell crippled or walked away injured. Some appeared to be carrying side arms, but couldn't fire into the field with gang tensions as casualties. As the confidant dropped out, the skilled became more common. Two criminals, a man and a woman struck as one, forcing Sarephel to fall back onto a retorting weapon, dodging with broken table legs until coming into a fallen sword and a gun. Pulling out the automatic, both warriors flinched, exposing their weakness in melee. She disarmed one to parry the other and in close proximity knock her victim unbalanced. When they rose they were greeted with front row seat to the batters swing. Outraged, the partner flung to a forward high kick but docked in transit, Sarephel caught it flying out. Locking the ankle she spun low, wrenching his leg and pulling him off balance to the floor where his future children felt the pain of her heel between his thighs.

With her adversaries thinning as they were, one man pulled his automatic out but lost use of his arm when Sarephel caught his intentions and blessed him with a flying sword. By the time he realized to switch hands, he was face to face with his reaper and dropped the sub to the floor in submission to her seeping aura. On certain terms, he was in the clenches of unstoppable terror. Five men remained, each approaching armed with automatics. Sarephel fell onto the rafters, leaving the cowering leaky

faucet to leave a peach trail as he crawled away. In the clamour of her escape, Sarephel singled out a single man, taking him from her balcony like a flying steel needle. Before the four could react, she fell behind the pillar, nest to pick off her flies again in her spiders dance. Tension taught the tread around their trigger fingers and shot paranoid at the flying object tossed out of the network rafters. On the other side, following the side beam, Sarephel emerged grappling the gunman's arm, and directing his fire back to his partner's grip, watching the gun fall down. Before the other gunslinger could return fire, Sarephel left her hostage unconscious beside the support..

“We can do this without guns.” The last gunslinger compromised. “No more swooping eagle crap... Just... One, on one, no bullet holes, no bloody hands... I can tell you aren't here to kill people, just, come out. See...” She called, holding her gun by the barrel. Assuming her audiences attention “No more guns.” She said dropping the peace maker.

“I'm glad we can come to an understanding.” Sarephel obliged from behind, cracking her neck. One unfortunate victim rose up, clinging to their second chance merely for vengeance. He rushed Sarephel, stumbling, his body vibrating. Sarephel scampered away koi, dangling off the rafter, the intoxicated man underneath trying to grab her legs. Letting go, she locked her legs around his shoulders, tumbling him forward head first into the wall with both their weight. Using his weight to slide underneath, she recovered running to see the last person backing away slowly, turning and running into a swordsman who made his entrance by spinning the awol deserter off his shoulder.

The swordsman cracked his joints in preparation and watched his footing as he approached cautiously, meticulously studying her. They danced the centre room following his opening move. Sarephel retrieved a broken wood chair to guard. His swing flew into the wood, catching the blade. With a jerk he retrieved his swing. They danced again, this time he lunged, faked and stepped in to catch her open arm with a falling left strike. She moved, pulling away to centralize her block to his new footing as his blade cut fresh gashes into the wood and fell out preparing to strike again. He swooped from below, trying to break her guard but Sarephel held strong. Knowing that he almost stunned her, he spun around as to strike from above but instead thrust straight through to the heart. With a step to the side, Sarephel trapped the lunge and twisted her sword trap, stripping the blade from his hands. She closed the gap, as he struggled to regain his stance, pulling back to keep distance.

Looking around, he left to retrieve a fine sword as a replacement. Upon pickup, Sarephel had acquired his own sword and tossed it down between them, dethroned from it's mutilated chair scabbard. They made their way closer, circling the taunt before them. As he got closer Sarephel did too. He leaped for his blade, bracing his loaner into the trap and put Sarephel at bay, then another movement to grasp his extended arm. As he dipped down Sarephel baited his swing, pulling him up to follow her evade behind him. With his arm loaded in place, he returned his blade to her blindly being caught in more broken furniture that braced his handle, and her off hand snapping his fully extended elbow. Gritting great pain, the warriors sword dropped again.

Outraged, the swordsman threw in a swift punch but was redirected into Sarephel's knee, breaking his lower ribs. As he fell limp she pulled his arm behind his back, dropping all his rag doll force into the twisted shoulder joint and cries leaked out of his hardened spirit. His head tilt back to his divinity, and answering his prayers the front of Sarephel's foot joint came thrusting his skull backwards, cracking the floor as his crippled mass drilled him into the polished wood.

The grey venom addict, still arguing, uncounted for in the back too stoned to move continued his verbal dispute. “Y-y-ye'ua not-na-nat tso toufff, thu, thu... Th-th-thite me...ee...” Twisting with

vigour.

“How's it going there?” Sarephel whispered into her receiver.

“All good,” Garath confirmed. “Target acquired, you stirred it up real good in there. Randevú at Kella Korner alleyway.”

“And witnesses?”

“Witnesses? If they ain't fighting, don't worry about them.”

Sarephel grabbed a piece of scrap wood as she walked up to the rambling addict, placing it in his hand. With a single step out, he fell flat on his face and fumbled to get back up again. “Coast is clear.” She announced, sauntering away.

“These friends of yours?” Sarephel asked, wandering up.

“Team eight, their escorting him personally up to interrogation. From there it's in their hands, until they call us that is.”

Raising the brows of her slanted eyes to complain. “Then we need to wait, huh?”

“It means we can sleep tonight. It's good that everyone got a beating in there, no one knows if it was a sting, or gang related. In this district, it's likely the later.”

“That means we sleep how?”

“Ain't nothing we can do now. I suggest you get some rest.” He said waving her off.

Tilting her head with his departure. “You're not heading back yet?”

“You gonna miss me?” Garath patronized. Sarephel dishonoured his response. “I'm taking care of the paperwork so you don't have to.”

“Better not say anything bad about me.”

“Don't you have a girlfriend to get back to?”

She did, but the with the late hour, “I won't be back til one thirty even with the earliest train” Sarephel confined to herself. “And that waitavator. She's going to be asleep already...” She staggered to the side, gazing down the ally, ears drooping. “She shouldn't be waiting up for me. The street outside was closed down for the evening, their mats stored away for the night. “I could get her something to cheer her up if anything was open... Maybe we'll come out for a visit, she does want to visit the country side. Just, not this country side.”

Chapter 4

The apartment echoed in void darkness, windows sewn and doors draped. Morning rose blindly behind her curtains of shame. Sarephel wrestled about until the sheets were just as restless as she was. Hot water normally soothed her but her morning bath, alone, irritated her sleepy skin. Pouring off it's top, she sunk into the surface with her tile floor draining it out. Coffee was bland, she tossed it. Food was guilty but she ate it. Nothing to do all day but sit on call. She could see Aera but Sarephel felt a little too frequent to pester her. That and wanted to avoid it for a while.

For once, the slow elevator was tolerable. A familiar sandwich stall rolled by, it's food was one of those easy day lunch kind of experiences and so she was. Elevator scrolled down as she snickered to herself watching it leave without her. Their seating arrangements were to be desired but from the balcony there was plenty to watch and listen to.

Time itself slipped through her cloudy frame-less eyes. One slow bite after another, everything seemed much more in place. Tarrat root wedges had that effect, the smooth firm avocado flesh insides slipped down the gullet like heavy flavoured air, which put Sarephel into perspective. A pleasant expression swept her face as her worries fell off the face of Herosae Tower. Food is a friend, it never judges, always there when you need sympathy for your most latent and irrelevant petty problems, and almost never bites you back unless you probably really deserved it. Maybe it was time to come clean about last night.

Sarephel was about ready to leave but saw her half eaten basket and sat down again. No sense in leaving them. "Maybe I don't have to go quite yet, I've got all day. Maybe, boys up top could pull me away again at any moment, and with Garath's timing I doubt I'll get half way through before he rings me up." She looked at her tablet, turned on again, running her palm across her cheek and hair as she propped herself messily. She sighed, sticking another wedge in her mouth.

A voice called, irregular tone and loud. Her ears opened up, they stopped but she could hear the small pattering of careless footsteps. It appeared security would have their time fulfilled. Another wedge came up to her lips before tilting it away and turning her head. "I've got nothing better to do, 'cept eat..." She veered up and popped another taste. "Yeah..." She said, pulling a small handful of snacks with her and leaped off the railing. Down she went, down two floors, and as she could last tell, to her left. Sure enough, security was hot on his cold trail.

Walking down the shop allys, Sarephel heard the careless scamper of someone who was really bad at playing hide and seek. She popped more wedges as she browsed the isles, the pace closed into a halt but the breath still remained.

Nervous to be certain, he pulled into a cubby. His breathing finally under control but his sweat still poured. Sarephel seen many men of flamboyant flare, he was not one of them. "Good haul?" She mentioned, his spine standing straight, he looked side to side. "Getting colder... colder." She chuckled

as the criminal struggled to source the ghosts echos. "I'm below you." Sure enough, he looked down and she laughed harder. His gaze shooting straight up.

"What do you want?" The man began to panic

Sarephel shrugged, eating her last morsel. "Entertainment."

"How did you find me?"

"Well, I figured you'd stop by here, if you didn't I'd probably have to end my fun early."

"Who are you?"

"I'm bored, with an 'e'... And if you are wondering where, when and why; here, now and screw you that's why. So, what's the story this time?" Sarephel asked, leaning farther over the ledge. "Kids to feed? Debts with the mafia? Chelsas had a lightning sale on fish cakes?" She finished circling her finger around the cement wall beneath her.

The man nodded. "Debts, real bad ones."

"Didn't pay back your jelli-roll?"

"Funny, these people are real trouble."

"I don't suppose it has anything to do with underground drug trading mafia types does it?"

He didn't seem it before, but the thief was more and more nervous, buzzing almost. "No... It's... C-Camii..." Unable to speak the name he started to look for his exit "I don't have time for this." Insisting, he turned to run for it

Sarephel stopped her shenanigans. "Camine..." She looked away.

The man froze in his tracks "You know of him?"

"Well with debts like those, you ought to report them to the station."

"Oh no, there's no where safe from them, especially a snitch."

"Think if I beat the crap out of you that they would come looking for me? Probably not. Where are those assholes hiding now a days?"

I don't know, the men just roam, few house calls...

"What makes you so interested in them?"

"I'd tell you I'm a cop but I don't want you to give up now"

"I've outran them before, I can do it again." Dashing away, he reminded Sarephel something of the crime life here, their all wimps. Chances of starting some trouble would have to wait.

“Huh... Right, I forgot you are simple and boring.” She said, stepping off her pedestal.

Around the corner, down the hall, through a crowded cafeteria and out towards the secondary stairwell. Sarephel was nowhere to be seen. For a moment, he was relieved, slowing his pace to look up the stairs. She didn't follow him, he was safe. Landing his last step was crooked and tripped him, falling him to his side. Looking up the stairs, the coast was clear. “Boo.” She spooked like a child trying to be adorable, surprisingly eliciting a small shriek from her victim. Returning her facade to a proper manner she continued. “You're coming with me.”

Two guards were there, paper and all. The woman describing his details with some charades, trying to make out whatever she could. She seemed to be stumped trying to describe him until noticing him. “That's him!” She yelled, the two guards turning to meet him.

“Alright pal.” Sarephel patted him up. “What did you want to to give back to the nice lady.”

“H-h-here...” He shuttered. “I brought you back your purse.”

The woman was stunned, two guards approached him as protection. “Aaaand, what did you want to tell her?” Bother guards taking note to Saraphel who was guiding him.

“I'm-m-m s-sorry, please forgive me.” She booted him in the calf. “It was wrong of me, I will never do it again.”

One guard broke his stance and began to chuckle. “You've got him trained well.” The other breaking a smirk himself. “Who are you?”

“Tren Koh...”

Shaking his head “Not you...” The guard cut off. “Her.”

Sarephel stood formally taking his stance adjacently unguarded. “Sixth tier guard and personal daughter of father Herosae himself, Sarephel Lysel Herosae.” The crook quivering at the sound. She turned to him, relishing the epiphany as his head slowly trembled with rusty gears facing to meet her. “And you, can call me boss.” The woman in behind getting more than her share of enjoyment from his face.

“It is a pleasure.” The guard pulled up straight in respect to the presence of utter hierarchy. “We can take him from here ma'am”

She tittered “I've got this, I have some business at the station myself. Ma'am, your purse... He won't bite, will you?”

“N-n-n-” For the lack of the words to utter, the man profusely shook his head almost shedding tears. Almost hesitantly, the lady came up and retrieved the purse from him trembling hands

She nodded. “Thank you.” Receiving the nodding reply from her once enemy.

“See, isn't the world a better place?” Sarephel announced, pulling Tren by his ear. “Alright, time

to go.”

Floors passed by, the station wasn't this far but Sarephel had somewhere else to go. Moments past without her harassing and Tren opened his mouth to speak. “What does bring the attention of a guard like you to a petty bag theft?”

“As I said, I was bored. I'm on call so there isn't much I can do, well...”

“So I'm not that big of a matter after all?... Can, can you assure my safety?”

“Sure, I used to beat the crap out of his goons daily. One day I sent him a gift basket with a lovely letter in it, the next day he moved out of town... Er, elsewhere. If you need some help, just tell them who's got you covered, they'll walk away...” “Maybe.” She muttered shrugging.

Big orange doors opened up to a large reception. Semi-luxury seating, for as luxury as a security station could provide, sat an empty house in front of a long bracket desk and a busy officer. “I never thought of it.” Tren astounded. “This is the big station, never thought I'd see the day I'd be walking into here.”

Sarephel smiled. “I'm almost sorry I did those things to you back then.” She said, shooing him off.

“Can I help you?” The officer asked, still attentive on his documents.

“I wish to turn myself in.” Tren announced cheerfully.

The officer pulled back to look the man in the eyes. “And what act of distrust have you committed.”

“Just today I had stolen a womans' purse and I'm here to atone for it.” He said almost vibrating with excitement to be locked away into safety.

The officer looked strangely at the man, then off at Sarephel who was waving behind him. Putting on a fake smile, he buzzed through to the stationary guards. “I've got someone for you, better bring three men, he looks real dangerous, claims he stole a womans' purse.”

Soon, three guards came by to inspect the man. One guy patted Tren on the back. “You'll be fine.” He said, gently pulling the willing convict away.

“Thank you Sarephel, for everything.” Tren gratified.

“You're welcome...” Sarephel replied, “Oh, and guys, if anyone asks about a snitch, tell them it's that guy.” She said waving his poor terrified face off behind the closing doors.

“Sarephel,” The officer groaned. “Why do you give me left overs?”

“Passing through Jarn, thought I'd give you a gift before I came to visit.”

“Well, your idea of a gift just gave me another problem to deal with.” Jarn replied, “What do

you need, anyway?"

"I came to see how the interrogation is going for Meji Kloho is going."

"You really do come by with the worst cases, don't you... Mr. Khloe is undergoing PKE, I'll tell you, I don't envy him there one bit. It'll be a few hours before their done with him."

Sarephel flopped down onto the sofa. "A few hours, doesn't give me a lot of time to mess around."

Tapping off his screen Jarn scooted his chair over. "You could try pestering the researchers down at the research labs." He said, clasping hands over his horridly slumped stomach, now attentive.

"Or, I could fatten myself up on terrot wedges."

"That would be the day." Jard chuckled, still reflecting his apathetic gesture and cold disposition. "My brother eats them like they were rice in a poor mans bowl and he's getting thinner."

"I don't suppose they'd let me join in there, would you?" Sarephel lazily waved her arm in the direction that they took Tren.

"There's nothing you can do about it, I'm sorry. Best you can do is just watch."

Still limp, she risen without hesitation, "Ring me through, anything is better than waiting out here."

"And after all this time you spent picking me out a birthday present." The door opened, "Do try to not hinder them."

Up she got, stretching and finally parted with a wave. Beyond the gates was dull grey floors and walls, the kind that saved on cleaning costs because no one could tell what was dirty and what wasn't. Really, it all looked dirty. A little carpeting would be appreciated. Down the echoing halls, quiet sounds of work persisted. Sure enough, there he was; three halls down by the private rooms, tied down and twitching. "I never get used to seeing it..." Sarephel reflected upon the glass, barely sympathizing with the barrier between them. Watching for what seemed ten minutes, she lowered her hands from the store display.

"Bored I take it." Her ears turned sideways, it was him again. "Not the worst means of torture, I'll admit it makes me crawl." Garath arrived, lab coat over skin suit.

"Is it true they don't feel pain?" Sarephel asked, still attentive on the figure inside.

He moved in, joining the spectators stand. "I've never been in one myself. Anyone I hear from claims it's the process of extracting memories that causes them to seize like that. 'Completely harmless', still a spectre to look at. It works by sending electric pulses out to stimulate different parts of the brain and look for a feedback response as they scope out the memory. It's almost impossible to lie when asked a question as it reads directly from the source, rather, you do. It's quite the tru..."

Sarephel interrupted "You know I don't give a damn right?" Returning her unimpressed glare

back at him.

“Well if you came by waiting for the...”

“Yeah, it's going to be a while.”

“Such sass today.”

“You're not the first person I've talked too all day.”

“Points for guessing it correctly? No?... Alright, if you think you know everything I'll leave you to it and not even mention that they've been at Rolaund Daz all morning.” Garath dropped, pulling back from the observatory.

Sarephel perked, “That's the first bit of new information all day.” Turning to see him sauntering away.

“Thought you'd be interested.”

“Where are they keeping him?” She inquired.

Continuing to walk, Garath brought his hand out and beckoned still facing away.

Approaching the room, Garath reached for the handle, “They haven't gotten much out of him.” He informed. “So far he's working blind for someone and was instructed to move some things that's all. Boss gives him notes under his door, says jump and he does. Pay is modest, same means of delivery. He's considered flat and awaiting judgment depending on what information you can gather from him.”

“Wait! I'm interrogating him? I don't know anything about him other than we trained for a year.” Sarephel contested.

“Thought you were bored.”

“He's part of the job.”

“So far, hes reached the end of his usefulness, it's a shame we couldn't get anything else from him. Assuming Meji can supply us, this job is looking pretty flimsy.” Garath coaxed. Sarephel returned, eating through his game with a straight glare, wise to his ploy. “Entert-aaainment.” He enticed playfully.

“Fine, but for my entertainment.” Sarephel conditioned emphasizing in her selfish favour.

Garath opened the door gentlemanly. Daz sat head rolled back, at the end of the table. He remained like that until hearing Sarephels charming voice drop his guard.

“So, they put you away huh? As it sounds you are pretty useless now. Where's the next step? Judicial chopping block, or they putting you away into TX38?”

Tired and intolerant, Daz straightened up “What's your routine?”

“No routine, I'm bored and I want to make your life uncomfortable. I hear, you were lucky to not go through PKE.”

“I don't even know why I should be here.”

“You could play dumb but I got some proof.”

“You ain't got nothing.”

“Yeah, well I was in the back having sex, while you were too busy figuring out which lug nut was smaller than your own. Small world, huh?”

“You've got quite the talent when your not raving at someone.” Garath congratulated as Sarephel closed the door behind her.

“And you're almost tolerable when your not trying to sneak up a girls skirt. /!*?an insufferable prick”

“I only caught the last bit so you'll have to let me in on what you found.”

“And where were you?”

“Checking up on Meji, PKE is finished, their just compiling the data now. Thought I'd come get you... So, don't leave me in suspense, what did you find out?”

“He was right, he was moving parts, not drugs. Nothing too major though, his boss may be working the hole bu...”

“The aperture, please.” Tickled, Garath smirked.

Sarephel's brows risen, “The 'aperture' but he seems rather inconsequential.”

“As we figured he'll probably walk but he'll be isolated for a while til this blows over.” Walking off, Garath

Catching up to him, “Are you telling me you already got that from him?” Sarephel retorted.

“You went because you were bored, remember?”

“You manipulative prick!”

Head turned and still walking. “Did I not fulfill your entertainment?”

Guiltily, Sarephel looked away in disgust.

“Mr. Chicoltae, your data!” A woman called down the hall, rushing towards them.

“What issues this kind of urgency?” Garath asked, walking in her direction anyways.

“Read it.” The lab assistant insisted.

Garath grabbed it abruptly and poured over the information each line scanned like lasers, his hand clenching harder on the crown of his skull. Clarity ran through his voice, grim and stern. “Alright, we need to mobilize. You and me are going in to secure this lab right now. Another team is preparing to enter with us but it looks like we are scouting ahead for them. Do you need ammunition?”

Sarephel shook her head. “What is going on, or are you going to leave me in the dark?”

“This isn't drug trade, their manufacturing bio-tech weapons in there. This is a red level threat.” Her eyes shot dark, as the iris almost vanished. Sarephel nodded and left immediately. “Wait by the aperture for me!” Garath commanded, clinging onto his intercom.

Only a few minutes behind, armed in full tech camo, Garath arrived signalling Sarephel immediately as he dropped her a satchel of equipment. Loud bang followed the forced entry through the back door, workers still operating the shop. “Down!” Garath shouted, with a mas meeting the call.

“Back room secure.” Sarephel announced. Customers in the front confused as the commotion fled into the front.

“Front secure.” Garath announced, binding all the workers in place for case of retaliation. In and down they went. Lights on, the dark corridor illuminated. Two drones took flight scanning down the passage ahead. “Be careful, in case my blunder on the stairs tipped them off last time.”

Sarephel nodded and took lead, pistols drawn. Checking corners, it was just as dead as it had always been. In vivid memory, the stairs definitely showed their weakness, railing detached and stairs crumbled. Sarephel studied it in some degree, it appeared almost purposeful. “Metal shouldn't snap like that.”

“The more I look at it the more I think it's a decoy to kill people, or something weakened it. A little gallium contact can completely cripple the integrity of aluminum structures, whatever they are working with here probably did the same to this steel.” Garath explained, shooting two spikes into the thick floor and clipping a line to them. “I'm not using that deathtrap, unless you feel up to it.”

Sarephel shook her head. “Pass me a line.” Being granted her request, she strung it herself. “This better hold, no doubt I can land it but I can't see what's below us.”

“It better hold me too...” He admitted, following it down to the lower levels. “Two levels, that's our destination.” Garath continued climbing down, eerily checking below while the drones scanned ahead. Swinging back they made their way onto the floor, over top the sketchy railing. Left Garath pointed, Sarephel taking point. Just like the floors above, the hallway along the stairwell's open shaft continued onto a door, though this one was not as far back. “This is it.” Garath announced, echoing his uneasy nerves.

“You have handled a gun before, right?” Sarephel heckled.

Quick to remark sourly, “You ever kill anyone?” Garath cursed, behind only a foot or two.

The handle seemed clean of rust, it was more cared for here than above. There was no sound of anything on the other side. Either they caught wind and were hiding or else it would be an easy capture. Hesitantly, Sarephel edged closer, ready to burst in. Almost swinging forward in preparation, her senses awoken. The feeling of manna coursing through her, eager she now grasped for the handle. The hand slipped, seemingly. Soon realizing the reality as her hand fell off, sinking into the door itself. She was dumbfounded, the event catching her by surprise. Her head was smacked out of the way and knocked her aside from behind. A moment of betrayal caught her, turning to see the full thrust of a black glowing tendril with a sky blue hum of energy pouring out where her head should have been. Garath underneath, working his way to force the death blow away from her

“RUN!” Garath commanded, immediately feeling the full shock of it's electrocution. For an instant, Sarephel hesitated, but pulled away in dire understanding of what he had just done for her. Casting her partner aside, the creature emerged, large and hideous. Metal and mass came rushing for her. There was no time to use the rope, there was no knowledge of the other levels, the stairs were the only option. Sarephel called out but there was no connection to her radio. Another tendril came out to her, trying to deflect it she made contact shocking her the same. Sarephel screamed, the needles piercing her heart as she tried to recover her footing. Barely able to move she devoted all focus to her escape, her mind racing in the background to catch up with what happened.

She ran up the stairs, feeling it's weakness almost pull her under. Leaping out, Sarephel kicked off the wall to gain height, as the tendril electrified the metal escape route, narrowly dodging the shock. From the next level, she ran the edge of the balcony, and kicked off the side of the chamber to grab the upper level's stairwell. It managed to hold and pulling up, the creature started to cling onto the walls to pursuit her ascension. No signal on the radio even still. Sweat pouring out as she ran to evacuate. The side path that was once there was missing, closed off in the time she had just passed it last. The radio clicked, she hailed it coming up to the surface with one angry machine gaining incredible speed in the narrow passage. Sarephel leaped with more ease than she ever had, the looming threat motivating great strength in her strides. She remembered the people still in the shop, and the people outside. Sarephel only prayed that the monster would not leave it's home. Her prayers forsaken her as she left the storage room.

“Command, this is Sarephel, come in. We have level black, repeat, LEVEL BLACK.” She cried in stern horror.

“Sarephel, we have you.” The radio responded as she leaped through the parts duct. “Protocol?”

“Seal all floor under phase three lock down! Halo, Sapphire, Orion, twenty three.” Making it out of the building, she continued “ Evacuate the Cando Station and everyone in it, now. Seal ALL FLOORS!” Loud noises erupted from the shop, breaking and taring, the screams of people inside witnessing the horror of the beast within.

“Understood, overriding. Sealing all floors, please allow time for full evacuation.”

The lighting pitched to blinding red for a moment then faded back to normal. “Please do not be alarmed.” The voice on the intercom informed manerly. “Please exit the main stairwell, all elevators will stop at next floor, please evacuate from the premise immediately. This is not a drill.” Finally breaking out, the front wall of the shop broke apart with the creature escaping its no longer encasing doorway. The people who were spectating now screamed, running for their lives. Unable to delay it any longer, Sarephel broke for the shaft as the shield barriers started falling, her predator close behind as

she dove into the shaft. Leaping from ledge, railing and wall mount, she followed the path down to the basin of the tower, dodging the fury of her adversary. It seemed unrelenting, the onslaught on attacks still devoted to her. It crashed through elevator platform and tore mantle from casing as it ripped down, the covers still slowly closing. Citizens grasping a small glimpse of the colossal menace.

“Command, dispatch!”

“Dispatch here.”

“Send mirage” *edit later*

“Mirage on her way.”

The path became treacherous with no levels to leap from, just mounted structures along the fully closed, dark descent as through elevator onto hell. Not long, a glowing rod shot down below her and ejaculated its shell. Sarephel prioritizing to catch it put her out of place and on pickup had to defend her new prize. Parrying, the electric sting could not penetrate her new arm, the rod known as “Mirage *Fix in editing*” The bottom was soon in sight and the new battleground was in play.

“Command, activate automated sentries.”

“Affirmative.”

Landing with a roll, Sarephel made great effort to escape the dead zone as the turrets pulled out of the ceiling and ground of her caged quarantine. With a loud crash it arrived making waves. The automated sentries opened fire, Sarephel's ears held firmly closed as the eruption of large flak cannons eviscerated the target. Matter flew all over, biological and metallic. After the assault, the guns stopped firing. The moans of the unholy still gurgling plops of air and bullet casings that poured out. The smell of gunpowder and dematerialized aether seeping out. Emerging from her cover, Sarephel edged out, Mirage in hand. The glow however faint, still outlined the creature as it struggled for life. Tendrils laid oozing out as though gummy treats had melted on a pan. Still solid translucent masses that liquid aether burned up like phosphorous blue alcohol. The aura poured out and renewed its vows, reattaching to the mass. Undying horror terrors returning for purgatory. Sarephel shot rounds into the hulk but it did little more than anger it. Another tendril rebuilt itself and continued the battering.

“Command, where is the decoy?”

“Inoperable, something damaged the circuits, perhaps shrapnel. You're on your own.”

* “Mirage incoming, just hold out” (restructure in,) “Pipes damaged, rerouting”

Sarephel twirled her blade hoping somehow to kill it. Upon its opening move, Sarephel ran to meet it. Another tendril came out which she sidestepped and continued. Another one reformed and lunged out piercing straight through the image sight of Sarephel before dissipating. Again it tried, also piercing an after image. Jumping on top, Sarephel looked deep into its abysmal heart and opened fire again at point blank. Nothing seemed to damage it and the regenerative powers seemed unnaturally unfair. It tried to defend itself, lashing its arms about but unable to catch her as she jumped away. Unsure of how to defeat it, or even if she could, Sarephel continued to spin her light stick, creating two more images beside her. Harmless, her tool was merely made as an aid illusion.

Strike after strike, the creature returned itself, almost able to walk again as it hobbled closer. Now centralized in the room, Sarephel dodged left and right, ready to call backup. Nothing could work and the sentries would not fire any more for some reason. Soon it's walking became quicker and following became frighteningly escalated. It even lunged it's whole body out, narrowly missing only due to her copy taking the fall. Sarephel pulled the radio up to her lips when a metal clink beamed off the cement ground. To her sight, it was another capsule, the glowing name on the side reading "Natheena" There was no doubt nor time to loose. Sarephel dashed for it.

The creature turned for her, striking rapidly. Image right, doge left, Sarephel appeared underneath. Grabbing Natheena, a bright sabre emerged. Burning, the tendril dislodged from above burning white flame and monsters cries. Each attempt to pierce was denied, taring it to ribbons. The creature pulled away, shuttering before the might. Natheena clean cut through it's innards igniting it from inside. Deathly cries were never heard in the fury and pitch of it's light festering transcendence into oblivion. It's manifested aura shot out like steam, engulfing the chamber and blinding light dispelled it's form into nothing more than the remains of it's metallic armature.

Once she was sure it was over, the panting could not cease. Dry crackled lunges and wheezing gasps of breath begged the wish of removing those same sacks. Sarephel's legs caved and she collapsed to her knees and partway onto her tails. Silence fell for more than it's time needed, the click of her radio and escaping sound that came out among many panting gasps followed "Target... Eliminated."

Chapter 5

Cyan tinted cold lighting, bright but dreary for where they were, Sarephel walked up the infirmary hallway. Her eyes set on the man in the wheelchair. He rolled himself out, griping and in some pain. His infirm clothes, the coat of a veteran. In a twisted fate, Sarephel lit a smile of relief. Catching his notice, she nodded and walked up to him.

With a more docile smirk, he spoke chummingly, still frozen. "Doc says in a day or two I can get out of this thing. The stuff they use for bone growth freaking sucks. It feels like an army of little workers being none to gentle about patching up the rough spots."

"How bad did that thing man handle you?"

"Tossed me against the wall rendering me unconscious" Holding his left rib cage. "That's how the team found me when they showed up. You?"

"It's sting is like drinking active battery acid." She said, pouring over his port side.

"You're all checked out Mr. Chicoltae." The nurse arrived. "Sign here and you are free to go."

"Thank you ever so much for caring for me." Garath nodded, smiling ever brighter.

Parting with her board, "Have yourself a good evening." The nurse left, putting some work on the receptionists desk.

Sarephel propping her head against her stilted arm on Garath's chair, poked the sore side,

returning Mr. Chicoltaes' attention back in jolting fixation. "You always that nice to the women?" She said solemnly

"Just the woman." Gritting his teeth, irking a compensating remark. "My Father taught me to be a gentleman after all."

Retracting, still propped next to him. "The kind that haven't dropped you like a brass town bell?" Sarephel corrected.

"No reason to stop giving proper respect, just not to the ones who..." Garath clenched, finally returning to breath. "Could break me in half." His panting winded him. "Oh this serum will be the death of me yet."

"Pity, you already signed out of here."

"I don't think I could sue even... If..." Garath's attention peeked in front and the slow stop brought Sarephel's sight to meet with it. "Can I help you?" He said to the man, who as of late had been standing in wait for him.

"Daddy!" Sarephel shot.

"Whoa!" Garath astonished, "Mr. Herosae!" He tried to rise before cracking some of the new knit bone and falling into his seat."

Cold frost bitten steel burned every vessel in his blood, a new effect to his medication or so he could imagine. With soft stern words the frost made its way down his spine. "You will address my Father as 'master herosae' do I make myself clear?" Her words crisped like crackling ice and aura seeping around him.

"Kaunzi, that is enough." Master Herosae commanded. "I do not need enforcing my position here. Mr. Chicoltae, I hear, you are very well aware of your audience. Are you fairing well after your engagement with the 'AU eighty eight'?"

"Is that what that was that hit me?"

"Troubling, I know." Returning to his full upright stance, "To think an old prototype such as that could be weaponized in such a fashion." Master Herosae grieved.

Speaking freely withstanding the sum of respect of being at blade point replied "I can make it through, it still hurts more than I care to admit."

"I hear that it also has an itching effect."

"Thank you for reminding me." He joked earnestly, feeling the returning gaze of another individual briefly.

Master Herosae chuckled. "I best not continue..." Turning to his daughter. "Sarephel, you're here to be examined yourself, is that correct?" He asked, guiltily she answered with a nod. "Please do, your scuffle with that monstrosity has had me worried. And in light of which... I'm afraid that until

farther notice I will have to withdraw you from this operation.”

“What!?” Sarephel returned.

“I will have a full investigation team running on this matter, the situation has changed dramatically.”

“What's happened?” Sarephel worried.

“Garath, have you been briefed on the followup to this fiasco?” Garath didn't have to speak. “When your team entered the labs they were completely dismantled, all evidence moved or burned. With the hole changing dramatically as well, drone captures have been obsolete, they are closing off the entire passage and with that I fear other entrances as well. Because of this, all official guard have already been assigned to conduct a full examination of all floors to find any trace of other entrances.”

Sarephel slumped, eyes guilty and glassy, “Does this mean we failed?”

Master Herosae closed into his loved one. “It's not something that can be helped.” He consoled in a voice even Garath took comfort from. “The timer has been running well before today, you did well but I can't risk you to such creations, let alone anyone watching. I am also relieving Mr. Chicoltae until farther notice, please take this time off to rest before you are needed again.”

“But...” Sarephel asked, rubbing her arm. “Who is going to take over?”

She was answered with two arms wrapped around her shoulders. “It's fine sis...” Kaunzi comforted. “Daddy put me on it. If I need help, I'll call you. It's not that we don't trust you, or whether your strong enough, you understand. I know you do.”

Sarephel nodded. With her hands retracting, Kaunzi walked towards her father. “It is time we left.” Master Herosae parted, bowing before his daughter and her comrade.

“Oh... Sis!” Sarephel called before it was too late. “I almost forgot to return Natheena.”

Kaunzi shook her head. “She is yours now.” Chiming she returned. “APL made me a replacement that supersedes Natheena, she's literally a burden now.”

Sarephel blushed, holding the capsule closer. “How did you know anyway?”

“When I heard the report that they were making bio weapons with liquid aether, I made my way to command to get the full scoop. Figured you could use the hand when I saw you getting chased. Looking at it now, I was right to give her to you.”

Sarephel waved, “Thank you. Good luck.” As the door closed, she looked at her new gift. Relishing in it's glory, Sarephel's bliss was woken with a pleasant remark.

“You have quite the loving family.” Garath admired.

Sarephel stared, “And you don't?” She inquired, sympathetically convinced.

“No, I love them... I've seen so many though that tore people apart. He really does care about you...”

“He cares for everyone.”

“It's blood, you know. Not everyone here has your privileges, or freedoms. Who else could let their little girl frolic carelessly and still care so much.”

Sarephel couldn't really answer the rhetoric of his prose. “While you are wondering I'm going to go in. And before I forget, I want to meet you at floor ninety five after I'm done.”

“That a date or something?”

“You could only wish.” heading in

“You took a while.” Garath continued down the elevator.

“You didn't have to wait for me outside the office.”

“There was plenty to keep me preoccupied.”

“Like that nurse?”

“No, she left her shift just after you went in.”

“So you were.”

“Where is this place that you want to meet anyway?”

Gravity regained it's weight with the halting of the elevators decent. Ninety Three a mostly residential floor, three restaurants immediately in sight; urban recreational park filled the immediate vicinity with classy apartments sprawling the two levels along it's sides. Speckling chair patio seating, the odd cart vendor selling festival food, the smell of savoury confection. Trying to pester Garath, he refused the service, nudging the wheeled vessel over the lip himself.

Flicking the last climbers out of his sugar packet he continued to recite the events, drinking his now flavoured overpriced coffee. “Bio mechs.” He pondered sipping. “No wonder they didn't show up on scanners. They are only half alive.”

“What do you know of them?” Sarephel returned, enjoying her beverage much more.

Cups aside, Garath compiled what he could best use to explain. “I know that they are not fully alive. The last known project on it sparked a lot of moral fear shutting it down but until then it was just proteins acting as bacteria with simple commands given to them. Not capable of much. They figured they were creating life, but it was mainly manipulating masses of microscopic creatures with simple structures. Not saying it died off though, they turned to their findings to forward nanobot research.” Churning his cup another time. “As is, machines are undergoing physical constraints.” He dismissed. “Circuitry doesn't work that small, the smallest interference and it's toasted. In either case, it needs a brain to tell the mass what to do; and I'm not sure the effects of athermal energy on the matter but

whatever you faced had one. AI, or not.” Placing the re-sweetened tea to his lips, he decided against it. “I hope you're not making me pay for both our drinks.”

“Already paid, consider it a treat.” Sparking an unenthusiastic smile in her acquaintance, Sarephel returned. “So... What I saw was actually more alive than the...” Struggling to find the technical term. “Um.”

“I don't know.” Garath shrugged sitting back. “I'm just a snoopy nerd, not a scientist.”

“Snoopy?” Sarephel hinted.

“Enough pervert jokes.” He demanded.

“Not snoopy enough to tell me what this is?” She replied reaching in her top.

Garath looked away, not even honouring the tease with a reply. Veering back he noticed something dangle. “What?...” Returning gaze, curious. Small greenish cube with crystal forks protruding out. “It... Looks like a key. Probably a nice one.” He confessed, reaching out to hold it. It was warm, he didn't expect much else. Heavy, strong, 'J30' inscribed in a Panra Text, real classy stuff. “If I had to guess this is an archive lock, and by it's size one hell of an encryption pass. I'd say its for the library but it only goes up to 'J24' unless...” Garath's eyes darkened, lids sliding with creaking metal gates. “A hidden archive.” Sarephel studied his reaction, more intent on him than it's meaning. Looking up he continued. “Where did you get such a piece?”

“I stole it.” She replied carelessly. Garath folding back into his chair, dropping the hot material in between. Sarephel quick to retrieve it, laughing as she did. “No, my sister gave it to me.”

Signing coarsely, Garath returned to honour the prank. “Alright, and what is it for?”

“Don't know, but I'm going to find out. Probably our next clue.”

“Waaait, hold on. You were taken off the job.”

Sarephel shook her head. “That's what it sounded like.”

“Yeah, because that's what your father said.”

“Kaunzi told me differently, so if you keep quiet everyone will still believe it.”

“And what did she say?”

“Well, after she slipped this key into my hair she tapped on my shoulder as she consoled me. I knew what she meant.”

“And that just means that you, are...”

“Ever read sixth tier guard regiments?”

“No, their classified to anyone who isn't a sixth tier guard.”

“Exactly.”

“And you are telling me this why?”

“Because I need backup, someone who can watch my back like you always wanted.”

“No!” Garath declined, sundering the mood under his cold stern voice. “I’m not dipping my feet in this shit. Whatever that key is for, is meant for you. I don’t have the clearance for whatever vault that opens, and I’m not putting myself out there.”

“And if I took the fall for you?” Sarephel enticed.

“Unlike you, when I got relieved I wasn’t given a special code. I’m off.” Grunting as he withdrew, having strained his chest in the frustration.

“Hey! You know I really could use you!” Standing up, she called out. “This is a little bigger than me!”

Garath slowed down, the regret of his inability breaking through. “Go find some other snoopy nerd. Worlds full of them, all single too.”

“And when I do?” Sarephel asked, hinting desperation.

“Call me. I’ll be around.”

Wheeling back to the elevator as the platform arrived too soon to make, one of the waitresses came up, having head the ordeal. “I’m sorry.” She said, “Some times these things just don’t work out...”

Sarephel looked to her unshaken. “Meh, he’s a good man.” Some worry and confusion taking the poor bystander. Looking into her palm, 'J30' in florescent green. Kinda malachite in crystal enamel. Her coffee still warm beside it.

A long corridor stretched out with chasms aside her filled with literature. Monolithic towers of archives dim lit and cased in dust. This was the forty eighth floor library, one of the original archives from the tower before it’s enhancements over eighty years ago and it showed. Old wood, still excellently crafted but dry and gave a strong aroma of it’s darkened casket barrel age. Before the end, a hub opened to a moderately lit reception and a better view of the study below. “Can I help you?” A lady asked, full dressed appropriately; swamp green vest over white blouse, glasses and enough unnecessary folds of fabric to tickle the most flamboyant of fashion designers. It clearly costed an unnecessary fortune. Her voice, still sweet.

“Yes.” Sarephel answered, undecided on her approach. “I’m looking for an archive.”

“Do you know which section? Or subject?”

“Yes, is there a section... 'J' twenty five?”

The receptionists expression saddened, warming a sympathetic smile she redirected. “The

archive only goes to twenty four, are you sure you are looking for a 'twenty five'?"

Sarephel fixed a somewhat reflective facade, honeying her voice slightly "He may have messed up but yes, I'm quite certain he told me to find section twenty five... J"

The warm sympathy fell saddened again. "Then I'm afraid I can't help you. I would suggest asking your friend again which section, otherwise the only person that could help you is our head archive manager but they are away on break."

"If it's not too much trouble." Sarephel took up, "Can you let them know I need some help when they get back?" She asked politely. "I'm going to ask my friend again, and if I don't check out with anything by then, I'm still looking alright?" Somewhat blankly confused, the receptionist nodded respectfully anyway and Sarephel turned to leave. "Before I go, which way to 'J' twenty four?"

It ended in the somewhat open, though above was walled off, where she stood doored passage beyond into more archive. 'J24' sure enough followed the same script font but it was all she wrote as no neighbour had any following but backwards to twenty three and on. On a hardened chair, her tush sat crooked curled into her tablet doing what little research she could. "Protocol thirty three." Sarephel thought silently. "Trust no one, test everyone. Kaunzi gave me the signal after I was let off, meaning I'm still on and whatever she gave me I can't trust to anyone else with what I have so I have to work alone. Garath seems to be earnest, he won't risk himself on a dishonest job but he is a little sternly adamant about it." She rolled through pages, hoping to maybe discover some kind of hint. "If he was a little more calm about it, he would be cleared completely. Depends on whether or not he follows me I guess. No, if he does it's confirmed." Her eyes veering slightly adjacent to her screen. A man approached, somewhat aged with his long hair greyed early.

Garath is only other in presence to be given secretive order

He greeted her "Are you looking for help?"

Her legs sliding back to normal, head nodding. Sarephel replied. "Are you the archive manager?" Ears perking.

He nodded. "Has your friend returned to you yet?"

She looked into her tablet. "Not yet." Continuing the charade and setting it aside.

"Then I can't say I can be of much help."

"You mean there isn't a 'J' twenty five here?" Pouting her disappointment, Sarephel tried again. "You wouldn't have a clue where I could find it, could you?"

He couldn't satisfy her. The manager looked to the side. "It is possible." He replied. "There are parts of this library that have changed over the ages." His focus was through the doorway "This would be well before my time, but there was a locked archive behind these walls. I have no idea what was in it, but it was moved supposedly."

Sarephel's attention returning from the passage back at the manager. "And where would they move something like that to?"

"It's beyond me." He shook. "If I had to guess, being a locked archive, probably to the private

archives but you won't find them there. You'd need special access.”

A shade of dismay darkened her face. “I guess I'm stuck until he gets back to me, huh?”

“Seems so. Is there anything else I can help with?” The manager offered. She shook and he continued. “Then I wish you good luck and a hasty reply.”

“Thank you.” She gratified, returning to her slump in the well flattened upholstery as it slid slightly. Anything moved to the private archive would have been conducted officially and thoroughly. If there was any chance of something left behind, it would be far too minute to even bother with. With the private archive, it would come with some recognition, rendering the secrecy of her operation redundant. Sarephel consolidated her options, the gears cranking in her drooped void stare.

Sure enough, the private archives laid beyond metal supported doors just like the last time she came. The front counter being the only access. Security cameras, double locks but vacant of the on-site guard. “Hi,” Sarephel opened, re-fixing to her act. “I'm looking for a 'J' twenty five.”

“And your clearance?” The worker requested, searching the file's requisites.

“Tier 6 royal guard.”

“Ten seconds please.” He replied dryly.

Ten seconds almost exactly, three men came from behind her. One stern armoured and unimpressed captain in front line, his unshaven five-o'clock shadow distracting her as he spoke clearly. “Show me your clearance.”

Sarephel obliged, revealing her identity.

“I'm sorry, you do not have clearance to access these files.” His posture held with effort, lazy eyes overcompensating for the sake of his heckling.

“Then which clearance would I need?”

“Classified.”

Reluctant to give her any information, she thought it was time to introduce herself a little farther with the window gap scewing as time went on. Still holding her badge out. “Sarephel Herosae, Second youngest daughter of Father Herosae.”

An earnest smirk lit his coldened exterior. “Impressive.” He commended. “Still not enough clearance.”

“What?!” Sarephel astonished, calmly unable to withhold the shock in her voice.

“What is your purpose with these documents, anyways?”

“While off duty, I wanted to do some studying for the sake of my work... I heard they moved some documents here.”

His face almost unwavering. "I'm sorry but you cannot access these files, regardless of your intentions with them so please have yourself to the entrance unless there are any other documents you are in need of."

"Then, what will my clearance get me?"

"All documents are by request only, you should know this. Without specific name and reason, I cannot grant you access to any information. It's my job, nothing personal."

"Fine..." Sarephel retracted, walking around them to the entrance as requested.

Searching her tablet, she was sure that somehow there would be an answer to her clearance gave access to. No document, nor pamphlet dating to her ascension of tier six bore any such inscriptions. "Maybe Daddy can help." Her mind did ponder to call Garath but she decided against it. Neither did he have interest, nor did she in pursuit him any farther. "Daddy." "Uh huh..." "I know... Say, I was..." "Yes, I was just outside the archives doing some light reading." "No, nothing serious." "Say, what would be the highest clearance document I can access." "It's just study." "No..." "Daddy..." "Uh huh?" "I know." "Please?" "I understand." "Thank you." "I love you too... Bye." The call ended, Sarephel's face instinctively fixed cheerful, flopped. "Well, that was useless..."

There was no way past the guard, the locks, or the workers. It took some time but she was almost ready to call in a favour from her favourite ninja. She was ready to call him, Garath's access at the touch of a finger. Hesitantly, Sarephel realized she wasn't really all that ready. The tablet vibrated. Her eyes set down to read a message from her ninja, oddly enough it had no context. The obvious relay, Father came through after all. "Right?" She thought. Either way, the counter was welcomed by her again as Sarephel requested the new document. The guards returned, remembering the authentication he instead walked her straight through.

"Still researching I assume?" He asked as they came into the main vault. Two levels of a dome-like cavern appeared, lit thoroughly with kiosks and catwalks bridging their current upper level.

"Yup..." Sarephel assured, changing to a casual tone. "So, I take it that you're a seventh tier guard?"

He looked to her, took in the question and replied "Yes."

"I've kinda wanted to upgrade to a tier seven but it's not my thing, standing around all the time."

Somewhat of a chum fell behind his porcelain job ridden mask. "It has it's benefits, but a lot of standing, yes." He said reaching to the over watching railing

"Do you hate your job?" Sarephel inquired blatantly.

A long silence followed. "No, I do not hate my job." Clearly irritated. The tension returning. Pressing the buzzer at the balcony's edge, comfort faltered with the long period of time before assistance was met.

An elderly gentleman approached, beard almost passing his waist with his hunched back. "What

can I help you find?”

“H' eleven through fourteen.” The guard announced, walking to his internal post.

Following sight to the post, the elder smirked. “It seems you've made friends with Elmren.” Then beckoning down the stairs he inquired. “My name is Whilyer, what brings you by?”

“Just learning.” Sarephel answered

“Knowledge is a wondrous thing but some things are not so leisurely to absorb.”

“No kidding, while I'm off duty I figured...”

“Yes, yes.” Elmer interrupted. “I am sure you have your other reasons. The search for knowledge is virtuous. Was there any particular document?”

“Not really.” Sarephel admitted.

“I assure you, there is plenty to keep you busy, a single archive can occupy me for a few days.” Whilyer admitted, trying not to gloat, the reminiscing glow of reflection radiating from his tittering voice.

“So, have you read all of these?”

“With some exception to my own clearance, yes...” He replied earnestly, fumbling he added. “But don't mention it.”

“Then you would know where some documents may have been moved to?”

“Certainly, given their age and importance, they have been either been added, exchanged for another kiosk, or put safely past our vault for the added security.”

‘I'm sorry, I probably shouldn't ask such thing of you.’ Sarephel confessed.

Whilyer scuffed, gesturing his lax towards it. “I find the condemnation of one's will to learn is a shameful hindrance to our ability to grow. There is no shame in wondering. I may not provide you every answer but I cannot deem you by your curiosity. I too share that freedom.”

“Where might a 'J' twenty five be stored?”

In a tight lipped smile, he replied. “I'm sure you have a good idea on that one.”

Sarephel reflected her understanding, solemnly nodding. Whilyer hushed his charming old grin.

“Here they are...” The old man destined. “You may want a seat, there should be some around here. Don't let Elmren give you too much trouble over retrieving one.”

Sarephel thanked her assistant, and returned to the place with a seat. These kiosks had no locks on them, publicly it was guarded in present, the gaze of her guardian pouring onto her. “It's a pity...”

Sarephel whispered to herself. “Seventh tier's final test is watching paint dry for forty eight hours. I've got his full undivided attention.” Peering around, her surroundings still restricting her. There was another door, a vault; maybe locked or hidden she couldn't recall sight of any such fixture. Exploring was out of the question and as she scrolled through the documents lit out in front of her, she knew she was in for a long wait to avoid suspicions. It wasn't the worst position she had been in, but it ranked. She cursed Kaunzi, 'J30' could eat itself.

The information was bland, in the options Sarephel set the auto scroll and zoned out to a different place. She wasn't the greatest strategist but a part of her thought of her situation, the other to what she might find. With how far she was into this mystery, there was no suspects and the motive was unclear. Too much time passed a while ago, Sarephel was tiring. Document after document, it was enough to put her to sleep. Scientific findings concerning chemical reactions, propulsion of militarized air drones, formulas for creating alternate chemical liquids, the book ended. With an idea of how bored she appeared, she fixed her exterior to match, trying to reboot her inner functions.

“You look ready for bed.” Elmren commented, Sarephel walking up the stairs to pass him.

Hazily she yawned, “Not quite what I signed up for to be honest.”

“It's best you didn't upgrade then. You would hate to work this job for sure.”

She nodded with his accompaniment.

Up the stairs, Whilyer greeted Elmren as he passed. “She gone already?” No reply “I guess then, she seemed so eager too. Alas, I'm headed to the facility, but you didn't need to know that.” Still firmly guarding, Elmren stood motionless.

“Found it.” Sarephel congratulated herself, key lock in hand. Glancing her rag doll, she fit it into it's lock. The anaesthetic worked, the coat hook holding his weight in place by the collar. A bit of regret came to her, it was no fantasy however, the malachite archive lock in her hand was real and 'J30' was certainly behind this door. Sarephel had faith in her sister's message, the means to get her however weighed heavily.

Opening the vault, it creaked deeply to reveal the darkened space within. Twenty minutes, that is how long she had before her victim would awaken from her quick serum. Low hums and dim lights blinked to fade, mostly green with navy blue adjacent. Closing the door behind her, the illumination of thin lights adjusted with the darkness. Having a flashlight was a thoughtful addition. Engraved 'J26' 'J28' and at last 'J30' with a green two prong key slot fell into her lap. Perfectly the crystals slid in, a welcoming hum booted the drive up. Light screen flipping forward it plipped on.

The old format was irritating to navigate, the operating system desperately in need of updates beyond it's physical constraints. On it's opened parcel, it displayed many images. While scrolling through Sarephel noted some files had been altered, documents sat side by side, drawn on top of and reckoning great conspiracy. Dated just last night. “This must have been what Kaunzi was working on...” Studying them farther, Sarephel noted some subtle changes in the blueprints, blueprints for the tower's construction.

Large metal drawers stood behind the screen, the physical copies hopefully within. With some luck, Sarephel cruised through to find each paper and folder organized by floor. Comparing it to the

one on screen, dated the same as the original, these documents seemed to reflect the ones being debunked. Some oddities still remained but there was not enough time to study it all. What appeared to be, was another set of documents somehow acquired that revealed passages. Father Herosae was oblivious to these, or claimed to be. It made no sense that he would investigate it with the ferocity that he did otherwise. Maybe someone acquired the originals and altered them. Whoever was responsible had to be high up on the ladder. She scanned through page and document, some longer text files were skimmed over but they were disjointed, names circled; probably Kaunzi's investigation of the staff and members of the executive during it's time. All the dates pointed to over eighty years ago. Every answer she had was met with more questions, and why in the hell Kaunzi tried to bring this all up to her was beyond Sarephel. Time was up.

With his resistance training, Sarephel figured Elmren would be waking early from the estimate. Fast to act meant not long to sustain. Last thing she wanted was an ordeal on her hands, though she already had one. Laying low for a while until Father Herosae could sort it out was the only option. Garath's assistance would have been appreciated but to her knowledge he was nowhere's to be seen. Not that she could sense a perverted tech ninja anyway. Closing down the computer it displayed a message. "Insufficient storage, all files on temporary access will be wiped. Shutdown anyway?"

The prompt had lots to debate, the work that was done must have been extensive but leaving it meant removing her trace from the material she sought after. Time rolling, she closed it all down, data and all.

Chapter 6:

Thoughts came to Sarephel as bright lit residential halls passed her by. Saying face was difficult, but less difficult than the recourse of her actions. Each passing wooden porthole reminding of the bitter gap she made the night before, there was little that could be changed. "D510" It wasn't luxury class but the neighbourhood was decent. Just off centre from T-intersection and a little short of the over watching courtyard balcony, Sarephel figured that Aera deserved a little better thought out of the community. Knocking in a guilty fashion, rustles from behind the door locked her in place. Trying to smile but bitterly failing the door opened too quickly. "Sara!" She was met ecstatically. "Come in."

Following the commands of her sweet mistress, Aera guarded the door with open arms, hugging Sarephel as she entered. Warmth and tender care, her guilt melted off and Sarephel smiled once more. Area pulled away quickly. "Where were you?" She begged "I left the muffins out and everything."

"I... Just." The awkward guilt seeping back in.

"Come on." her girlfriend dragged her in, closing the door behind them.

Staggering on her own, Sarephel remarked "So this is your new place, huh?"

"Yup." Aera replied, returning for her love. Arms wrapped from behind.

A woman called in from the adjacent room, "Is that Sarephel I hear?" Halana's voice just as toned and accented as ever.

“Yes!” Aera remembered, dragging Sarephel into that same room. “This is the kitchen.”

“Don't worry, I won't give you heck.” Halana remarked. “The kitchen isn't that small anymore.”

“It is pretty big.” Sarephel remarked.

“It was the one thing I really wanted,” Aera continued, “And your dad came through on it.” opening up the pantry “There is so much room!”

Sarephel lightened right up. “I see you've stocked up.”

Aera nodded. “I wish you were here last night.”

“Yeah,” Halana added, “Then you could have seen Kayli covered in cream dip. She had to clean it up while she was still getting it everywhere.”

“Then she took a shower and ended up sitting in the bowl she set aside.”

“I think Tami put it there on purpose.” Halana admitted. “Kayli isn't that prone to failure”

“At least they didn't fight again.”

“I...” Sarephel tried to amend.

“Hm?” Aera notioned, not hearing her girlfriends mumbled apology.

“I'm sorry, I was up late last night.”

“I understand but why didn't you show up at all?”

Gripping the back of her own fizzling brain, Sarephel tried to answer calmly “I didn't want to wake you”

“I wouldn't have minded...” Aera consoled, moving them out to the living room

Trying to explain, Sarephel felt herself falling down a hole with each word becoming less confident than the last. “I wanted you to show me around when you were more... Awake.

Aera snuffed. “It's not that special, it's just a place.” Her shrug leading them to the couch. The air of sympathetic disappointment.

“But...” Sarephel sat down, holding herself in. “I wanted it to be special, for you... I just felt like I would disappoint you again...” Just a foot away from her love, Sarephel couldn't bring herself in.

“I know who I am with,” Aera assured. “I don't care as long as you show up...” Trying to reach out past Sarephel's shell. “It's kinda hard to have a girlfriend that gets dragged away all the time if she doesn't even drop by to get abducted in the first place.”

"If I got dragged away," Sarephel intercepting the incoming hands. "Would you be upset?"

Aera paused. Truth being a blight stain on a white rug. "I'll get over it I guess," Her voice irked, soon sliding into Sarephel anew "But I didn't tell you that, alright?"

"Okay..."

Adjusting her position, Aera let her frustration disappear. "I don't care when, just... Show up next time. Okay?"

"I will." Sarephel assured, caressing Aera's bare arms, still emanating a gentle heat. Soft smells of fragrant lotions and softer tails rubbing against her legs. The sounds of kitchen work preparing supper. For a moment, everything fell into place. Sarephel relaxed, all tension leaving into a kindled flutter of senses awakening. It was like before, when the air was full and there was nothing to do. Times before her training when nothing seemed to matter. *memory cut* Waiting for something to happen, only to be content with the moment there. Moist evaporation from the kitchen, arms wrapped tight around her stuffed friend clad to nothing more than what was there. No strenuous thoughts, no nerves set to defend, no burden of holster or phone. Remembering which, Sarephel unbuttoned her side, and laid it below her.

"Hey Sarephel." Tami greeted, leaving her room. Sarephel neglected, returning only to Aera.

"I guess this is your new couch, huh? It's a lot softer than standard issue."

"Just showed up this morning." Aera replied.

"Been a while." Halana interrupted, "What have you been up to?" Drying her hands by the door.

"Go away 'Lana." Aera moaned.

"Tough tiddy. All you two ever do is make out and conjoin like worms."

"And how great it is." Sarephel replied.

"How's the job going? Aera was worried about you all morning."

"Yeah." Aera added. "How did it go with that Garris guy anyway?"

Sarephel chuckled. "He's checked out of the infirm so, as useless as tits on a bull for right now. Hes a good man, too good. Had to leave him behind."

"Are you okay?" Aera stiffened her back, looking into her lovers eyes.

Sarephel gave an confirmed response, "Just a scratch or two. I'll show you later though. Mostly just tired" she stretched. "Nothing three hours in the library couldn't fix."

"You read?" Halana poked, making her way into the chair.

"Not much else to do. The holes are being locked off and disappearing faster than they can be

found. On top of that, Kaunzi has been running me off in search of a bunch of files I can't make too much sense of.”

“Holes? That the thing Aera was telling me about.” Halana asked, Aera confirmed. “So there are more of them?”

“Supposedly. With that Kaunzi found, it looks like there are countless holes all over, but finding the entrances...” Sarephel returned into a phase of frustration. “It's really got daddy upset. It's a complete mess at this point.” Pulling her pet tighter.

“Say, I don't suppose that alarm earlier today was you was it?”

“Yeah, what makes you say that?”

Halana broke into laughter. “See! I told you it was her.” Aera trying to find something to toss at the resident hyena “She was like that's could have been Sarephel and I was like it probably was.”

“So you just figured it was me taring all the way down the central elevator.”

“Yeah.” The two replied in sync, Halana continuing. “Who else do I have to blame? Of course I'm going to think it's someone I know.”

“What was it anyway?” Aera asked, pulling up to adjust herself and her clinging undergarments.

Sarephel hesitated to respond. “It's not something you want to know about.”

“Try me.” Halana intervened.

“It was...” Sarephel fumbled to find suitable terms. “...A biomech.”

“Cool!”

“That sounds serious” Tami returned from the facilities. “And cool, yeah.”

“Not cool!” Sarephel retorted. “They are ridiculously dangerous, and they are being made here in this tower!” Regretfully spouting, she turned back, guiltily to Aera who's face was sickly and frightened. “No.”

“Here?” Aera replied, gripping tighter.

“It's fine, the guard are looking everywhere, I'm sure they'll find another way in and stop it...”

“It's not fine.” Aera reminded. “You said they were being blocked off faster than they could be found.”

“I was just, frustrated is all.” Sarephel tried to calm. “It'll all be fine, alright?”

Aera's eyes like beautiful beaches poured out precious sea water, blazing a shallow river down her side. “And you had to fight one of those things, didn't you?...”

“Not many else can.” Sarephel admitted. “No one better than me.” In a comforting bluff she wiped the tear off and licked it off her finger, kissing Aera. Pulling her down.

“So...” Tami awkwardly interrupted. “How long till supper?”

“Enough time for you to go back to sleep.” Halana issued.

“Alright, see ya.”

“Glad she's gone.” Sarephel confessed. “Makes me feel ashamed every time she stares at me.”

“She gets like that whenever we're together.” Aera added.

“Like a fool in front of a moving train... I'm sorry to ask this Halana, but you've been all over the lower floors, right?”

“In a means of speaking, yes, there isn't an inch I haven't walked.”

“Is there anywhere that seemed... Out of place?”

“Sara!” Aera stopped, irritated.

“It's to help dad find another way in.” Sarephel defended.

Halana shook her head. “In honour of Aera I can't answer... However...”

“Lana!”

Halana laughed. “I really can't think of any off hand. People do all kinds of crap down there. Pick and choose, really.”

“Go make supper or something.”

“There's nothing to do til it's done... Come to mention it, there is this one place...” Halana pretended to think. “Just kidding.”

“Oh piss off!” Aera cursed.

“Fine.” Halana returned. “I had to go anyway!” She chuckled, wandering off to the bathroom.

Sweat poured down the centre of her top, and Sarephel could feel it stick between her legs. Pulling up to escape the heat, Aera retracted to air herself off too. Flicking her clothes, Sarephel changed topic “If Tami sleeps there then where do you sleep? Not the couch...”

“No, Halana sleeps here. I got that room.” Aera pointed behind the couch. It was adjacent to the master bedroom and by it's appearance, it was little more than a closet.

“Why?” Sarephel argued. “It's your place, you should have the big room!”

“It's better than the couch, and keeping Tami and Kayli wont sleep with anyone else.”

“Their sisters, they can fit in the guest room.”

“...Yeah, and cramming them in a small space with the way they fight, there wouldn't be a guest room left.”

“Still not fair.”

The door swung furiously open. “Ha!” Halana entered. “Have I ever told you girls that I do my best thinking on the can?” Sarephel shook her disturbed head, as Aera nodded with narrow slights. “I thought of somewhere.”

“That great!” Sarephel jumped. “I mean... In respects to Aera, who has her girlfriend back, I should probably let it be... So, where is it?” She hastily asked, joyously.

“Both of you!” Aera shouted furiously.

“Aera, It's for daddy, you know.”

“But now?” She whined, slowly shaking Sarephel's arm with firm grasp.

Sarephel reached in, lifting Aera slightly with a hug “It's important, and he's your daddy too.”

Aera's unwillingness still persisted. “Hes not everyone's dad, you know that right?”

“No,” Lowering her partner. “But he will be when I marry you.” The blushing glimmer of butterflies flying up behind Aeras eyes. The long silence manifesting into the shy sputter of mumbles that was universally understood broke her ocean walls once more.

“Not in front of people.” She uttered, flem crackling up her voice.

Sly as living whips, Halana shook her head in disbelief, unable to stop herself from being touched. “And who do I marry? Some skinny boy who traded his love-life in for a life-love of misery.”

“Come on,” Sarephel calmly shook Aera, “It's not the first time I've told you that, and it won't be the last.”

“Here I thought you told me everything, Aera...” Halana adored. “Sorry, hun... The last thing I want is monsters out of a fiction novel ruining my day. That place your looking for...”

not happy with transition

“You getting this?” Sarephel came in, connection crackling, re-buffering it's filters. Loud noises from the distant machinery pounding in over the noise cancellation.

“Yup, waiting for the signal to stabilize...” Halana confirmed, “That sure looks like the right area.” Concrete floors and dark wood walls, with plenty of industrial networking. Floor twenty three

was mainly loading and storage. Given the stock of this area, it was oddly extirpated.

“Alright, where is this strange anomaly?”

“You see that pipe to your left?... That.” Rising from the ground and probably big enough to transport an entire vehicle, the massive tube was hard to miss. Sarephel slid her eyes off it looking for something smaller. That was it alright. Shooting out at ninety degrees, the massive pipe was suspended well above her as well. “Follow it up behind you, see where it disappears?”

“I see what you mean.” Sarephel confirmed, noting it's mount into the wall, down the corridor and over the bend.

“On the other side of that hall is and a square entrance that feeds into up on the second level”

Shaking her head. “That thing?” Cynically, Sarephel announced her disbelief “Doesn't look like a great way in for transporting illegal parts.”

“Where is it?, I don't see it.” Kayli complained in the background.

Guiding, Halana directed “It's right there.” Pointing, for everyone but Sarephel.

“HEY!” Tami shouted, loudly breaking over the intercom. “Stop hogging all the snacks you wench!”

“Blleeeh.” Mouthful and mockingly Kayli

Irritated, and slightly offended “You two just ate!” Halana shot back.

“But we're gonna watch a movie.” Whining.

Rolling her eyes, Sarephel called in over the line, “Will you please get them to shut up?”

“Shut up or I'll demote you to the storage closet!” Aera reprimanded, without a shred of hesitation.

“Ignore them...” Halana continued. “There is more.”

“Uh huh...” She (sarephel) said, coming under the place of question. Looking around, there was hardly anyone to be even heard let alone seen. This silence was about the only shady quality running for it. Leaping heavily, Sarephel found her way up and an uncomfortable heat.

“Mind watching the pipe, it's hot.”

Internally the mechanism in her mind spoke almost audibly obvious, late in warning she instead focused climbing around it's girth. As expected, the low entrance made very little to the desire of this entrance. “Well, I'm not sure the addicts would even use this route.”

“I actually came across this while looking for a place to party. Make a small base and call it my own even. It was a good day.”

“It's not melting my shoes, so It could be worse. I take it this is a steam pipe that leads to the topper floors for heating.”

“It's not very well maintenance either. Look below you, you should see a drop to your side.”

Green lit, night vision turned on, about the only light to see anything other than the dim radiance at bend far ahead. Below the pipe was floored, poorly but who'd care to decorate that. Not too far along, a small drop big enough to fit a small hallway appeared, tall and almost pitch bottomed. “How'd you find this anyway? Looks like no way back up.”

“The pipe was too hot for me so I crawled under it. Just about lost my flashlight when I looked in so I turned back not wanting to get lost down there.”

“It's too dark to be anything but what I'm looking for... I think this is the place after all. Thank you Halana.”

“Don't thank me yet.”

Being silent wasn't possible, without anything to climb down on Sarephel landed, rolling. Quickly, she checked both ways, no one. One way was a dead end or a secret opening perhaps, the other a shortish hall with an intersection perpendicular splitting paths. Approaching, footsteps scuffled in the darkest halls. She dropped, rolling tails tucked in into the corner of the hall, echos unable to determine the direction from the split. One individual, concealed in cloth cruised along in front, merely twenty feet away. “Whoa, this is really legit, isn't it?” Tami commented, reminding Sarephel of the line. After he passed, she lowered the volume and continued. Neither direction was appealing, though someone would have to have something to do unless guarding, and if so than what. Behind him slowly creeping behind, she noticed a side path up ahead. He didn't take it, but looking down herself it lead to an stairwell. No one behind her, she took it.

This room had a ledge overlooking the stairwell, like before. Wherever it went, being close to the ground level, she wanted to find it's bottom entrance. Somewhere hardened criminals could sneak in from. Nerves crept in, the dark eery passage of danger with no one to know where she was, she wasn't sure she'd even find the same entrance out. Aera watched quietly, engaged and breathing quietly, entranced in the entire transmission. Everyone became really quiet. “You're getting this, right?”

Quiet “Mmhmh.” from audience, and Halana admitted. “This is pretty crazy.”

“You're recording this, right?” Tami asked, quietly engaged as well.

“You know, I'm the one that needs to be quiet, right?” Sarephel reminded, turning the volume up again. “I can barely hear you with all your whispers and murmuring.”

“Sorry.” Halana apologized. “And yes, I'm recording this. How could I not?”

“Good, might be useful later. Who knows.” Sarephel returned to her work, leaning over the balcony. Deep pits making a great chasm far deeper than she brought rope for. Withdrawing her knife, she picked away at the base of the metal railing, strong; but pushing against the top, it felt brittle. Sure enough, it chipped away as she scraped it's top. Spikes would alert everyone, testing the line she tied at

the basin seemed fine, a risk she was about to take.

Descending once more, Sarephel let down her line, clipping on she continued as normal. Each level, peeking in from above before moving to the next checkpoint. If only the line could disconnect from above, she wished, making it all the way would probably require undesirable exploring. This itself was too much to readily take in. Staring down below, something happened. Not sure what, something caught her eye. It must have been someone, somehow. The rope reached it's last inch. Just short, Sarephel locked onto the bottom hook and swung herself towards the ledge. Quietly, or more quietly than before, she landing smoothly alerted a whole of no one. This floor was a straight path forward, just as dreary as before. All connecting, the thoughts of how these many paths remained secret was astonishing. Time to tie the second rope. Turning back to the shaft, she came to meet a horror. Behind her walked a tall, neck-less black creature, almost close enough to touch. Screams erupted over the line punching Sarephel's adrenaline through the roof. Quickly reaching for her blades it didn't seem to notice her. Stepping back, Sarephel kept ready to strike. It teleported behind her, somehow. Heart racing, bickering and overlapping questions made her connection a trampled mess. The creature simply continued, ignorantly mindless of her presence and disappeared down the hall.

“Sorry.” Sarephel cursed. “You girls are getting muted for a while.” True to her word, the communication was squelched. Looking back down the halls, it made this whole experience less enjoyable by the moment. Testing the basin of the next rail she tied a new rope in a frightening hurry. Descending much quicker, and frantically checking all over. Soon another creature emerged, climbing the side of the shaft. This network was loaded with them, working bio-slaves. Mindless, wall climbing freaky bio-slaves. Their rounded heads and slug like grotesque pitch black bodies, metal attachments and radiating aura hum were unsettling but their threat diminished.

Leading the final length, immeasurable floors in the darkness fell underneath the last swing to safety. Likely to breach the underground levels, her voyage was detoured to leave the boundless void of oblivion. Halls of daunting unknowns just as bleak as the rest sprawled out echoing sounds of eery ambience. Distance imitations of sharp fluttering echos and humming made their home off these plaster walls. To the ear, pressed against them, deeper hallows danced the confines of it's hidden volume. Unclear whether part of the mystery or the clockwork outside, the deeper she got, the less comfortable Sarephel became. Still somehow feeding though through distorted and choppy footage, a couch of eager watchers could only marvel. Parcel by parcel of static frame splotched over top, every fourth step and getting worse, they might get a new update. The hallway broke off, for a brief moment the connection stabilized returning distorted sound.

Along it's sides were doors, with light drawn from their base. Slowly Sarephel crept through, noises on the other side like tinkering. There were shallow lights but slit crack, looking down the stairwell was activity on the walls. Shadows of things moving, minor strobing flash accompanied with electric buzzing and wires blurred puppetry on bland concrete. On it's second level, unseen by the living workers, Sarephel moved in closing the door behind her. Metal catwalk overlooked production. Eight tables with five of which filled each laid an assembly line. Boxes stacked off the sides and a conveyor belt crawling out through a narrow passage. “You getting this?” Sarephel whispered, unmuting her wire.

Morbidly delayed, she was answered, “Yeah, it's insane.” Robotic static muffling out it's source “What are they making?”

Sarephel shook her head, retracting before she could draw attention, then muted her channel. It

appeared to be boxes like Daz carried out, assigned by someone mysterious. Most the workers probably didn't even know who they worked for, just earning a check. Working here, the check had to be better than a tower job could pay; creepy and dingy and all kind of shady wrong, there could be no other reason to do it than the fat sum at the end of the day. Loosing her nerves, Sarepel thought to each level and it's probable entrances. The stairwell was out of commission and she doubted there were any other passages down. Connection worsened, returning to a static suspense of garbled newspaper cutouts. Everyone at home sighed, Tami and Kayli returning to the bowl they neglected, getting bored. Just the same dull reception. "Tell me when it gets better." Kayli complained, leaving the couch.

"Wait, it's getting better..." Aera informed. "Maybe." Sarephel turned the corner, clipping the video again. Desynchronized, they heard loud modulated screech and meeting them was the blinding image of something bright and frightening. Frame after frame, floor, wall, corner, it changed from place to place every time. Whatever she found, she was running.

Loudly approaching, Sarephel kept moving, assailant barely keeping pace. The massive hulking sentry didn't do corners well as she attempted to loose it in the bends. Gaining the most distance she could, the network was shallow and escape was out the hole or down it's chasm. To her side, another door, this one without light. Large and without clear sight yet, Sarephel launched through the door slamming it behind her. Just like the other, however empty, it laid out the same. Heart racing, she heard it behind her. It stopped, knowing very well where she was. Trembling, she reached for Natheena, realizing the ruckus that was made would surely spawn more trouble. In terms of being caught, this was pissing off the hive. Lashing whips crushed the door behind, knocking Sarephel over the railing. Her eyes fixing on an alternative, the fuse was lit. If she raced it, she could find the bottom entrance (of the backroads) and escape that way. As little as she wanted to fight another after her first terrifying experience, she could avoid it altogether. Into the vent she dove. Though tight passage, the thundering sound of the shattered wall behind charged her adrenaline. Slight shocks seeped into her, grateful of the rubber bottom. Out like lightning Sarephel scrambled on the other side. Storage room with a chute down, the first place in mind.

Light shown from below. Gripping the edges, she came to a stop. People caught onto the commotion. Murmurs and comments bounced back and forth. Curiosity striking both ends of the porthole Sarephel blocked. Hoping it would die down, she felt her grip slipping. Strenuously her stamina drained, gripping tightly with any skin she could brace with on the embedded snagless transport pipe she prayed that it would last. A mans voice called out, stern and authoritarian. "All workers are hereby evacuated immediately. Complications have compromised your safety, please send out any shipment, ready or not, and seal the elevator." His audience conspired, inquiring the issue only to be silenced "That is an order!" All communication ceased. Boxes flopped onto a metal plate that jiggled creaking springs in a hurry and left.

Climbing down, her strength gave out near the end, flopping her into the vacant room. She sat there, resting on her tails, taking in the surroundings while rubbing her sore arms. Cracking a few joints, the stiffness resonated in her skin, fading only slightly. One metal hatch sat in the space opposite of the shelves around her. Quite out of place was the set of buttons hanging above, from what she heard, probably the "elevator".

Three buttons of differing green lit shades stood between her and exiting this purgatory. The inscriptions were illegible with the twilight and without texture her night vision did less than little to nothing. Up, down, close, or something, Sarephel pressed the middle button. Seemingly nothing happened, she pressed it again. Pressing all the buttons, the hatch finally opened, light lit from below

unable to readily reach her. The shipment, coming to meet her. Middle, then down, the platform stopped and went down, following her before the hatch sealed again. This long elevator's bottom took it's sweet time to reach, peeking down the sides it brought her well below where she figured. Almost there, it emptied into a larger collections room. She heard something, soon audibly clear. Two men were chatting. "You know it'd work." Sarephel saw their shadows outside the room. Rolling off, she hid on top of the highest shelf, laying flat against it.

"Horal! Whad make ya think 'aat?" A tall muscular man walked in, long brown hair let down past his shoulders, a strange foreign accent lacing his lisp with an intelligent charm.

"Ell, ya think ina bar, ye'd get 'aat stuff." The pudgy second emerged, "No safer place an where yad most expect it." His clothes damaged in oil and coloured liquid stains blotching his under shirt.

"Exactly." Reaching for a box

"See?" Gesturing, arms extended.

"No," dropping a load in Horal's arms "I see you're stupid. Ye'd put illegal shed 'aird right where 'querity check'n most"

"Yea, airs so much ov'it everywhere, oo'd expect it'd be me?"

"I'on know, the guard who ook for people pedalin."

"An oo says id's me"

"On tha'ds why yur'a moron. om on, soona we pack this out, soona I can drop yur stupid auss." The strong man replied, dragging another package away.

"On you 'ink ye'd gotta bedda idea?"

"For dealing faed? Yeh, a lot bedda."

"Right en Plendal, what ya figgar?" Their sound still echoing down the hall as they babbled. Sarephle dropped down, peeking around the corner.

"Feir'one, ye don't pedal it in'a ruddeh bar."

"Oh? Air'd ya pedal it en?"

"Like'r rest. Where eh don't get caught being a right dundermuck." Plendal informed, releasing his grip onto the cart.

"Uh, at's where they think ye'd sellet. At ain't very smart." They stopped there, continuing to bicker, Horal still going on. "Ya seea ragged fellow on a bench, what ya?"

"Pedalin faed."

"Zackly! Pedalin faed. An oos aight behin'em? The guard. 'eh you sir, yed right not be pedalin

faed says I?' 'no sir, I just ook like ah'am.' Like an idiot.”

“En whyzit they still around?” Plendal returned. Sarephel returning to her hiding, the ruckus of metal shelves being unheard over the debate.

“Oz idiots'r being popped our air muddars whits faster an'eh can be puta'ay.”

“Ya say?”

“I says say I, right idiots through'en through.” Horal grabbing another box

“An says say you, you ought hide in tha'open with ya fingers dipped?”

“Why, says I, SHOULD I? Ide it!” Horal professed, down the hall. “No sir, justa man' I say.”

“Right, right, an you sellen?”

“Ay.”

“Not on you?”

“No.”

Plendal shook his head. “You'd be shot, second eh see'ya not carry'in.”

“Where at? I tellz'em it's unda'a tree.”

“An oo'd be dumb enough believe some shed like aat, uh?”

“Customa, guard right ain't.” Horal stated going for another box, Sarephel sneaking in behind. Beyond was a small station and the cart well loaded. She ducked under the ledge, stiffening away from the electrified rail just next to her.

“Right, ina bar. You pedalin faed, an tellem id's unda'a rock. An if'e dodn't shoot ya, he cuff'ya air undercover guard can buy faed in under'ya.”

“Ah didn't ave'it on me.” Horal explained directly overtop of her, the box being carelessly dropped on to the rest.

“But ya sold it to'em.”

A silence fell. Right proudly Horal continued, “An till then?” Says he, ringing the button to move the cart,

“Ya make money, like the rest'a em and get caught like the idiot ya'are.”

“Auht? Me says you?”

“Right, I says say I! Right idiot through'en thro...” The doors closed behind, Sarephel clinging

off of the cart. Climbing fully aboard, she found the rail taking her a long way to three oblong lifts carrying similar filled carts. Lowering, the front most cart dropped down into a well lit area and the sounds of workers passing it along. Sarephel got off to watch down the slits of her platform, a woman checking off the boxes. The second cart went, and eventually the third right after.

Barely in time, Sarephel tossed the cart around to fit her under the fort and slid through unseen. Ready to emerge, she was passed through two large doors into another pitch dark tunnel. The cart sped up, and Sarephel peeked out. With night vision, she could see the rail tunnel passing her, with a large glow to her side. It was huge, gauging the speed with its movement she realized exactly where she was brought to. "Wow..." She astonished. "I must be under the lake below, and this..." Sarephel looked ahead. "Must be an underground passage out of the tower... But..." Turning her sound back on. "Hello... Hello?" Signal was lost long ago and could not travel through so much water and space. Truly on her own she came closer and closer to what she could best remember, the restricted zone. Still, looking up all around her, it was beautiful. In awe, she watched weightless shadows wave and flicker, fish swimming between her and the generators solar light. Her eyes adjusting to it seemed tranquil but ahead was hell. She pondered heading back, to where security would not be so insane and ahead which may have lead elsewhere for all she knew. Wherever it took her, she was getting to the bottom of things. Dropping the ear piece into her top, she laid back watching the splendour before the end brought her into places truly unknown.

Chapter 7:

*Describe the seeping aura of Kaunzi, and her long range capabilities.

Creaking breaks vibrated the chariot, hell bending its will towards the other end of the aquarium floor. With the vanquishing of the industrial river lamp, the tunnel gave enough warning to seal the hatch with Sarephel back inside her rolling bunker. Door opened, door closed. Another door opened, illuminating the cracks in her defence. Everything halted, she sat there a while then the ground shook of churning gears and augmenting direction. She felt lost, another door, everything fading from lit to dark she poked her head out. In front was a short hall, getting brighter near the end. She got out, clinging to the back and with sight of people she dropped in the darkness. Lastly her car docked in a designated stall. Workers surrounded it, pulling off boxes and moving them outside. Grateful as the looming shadow she was, Sarephel waited, she could wait all day here. As long as she remained unseen, this suited her. None of this became any sum easier and even this rest could hardly focus her. She counted herself very, very lucky.

Some people left but one still remained for all she could see. He sat bored, twenty some degrees off, she couldn't risk it. Though his sight was everywhere but the tunnel, her patience would be rewarded in time. Finally he got up, stretched, and moved to the lockers. Closing the end, Sarephel hugged the wall, peering adjacent to see anyone else. Still mucking about his locker, Sarephel checked out one side, then peeking with a mirror she checked behind on the other platform. She moved. Catching her sight was a vent beside a forklift. Still unseen, Sarephel waddled out.

Flat head screws were the best, with ease they came out, pulling the cover off and entering the shaft. It could have come back easier, but barely resting in their holes she left it sitting right in place. This covering the issue of being spotted as she traversed the complex, she couldn't help feel a cliché. One would think there were alarms in these, or at least for rats. (out the side) Some people headed in the same direction she went, if nothing she was going in the right way, maybe. These vents shifted level frequently, becoming a hassle when carefully moving in suspended passages or finding fans. This maze was getting on Sarephel's nerves. Just returning from a noisy dead end, there was no room to turn and reversing was precarious. Constantly kicking the sides by accident. Someone was walking by, Sarephel didn't realize until they were right beside. Stopping instantly, she listened carefully. She couldn't see who but it did give an idea. They closed the door, and with that Sarephel attempted to unhook the vent from inside.

After much tinkering and a few laser cuts, she was out with only minor abrasions. First was to try the door, perhaps find a uniform or some kind of key pass but the door was locked. With cameras around, somewhere, Sarephel didn't want to immediately alert the base. She knocked, hoping to capture whoever was inside. No answer, it was pointless and particularly strange. With no windows, she would have to find another way to secure herself but every turn was like pins and spotting cameras in her small mirror was gravely consuming. She heard footsteps, but they walked away making the vents look mighty appealing again. Right before she tried the old approach, Sarephel heard big wheels down the hall. To her surprise, a woman and another man were pushing a large wooden crate. Large doors cranked open. It was curious what they were up to, but the room they resided in was well guarded. Surely where ever they went needed air and if not it gave Sarephel an idea of where to go next.
(missing transition)

It was dark, certainly, but this large room was definitely the one. Barely lit by centre row aligned lights, this large vault was huge and laid thick with wooden crates just the same as what went in. Hollow as dead oak and just as quiet, it was musty and pale. In shallow air she came calmly making her way down off the second level. Above, metal catwalks and strange rods hanging down, and all around were crates placed in align between the green paint lines. Though hard to make out as she passed by, they were all stamped with some red mark that blotched through the tan wood. The sheer number of these presents were fascinating, at least two hundred. Somewhere though, there had to be some kind of crowbar or opening device.

Standing tall with thirty two screws in each facing side, these behemoth treasure troves were secured beyond measure. Photographing everything she could, the laser cutter made it's miraculous return. Among the stale air, it was greeted with burning wood and hot metal. Screws cracked as they bent, the top being ripped open with the sides. Bringing it down, Sarephel gazed inside. Cold cinder froze her in place like needles of pure ice pricking the skin. All hair and fur alone standing on end, the reality of her jail cell seeping in. Slowly pushing the wooden face back into place, she heard it move. "Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid." Sarephel cursed, hearing the movement within rattle her. Slight weight flopped onto her panel, oozing out it's hefty mass and overcoming her strength. Sarephel was panicking, the sounds of other boxes awakening. She abandoned the wooden lock, slamming it against the ground, awakening more angrily.

Fast to it's feet, pouring out was another dreaded biomech. Sarephel jumped to Natheena, quelling the beast and the cries of rage burned through the caskets temporally destabilizing the air in a heavy gravity that brought Sarephel's ears to crackle and her strength to pull her down. She regained her balance, as crates popped open. Loud sirens pulled, hailing all staff on sight. "Danger, all Atherian Mk seventeen's have awoken in the vault, repeat: Danger, all Atherian Mk seventeens. Please evacuate

the area, this is not a drill, NOT A DRILL. All guard, please standby until 'lullaby' is complete, all guard, please standby.” She had to make it back to the vent. Running as she might, the emerging malice chased after her. Pulling her incredible weight up the catwalk, they arrived to meet her, closing off the ventilation entrance. She tried to kill them off but they piled up and the matter would not dissipate quick enough to crawl in. Dodging the mess of appendages wasn't possible, their stings charging and worsening with each lashing, sending her across the balcony. Sarephel scampered off, flying overtop back into the fray. Her entrances were blocked. Purple lights shot down, a strange emotion coursing through her. Everything that was hard to do before became worse but it seemed to have a bigger impact on everyone else. “Lullaby in effect, do not enter area until Lullaby is complete. Repeat.”

“Oh shut your mouth.” Sarephel returned, still engaged with the swarm. The other side's vent was free, it was her only other option but all her strength was being sapped by the damned 'lullaby'. All she could manage was to fight them off, one by one, or one by ten. Even Natheena's glow dimmed and her strikes more saturated than holding clout. Though they slowed down, their shock still had it's affect. Sarephel narrowly dodged it's blow, finding her new placement subject to the dog pile above. Ready to vomit, the exertion subjected her to collapse. In the distance through blurry eyes, bright light flickered along the wall. All around, their slow movements gathering in. Rumbling the the ground, she looked up. Explosions echoed through the steel door, flashing blinding blue rays, another, and finally the last. Intense burning sight stunned her as a glowing steel metal cylinder flung out decapitating it's victim. From the new hole, two rods of light danced passing her. Blasts of energy shattering the lamps into twilight. All Atherian Mk Seventeens behind, boiling and blistering fire with the continuation behind her. A hallowing tone struck her off guard

“Fight.” Sarephel felt her strength no longer being taken, a second wind sweeping her ill bones and trembling gut. As though she had not existed, the monsters turned their backs to her, chasing after her angel. Her voice, impossible. They piled high, vicious and untamed while lullaby went for a long bathroom break. Twin rods, curling around their mass like a child's scribble, leaving trails in their festering corpses. Swarms swallowed their target, splattering the ceiling, a cyclone of curling light shattered them all away as it descended into the basin of it's faucet. Sarephel was speechless, clinging back to her footing, she had her own to attend to. Natheena glowed bright, etchings humming strongly along it's razor edge. Two fighters pitted against the odds, returning to battle. Two sisters, reunited. “Nice one... You REALLY done it this time.” Kaunzi congratulated, fighting a new path back to the entrance.

“How?” Sarephel remarked, holding off her end.

“You literally are, THE, worst spy I've ever seen in my life.” Continuing the praise, as Kaunzi broke off her ballet of florescent death.

“So you followed me?” Sarephel called, unheard or in the least unanswered. “All the way here?”

“You better pay me back for this!” Kaunzi hollered. “Just 'coz. Your cute, doesn't make it free.”

Sarephel expected as much. With the aether lit burning floor, she blazed a new trail and Sarephel worked her way out.

“Your back is wide open.” Kaunzi lectured, inches behind, and gushing liquid fire splattering off Sarephel's cheeks. Swapping sides didn't seem any better pickings, still over-run and tiring they

consulted their options. “How many are there anyway?”

“A few hundred.” Looking the other in the eye, they both agreed.

“Make a run/dash for the exit?” They both suggested, taking it instantly and cutting their loss of ground before it fell heavier on them. Running through the centre, giant biomechs intercepted. Nowhere was a good place, and any place was no good. Recklessly Sarephel dove under one enemy, and pushed herself back on it's other side. Kaunzi slicing it's forehead with a high road leap. Splitting the attention above or below, the sisters leaped through the cannon hole outside of the mess. Soldiers awaited them, tending to the incapacitated and the paralyzed.

“Executive royal guard, coming through, make way!” Kaunzi flashed, badge and all, making their way passed until one man yelled out

“Traitors! Get them anyway! They started this mess!” Ducking into the first side passage they could find, Kaunzi lead them into a maze of sharp turns, disabling anyone they met that was armed. Into an elevator shaft, Kaunzi smashed the door close and the top floor while furiously swiping her key card. Quiet at last. Panting heavily, Sarephel opened up.

“You never answered me... Back, back there.”

“Nothing personal, you have the worst timing, especially for casual conversations.”

“So you followed me?”

“Kaunzi laughed, followed by coughing “You're not that special. How'd you show up?”

“Followed a hole that lead me straight here, you?”

“Found some documents that show those holes are everywhere, even here too I figured it being the highest security place to have them, it had to have the best lead on whoever is responsible.”

“And you just knew it was me in there then?”

Kaunzi continued to laugh harder. “I said you were the worst spy I've ever seen. While I was in security I caught you trying to be sneaky on the camera feed, and failing miserably.”

“And you didn't come by to help me, why?”

“And if I did that, you'd grow how?”

“I hate you some times.”

“I just saved your ass didn't I? A little appreciation would be great...” “Later,” Kaunzi cut off. “We're here.”

“You think they caught on to us up here?”

“For one, you tripped the alarm, everyone is going to be on edge. Secondly...” Kaunzi

announced, finding a welcoming comity. “We're horribly dressed for the occasion.”

Guns drawn at a distance, the head guard stepped in. Dressed for war, she stood tall addressing the sisters firmly. “You two seem to be busy.”

“So, you've heard of us?” Kaunzi talked through.

“Treason is a pretty high offence, especially from a guard such as yourself.”

“Does this mean I'm on the wrong floor? I can go back if you prefer.”

“No games Kaunzi! Step aside and away from your partner.”

“Fine, I know when a good chat's turned sour.” Slowly lifting her leg to the side, a small metal canister fell from behind her, instantly igniting. Blinding flash bang covering the whole room, Kaunzi's eyes closed, cushioning the blow

“Fire! Shoot her!”

All weapons opened up, blindly unleashing their entire clips, Kaunzi's sight returned quickly, “Sis, grab me!”

Sarephel did so, finding herself being tugged over slippery shattered bullets, still seeing nothing. “Are you okay?”

“It's what we train for.” The halls slowly regaining their passing glance. These passages were mostly empty until turning one corner. “Close your eyes.” Another flash bang went off, ringing their ears. Though the soldiers caught on, Kaunzi closed in before their sight fully caught the incoming chop to their nerves. As the men collapsed, Kaunzi shook her buzzing arm, the cloth stripped away from her plated armour. Shock numbing the fingers.

She felt an incline as Kaunzi gragged Sarephel up a ramp. Men shouting from behind. “Get in front of me.” Kaunzi demanded. “I'll be right behind you.” Sarephel agreed, sight mostly returned. “And whatever you hear, don't stop running.”

“Kaunzi?!” Sarephel cried, worry sweeping her.

“Keep moving!” Kaunzi barked, throwing a package behind her. Instantly everything lit up, a burly fireball shooting past her on both sides and explosion capable to winding anyone. She stumbled, looking back. Kaunzi holding a massive light shield between them and the tunnel collapsing shock wave. Rock fell, and pebbles dropped on Sarephel's head, dropping the solid mass to cave in the path behind them. They made it to the top, a single metal door in the way. “You take that side...” Kaunzi directed, pointing opposite of her. The door started to open, Sarephel taking order swiftly.

“What the sweet damnation was that?” One guard uttered, lighting his flashlight into the smokey chamber. He walked in.

“What happened, it's completely dark.”

“I think the tunnel collapsed but... I smell explosives.”

“You think there is anyone in there?” Following in.

Sarephel and Kaunzi peeking out behind “I don't know” The guard shouted, the other looking to him as Sarephel rendered the other unconscious. Kaunzi stealing a set of keys from his belt. Covering their corners, the two guards out front were all that was left of the original stationed that went in to deal with the girls. Waiting outside, one beautiful dirt covered Toma eight hundred off road tanker truck and a set of keys to start it. Last years model too. Though it didn't smell brand new, it worked flawlessly, engine booting like the returning heartbeat of their chase.

“Thank you...” Sarephel finally gratified, the road riding clear. Bumpy dirt path leading far away from the base, the night sky clouded over and lit by an enhanced visor. Lights searching from above

“You're an idiot...” Kaunzi replied darkly. “But, you're my idiot little sister so I expect it.” She smiled, turning lighter, the first legitimate smile Sarephel ever saw from her since they were little.

“I guess I messed up your research, didn't I?”

“Well, I planned on staying there all night, so yeah but... I just left the bosses office. I was seeing what else I could dig up in security before I noticed your buffoonery. It's alright though. How did you like that key I gave you?” Sarephel didn't answer. “That good, huh?”

They continued down the path, lights from behind them catching up. “I love this boding time we got but I'm going to have to crash us. No hard feelings, kay?”

“What?”

“I'ma crank it to the right, you get out on the roof and jump to the other side of the road with me. We'll have to resume this on foot before they start lobbing bombshells on us. Probably not, but I'm not up for high speed gun battles and bloodshed, even in this machine.”

Without a lot of thought, Sarephel opened her door, yanking herself out of the safety of her seat. Still hanging there, she gazed over, process the request of her blood commanding officer. Nodding, she lunged onto the roof. Balance was a miserable thing to have, straight as they drove the bumps weakened her stance and her potential to leap. The door swung out below her, and commanding, Kaunzi commenced the operation. The air felt like pins, each moment unfixated to the earth's rotation left her nervous of making tracks along the ground. Though barely tapping the grass, Sarephel came into the woods and Kaunzi right behind.

Returning to the night vision, everything lit illuminated by massive shafts of moonlight and blinding dark with bright obstructions. A path if any was trying it's hardest to become visible but Sarephel stumbled, turning the hindering aid off. Light casting drones above weighted down into the path. Still uncertain of the sisters rogue trail, it moved on ahead and veered off track. Though without a proper cut, Kaunzi seemed to know where she was going. Up ahead they found a large bog, grabbing a reed, Sarephel followed her sister and entered it.

The night lasted far too long. By the icy river bed, they could clean off. Heavy black stains

ruined everything, and reeked enough to wake the dead when they would finally burn it. The only salvageable articles were the bare bones of their outfits and the tools that accommodated for the aquarium escape. By morning, a little before sun rise, they entered the neighbouring village. Roads and buildings of the small area littered around a lit parking lot across the street. Still open, no one manned the front. Ringing the bell a few times, a man came out of the back room and bar. He took one look at the two and shook his heads.

“Come on, let's go off roading she said, we'll be back by supper... Right?” Kaunzi mocking quoted fiction, nudged at her sister who played along.

Everything came off. Into the convenient garbage under the desk, Kaunzi took first shower while Sarephel tried not to dirty the sheets. She took long enough to see sun beam into their room, closing the blinds Sarephel returned to her wait. Emerging, Kaunzi rapped herself in a towel and went to her bed.

The water poured down filthy. Her hair matted and tainted sticky tangled mess. Fingers were poor brushes, continuously checking knots. She covered the rest of her in lather and massaged her tired skin. Warm water pulled out the tension and the rest she needed was not soon enough. She bathed in the bliss of it's splendour. “Hey.” Kaunzi knocked. “I have to go.”

“I'm just about done.”

Opening the door, Kaunzi barged in. Sarephel closing the curtains. “Shy.” She teased. “I just saw you before you came in here.”

“Like I want to watch you evacuate your bladder.”

“Whatever. I got someone coming, he's got us a fresh set of clothes.”

Sarephel peeked out narrow eyed. “He?”

“You got a problem with him?”

Looking aside, she ducked back in to continue working out the bugs. “No, I just get hit on enough while I'm actually clothed as is.”

“If he did, I'd have his balls for bookends. How's Aera?”

“You've been snooping, I haven't even told you about her yet.”

Kaunzi broke into laughter. “Daddy won't shut up about her.”

“What does he say about her?” Sarephel poked out.

“He likes her a lot. Aera this, Aera that. I've never seen Sarephel so happy with anyone. I should give her that old restaurant we used to go to with grandpa...”

“I miss grandpa...” Sarephel reminisced

“He's doing fine, sent us a card from Tallaus. It's gorgeous country out there. I'll show you the picture when we get home.”

“I know it is, I've seen them before.” Returning to her waters.

“No, this picture he took himself and it's amazing...” Kaunzi admitted, finishing off her job. She washed her hands undisturbed. Sarephel was busy with her rainfall but Kaunzi lifted the weight on her. “He really does like her, I'm kind of jealous.”

Sarephel nodded, concealed.

Finally running the hot water on low, she left the steamy chamber. Walking out, Kaunzi was reading her tablet, inattentive to Sarephel. Sitting down onto her cushy bed, Kaunzi turned to her and remarked. “You still smell terrible.”

“If was your idea to go trudging around in black muck.”

“You rather take it up with the local military on foot?”

“I rather have ran around the mess.”

“But then we wouldn't have this sister bonding time!” Kaunzi instilled, whining sarcastically.

Sarephel slanted her head “You wanted this?”

“No... Was your idea to piss off a vault of biomechs.”

“How was I to know!?”

“You could have gotten you head out of your ass and thought about it for ten seconds instead of being cool.” Pulling out a few needles out of her kind composure.

Silence took the room. “I'd go back in for round two but the waters getting cold.”

“Not my fault if people think you stink.”

“And what about you?” Sarephel asked, crawling to the edge of her bed. “...Why don't you smell like crap?”

Kaunzi smiled, earnestly complimented. “Trade secret.”

“Trade secret, huh?” Sarephel answered, unsatisfied, fixing her loose towel.

“Say, how'd you like that key I gave you?” Kaunzi inserted, cheerfully distracted on her reading.

Sarephel took the topic change, due to her many words prepared for this subject. “It was a pain in the ass. Would have been nice to know where it was so I wasn't running around asking every cat on the block. When I got there, you left a lot of information that was...”

“How'd you get there?” Kaunzi interrupted, mischievously.

“Oh, it was a hassle.”

“Mhm?...”

“Getting in was a pain but the guard there was staring holes in me the entire time...” Sarephel stopped, noticing the squishy flush expression on her sister's face. “What?” Kaunzi broke into laughter again. “What's so funny!?” Sarephel demanded.

“I... I t-AH” She laughed again. “I told him, to give you a hard time.” Her laughter continued. Sarephel boarded Kaunzi's bed, hands on her shoulders. “I told him to... To make it hard for you.”

“You prick!” Sarephel started shaking the bubbly doll, smiling under her playful anger.

“He... He would have let you in, directly. But, but...” Regaining her composure. “So... How, how did you get past him?”

“I incapacitated him with a quick serum.”

Kaunzi couldn't hold in the dams, her eyes watered in wild laughter. “You, are the worst spy, I've EVER SEEN!” Sarephel throttling her sister's limp tear ridden head against the pillow. Kaunzi rolled aside, tumbling Sarephel to the floor, and then she continued to laugh. Sarephel took poorly to it and tugged Kaunzi off balance and down with her. They both chuckled, Kaunzi more enraged by her humour, stark beside her sister's smiling face. “Seriously though, you kinda failed. Don't worry, I'll test you again later.”

Both returned to their feet and then their respective bed. “I hate you.”

“You love me.” Kaunzi assured. “I guess I should at least let you in on what's going on.”

“Yeah, what did you find down there?”

“More over... What we're doing when my tech ninja gets here.”

Sarephel returned gleefully. “You call him a tech ninja too?”

“It's kind of my cool name for him, he's not really a ninja but I call him that.”

“I prefer stealth wuzzard, but...”

“Well, anyway,” Kaunzi Restored. “We're going to be heading out for a while, so drop off anything you're not taking with you. Tannor is bringing us to the meeting on his way out there. We're gathering to discuss everything we know about this incident so far.”

“And I'm invited?”

“Personal guest, really, but I don't think they'll mind much... So the stuff that I found brought up

a few new names, and some special information I've passed on to Jaela to look into. You'll hear about that there. And yes, this matter goes pretty high up there with Restricted Access involved." Her tone changed, Kaunzi's melancholy seeped in with her reflection. "I just can't believe it... They've been using our royal passages and we haven't even noticed them. It's scary, right under our noses and not even daddy was aware. You know about the passages, right?"

"I would expect there to be some, yes."

"Well, inside the the main support columns, you'll find small passages which our escape tunnels are made, as well in unmarked areas of the maintenance levels. Whoever is in them, though I can't say when the last use was, not only knows of them but has integrated full undetectable networks around them. They can access anywhere. Who knows what else they know about us."

"What do you think they want? A take over or something?"

"I'm not sure..." Kaunzi admitted. "I might have a better idea after the meeting. It's not really a clear motive or manner."

Lingering longer than it should, the quell air reaped their thoughts, awaiting the end of their intermission. "Sis." Sarephel ushered. "What have you been doing lately?" Her sister turned rhetorically laxing her brow. "Beyond work..."

Kaunzi rose her knees, clasping loosely under with an expression of drawn thought. Her mind, still loose to grasp the sidetracking notion, pondering what best said her lack. "I've not much."

Unconvinced, Sarephel returned, "Really? All this time?"

"Life is work, everything is."

Grave disappointment irked Sarephel closer. "And off shift?"

Kaunzi popped a sarcastic choke of laughter. "Welcome to my life." She announced, sporting far too entertained of a cadence in her outraged voice.

"What about the sim?"

"That's like mega work."

"Not to me." Sarephel replied earnestly, "I go there for fun."

"If you got stress to beat out, sure." Kaunzi excepted, unhindering her point. "It's still work for me." Emphasizing her personal claim.

"They don't make you stare at a holographic wall for thirty six hours, do they?"

"Why, when I can do that at home?" Kaunzi joked sadly, "If, I could get thirty six hours off..." Knocking interrupted them, both turning to the door. "You might want to wrap up." Making her way to the spy hole. Sarephel crawled off to the bathroom. "There you are." Greeting warmly.

“Your clothes.” The man intuitively prioritize, not taking even a moment off her face to realize the towel loosely fitting.

“What? Not even a sweat?” Kaunzi teased. “Oh, yeah... You can toss that one at the wall so my sister can get dressed.”

One peer behind his partner, in the dim dark corner, Sarephel was peeking out, arm extended sheepishly. Over the beds, Tannor chucked the package. “Inside is everything you need, and a ticket each. Don't lose it.”

“And the bill?” Kaunzi continuing her charade.

“By the desk as always.” He smirked, giving them some space.

Chapter 8:

While you were watching the front, I was researching the entire staff and their connections.

Bustling by the tall sun radiant grass, the car jiggled occasionally along the tracks to the next station. “I knew I could count on you.” Kaunzi congratulated. “And you didn't put me on a death trap this time, either.”

Hiding his fingers in his hair. “It wasn't that rickety.” Tannor shied.

“Tell me more.” Sarephel requested eagerly

“I'd rather not.” Kaunzi answered. “How did Garath work out, anyway?”

Pulling her sparkling karra juice to her lips, Sarephel shrugged. “He didn't go for it so I left him there.” Drinking

“Do you trust him?”

Savouring her fine beverage, Sarephel withheld her answer, not long returning from it's potent citrus. “He seems like a good man despite the trouble I give him... I'm not sure.”

“I'd suggest making up your mind.” Kaunzi informed. “He plays a role in this debate.”

Leaning in with his knee propped elbows and forward clasped hands. “Since that incident with him, the fuse has been lit and it makes everything much harder.” Tannor added, “If it was deliberate, you know what that means.”

“I think it's best that you let him go for it alone as you did.” Taking the glass from Sarephel, and

tasting it herself. "If you went with him, he could blame you for it going off." Returning the sparkling purple tinted bliss.

"Alright." Sarephel requested. "Why didn't Father assign me to Tannor then?"

"Because as soon as Daddy heard about the hole, he needed me to check out the backside of our archives, and I took priority of the best stealth expert outside Beralda who's semi retired."

"Speaking of my teacher." Tannor added, "He's going to be at the meeting."

"Someone had to watch the front of shop while I did dug up all the archives on staff and facility. You needed experience, and so did Garath, no one expected it to light up like this. Try not to take it out on yourself either."

Nodding guiltily, Sarephel returned to her glass.

Meeting the end of the line, everyone's departure spread out with the crowd and those awaiting luggage. Beyond the swarm of tourists and locals alike, Tannor lead the way out. Dirt roads and wooden buildings ran the streets down both ends of town. Farms and orchards stretched to the forest walls but before there, they turned the ally behind the bed and breakfast. Aside it's wall stood a dressed man with a cigarette who nodded upon sight. Behind him, embedded was a cellar door half hidden by the stack of wood piled along it in the corner. Down the stairs was a painted stone room, insulated with hanging orange cotton and a tiled wood floor. The stairs bent inward with a railing overlooking the space. A cheep poker table with worn top adorn the rustic unpainted dowel backed chairs. Three of which were seated, leaving five more unfilled.

In the centre a man with nipped ears sat head slack with sewn cap resting his eyes. Far adjacent sat two woman, one of fancy attire, the other a more casual version of the same accountants uniform. "Kaunzi, Tannor." She welcomed, her underling nodding with her superior.

"Jaela, Keltha," Kaunzi greeted in return. "Rhien." The man in the cap raised his hand.

"Finally, people are showing up." Rhein gruffly rumbled. "I've been here for hours bored out of my mind." Slowly departing the cover from his eyes and untilting his chair slightly.

Sarephle sat down with her sister, the cold underground wood warming slightly under her. The door opening up stairs. "You take shift, I'm going down." the man's voice followed down with his decent and aroma of smoke coming with him. "We got enough seats down here?"

"Doubt it Leon. Come grab one before it gets stolen so we can start this."

"We are still ten minutes early." Jaela informed. "I appreciate your prudence, please be patient a while longer."

Looking back into his watch, Rhien returned to his place. Soon hearing the door open and prancing along the stairwell. "Kaunzi!" The man announced. "I knew that was you. I was waving at you at the train station, but you didn't see me."

"No, Falan," Dryly and as impressed as seventh tier exams, Kaunzi replied. "I didn't care. We're

meeting in secret, try and at least act professional.”

“People wave at each other all the time at the station,” whiningly defending his claim. “It looks normal.”

Fixing his chair, “This guy isn't getting the point.” Rhien got up to stretch his back, exposing many scars along his stomach as his shirt lifted with him. “Sit down and get over it.” The door opened

“Falan, buddy, why didn't you wave at me when we were at the station you selfish prick?” Another mans voice came mockingly down the stairs, dressed in worn dark clothes, his reception was greeted well.

“Beralda.” Tannor welcomed.

“Finally a mature man around here.” Rhien remarked. “Anyone else or are we just waiting on Yura?”

“You'd be the best judge of that. I was not informed we would have another member here.” Looking to Sarephel. He smiled walking by. Without thought, Keltha retreated from her seat, offering it up to the man. Across the table was one last chair, and the smoke ridden man still standing after all.

“How's the kids?”

“Still getting into trouble. Especially Tannor, he's by far the worst.”

Taking the humor coldly, “I'm sitting right here.” He defended.

“I didn't know.” Falan remarked. “You two were...”

“We're not.” Beralda assured, patting Tannor on the back “Just the games of old men. How're your kids doing anyway?”

“About the same.” Rhien replied, capping off his flask. “Medicine don't fix headaches like they used to, and they sure give you a lot of them.”

“Ah, there she is.” For the last time, the door opened. “Come on down! I guess we have to get serious now.”

“I'm not even there yet.” The assumingly Yura remarked, making her way down the stairs. Her old shakey bones climbed creakily down the steep steps, turning at the bend very carefully. Sarephel remembered her face, she talked to her father quite often.

“Ma, do you need help?” Beralda requested, lifting up from his seat. Falan took interest, before noticing a dismissing gesture from the man.

“I ain't that crippled yet. Hold on.” Waddling into the last open chair. “You got any of that pain syrup left?” Rhien already handing her the flask.

Waiting for Yura to finish her swig, Jaela commenced the meeting. “Alright, unless there are any

surprise guests, this meeting is open. We are gathered here in light of our knowledge surrounding the undubbed underground network fiasco. By order of Master 'Father' Herosae, we shall begin the proceeding. Who would like to start us off with making sure we are all up to date?"

Stepping forward, Leon opted himself to the table. "About two days ago, the lovely Mrs. Sarephel who is in our presence tonight, stumbled across an unmarked cavity in the back storage of a floor fifty eight repairs workshop. This unprecedented event has spawned more correlations with smaller reports over the span of the last few years as uncovered by Rhien's division of researchers. These reports were allegedly dismissed over the short sight that it was merely party holes for young punks to gather which are as common as vegetables in your soup. Kaunzi and Tannor have been going through countless restricted files over the last two days and I am curious to what they have found so far. Also in light of criminal activity, my team has been tracking surveillance footage of all the known cavities that have been uncovered so far and it's brought up some alarming statistics. Rhien, would you care to debrief us further?"

Nodding forward, Rhien sat tall, offering his piece boldly. "Our teams that have been raiding the facilities inside the cavities, have detained over one hundred and fifty workers with help of Beralda. Information is currently busy handling the massive inflow of patients so I and Leon are here representing them as well. As is, with the scene of notable workers such as Yadaro, Kalanta, Jaran, Esmondas, Rolaund, and Petre." He read off. "They are all oblivious to the functions of their jobs, just that the pay is astounding. They are all approached by a man we have dubbed 'the employer' who as of yet has no particular pecking order to their choices other than to pick shady people at random and investigate them. The employer pulls a particular individual out of a bar, alley and even a market place. The employee is offered a no questions asked opportunity and is given a letter with the job and a meeting place for his next letter of work. We have not been yet able to identify the employer, each time he comes in a different suit and skin. He is reported as having a saggy flexible mask, and there are lots of them in his arsenal. Payments are under the table, workers are instructed by card and those who snoop around, run into the bio mechanical sentries that guard the hallways. PKE on Meji Khole has revealed the same structure of his employment, including many of his underlings. It has also unveiled a few links to other conspirators and a positive connection with the local gangs and external gangs as well. We will be extending our forces to investigate those individuals in the upcoming days." Concluding himself, Rhien leaned back and let the next come up to speak.

Leon returned, pulling out a few documents from his case. "In most cases, workers have been working on the bio mech project but other jobs have been arising. Smaller less funded projects have found such as weapons manufacturing, and numerous drug trafficking operations that are usually not mixed together. The inclusion of these suggest either random access to these areas, or a leak of information to selected groups."

Yura stepped forward. "We've noticed... Pardon me darling." Clearing her throat. "In our investigation, we've tallied some stray numbers into this. Among workers of the bio mech project there are little to no correlation with specific groups, they are at random. However with the smaller groups, almost all of them have a tie or affiliation with a particular gang which supports the previous claim. It's safe to say that there is no one particular faction facilitating the operations. It is an underground district of it's own."

"That is somehow officially tied." Kaunzi argued.

"I suppose. Both can potentially exist. Greed harbours no boundaries."

“Yes,” Beralda added. “I’m curious to how your findings plays into this Kaunzi. What did you uncover.”

“Primarily that it's just as messy as everyone else at this point.” Kaunzi described “The cavities or equivalent there of are based and worked around Herosae escape tunnels, only modified from the start. Instead of integrating them into the network after the point, the original documents show most all known passages and facilities. Worst of all, the documents we have in their place are forged since day one. Whoever is covering this up has been covering it for over eighty years, and the passages have been most likely in service for just as long. Whoever is responsible is high up there, it's built right into everything and we didn't even know. Connections to these tunnels go so far as Restricted Access where a subdivision of their warehousing and testing facilities are currently housing over two hundred active Bio Sentries.”

Ending her claim deafened the whole room, static ringing in one's ears became apparent in the deficit it caused. Yura, holding herself. “A single one...” Beralda uttered in grim recollection.

“We had no idea there were so many.” Leon admitted, leaning heavily against the wall, holding his chin.

“And we are certain that Master Herosae has no idea about any of this?” Rhien astounded. “That's pretty high up on the ladder right there.”

Withholding the pain of this accusation, Kaunzi retained herself. “Father launched an entire operation to uncover anything and everything concerning this without hesitation when he discovered how heavy this is.”

“You're right.” Beralda remarked, slump back overhanging his backrest, attentive to the table. “This is a mess. A real big one and it's smells terrible. No one's crapped themselves, have they?”

Grumbling seriously, Rhien scooted up. “Yeah, a lot doesn't make sense. Gangs got a hold of this mess, Tower hierarchy has a hold of this mess, it's gone on for how long and now it's blown out of the water.”

“I think we've blown it out of the water.” Everyone turned to Jaela, who's remark sparked more than she cared for. “In the last day alone we've uncovered enough mystery to overwhelm anyone. The only thing that has changed is their knowledge of our pursuit.”

“And what started that?” Rhien argued. “Garath tipped them off.” Staring at Beralda “Second best stealth professional you've got to offer and he trips on a bar?”

“Wait!” Sarephel shot out. “Garath is second best?” unbelieving.

“Unprofessional, yes,” Tannor admitted “But sad to say, he is my close competitor. Not to be associated with his blunders oh course.”

“And what about you?” Rhien turned to Sarephel. “Everything was a minor mishap until someone dragged one of those monsters all the way down to (see chapt 4 for name) Station, ringing every dirty doorbell on the way down. What say you're not in on it?”

Icey chimes hallowed like frozen moon as Kanzi rose, in a deathly scowl “If you so much as lay a breath on my sister, I'll have you thrown into TX38 under terms of treason.”

Rhien withdrew, continuing. “Alright then, Sarephel, what happened when you were down there?”

Sarephle rose herself to defend. “Well, when I was down there...” pretentious over her offence, she was cuffed upwards.

“Stop acting cocky before I smack you again.” Kaunzi commanded, eliciting a chuckle from at least two people.

“You're sisters alright.” Beralda smirked through his hand,

“When... I was down there.” Sarephel continued calmly. “Garath and I descended down the stairwell by rope, as anyone who read up our reports, the metal is as bristle as biscuits. When we approached the door my hand slipped through the hologram. When he noticed, he knocked me out of the way. He did save my life.”

“And what happened to him?” Rhien requested, returning his a leisurely manor.

“He parried the tendril with his blade but the sentry electrocuted him. He told me to run so I did. I was still in shock. There wasn't enough time to climb back up the rope so I took my chances with the stairs and had to climb the walls because of it's instability once I was out of range. I couldn't outrun it on flat ground, I didn't know the area well enough to loose it in the halls and it did *not* stop following me.”

“Tannor, Beralda, do you trust this Garath? You say he's unprofessional, I want to hear it separate.”

Beralda passed his hand over to Tannor. “As my close second, regardless of how he handles himself he is still honourable.”

“My student is eccentric, he's brought me many good laughs but he doesn't let his complaints get between him and his job; though he loves to be vocal about them.”

“I gave him an ultimatum.” Sarephel added. “He refused to follow me into the private archives because he wasn't qualified to do so.”

“This was after the incident, correct?” Rhien asked, Sarephel nodded. “You were taken off duty correct?”

“Protocal thirty three.” Kaunzi vouched. “It's still in effect.”

“To anyone who doesn't know.” Beralda explained. “It's a solo operation used to test allegiance in times of deceit, usually given by a permitted superior officer who's willing to take the fall.”

“So you tested him, do you trust him?” Rhein reinforced.

“Yes.” Sarephel

“I guess that counts for something, I suppose.

“Does anyone else have any piece to add?” Leon requested, tiring of the bickering.

“Not yet.” Jayla answered. “I am still looking into the names that Kaunzi has forwarded to me as of last night.”

“I found some names that might check out for some large expenditures.” Kaunzi added “People are being paid large sums, that doesn't just come out of anyone's pockets.”

“My stewardess and I are cross referencing them in our time outside this meeting so I will return to it as soon as I can.”

“Do pass them onto me once you are done.” Leon asked, checking his cigarette case. “I'll want to see what I can dig up with surveillance.”

“How about you?” Rhien pointed to Falan “You haven't contributed anything so far.

“Um...” He replied, put on the spot. “I haven't really caught up with all of my home work yet. I was looking into the possible gang ties until I found out someone else was already handling that...”

“Who are you, anyway. I haven't seen you before.”

“He's my cousin.” Kaunzi admitted. Rhien's eyes rolled

“Is that his only qualification?”

“Curious.” Berelda mentioned. “Kaunzi, what tipped off restricted access? As I hear, they have you on their black list.”

“Just a mistake.” Kaunzi covered

Rhien called out “Where was Tannor at that time?”

“He was warming up the car for me when I got out.”

“Why didn't he pick us up instead of dragging me through that swamp?” Sarephel asked

Rhien, Leon, and Berelda all leaned in. Kaunzi sighed her hand inward and rested it on her head, ears cocked on one side staring unpleasantly at her sibling.

“Dude...” Leon said gravely. “I know you two are sisters and all but calling her a mistake is kind of harsh.”

“Not what I meant.” Kaunzi admitted, “But close enough.

“That's what's wrong with this whole thing...” Rhien stood up. “We've got little privileged kids running around trying to do a real man's work just because they talk to their daddy. They get in the way without being trained how to do something and make a mess of things.”

“We all want to help out.” Falan returned.

“Hey, Kaunzi, does that threat apply to squirmy over there?”

Leon stepped in. “Enough. Right now, no one can trust anyone else. Lets leave our quarrels to outside this discussion and continue them after.”

Yura stepped in, hushing the boys. “So what are we going to do with this information?”

Confidently, Falan “We're dealing with the issue aren't we? We're beating them back, it's only a matter of time before we close off the passages and reclaim it.”

“So what?” Beralda remarked. “We'll get rid of them and right under our noses they start all over again. It's not like warring an enemy into submission, as long as there are parasites left in the body, they continue to multiply until you're infected again. A new flu, a new extreme, how many holes need to be made before the tower crumbles?”

“Last I checked.” Leon realigned. “Jaela and Keltha are going to look into the names which I'm waiting on to look into. Who else?”

“I've got heads to bash,” Rhien added. “There are twelve more cavities that have been brought up with the information Kaunzi has provided to us.”

“I'll forward the names to you right away.” Jayla answered “That way you can get a head start.”

“I'll... Find... Something else to do.” Falan admitted quietly underneath everyone.

“Statistics as always.” Yura coughed up. “Pass me whatever information you need dealt with to me.”

“I've got some questions for Garath.” Beralda added.

“I have a few more leads on some staff to check out.” Kaunzi said.

Peace finally found the round and everyone seating at it. A brief moment passed before conclusion “If that is all...” Leon announced, rustling his case. “I will adjourn our our meeting until further information can be acquired. I need a damned smoke.” Walking out for fresh air to pollute. Rhien immediately followed. Falan glazed a fresh coat of dismal. Both accountants nodded their departure as they passed Kaunzi. Quiet groans emitted as Beralda got out of his chair, patting Falan on the shoulders.

“You did good for getting chewed out there kid. Tannor, Kaunzi, good travels. Sarephel.” He nodded, making his way up the stairs. “See'ya ma.”

“Don't get caught in the other boy's habits, it's bad for your lounges.” Yura said in no hurry to

leave herself.

“I’ve had enough of this dungeon.” Tannor announced scooting back.

“I’ll see you inside the tower then?” Kaunzi replied.

“I’ll send you a message once Master Herosae has amended you back in.”

“Warm the seat for me while you’re at it.” Repelling to her feet, Sarephel close behind. Forgotten as the spring flowers, brisk fresh air rushed into the body and sun danced as it dangled fireballs in their eyes. Tannor walked off, passing the two smokers by the broad wooden edge of the inn. “What do you want to do?” Instigating in a clear-voiced incentive. Bubbling internally, Kaunzi was almost screaming inside, stricken Sarephel’s guard. She was unable to pin why.

Calm vibes of the after lunch diner echoed a strange element about everything around her. Light began shining on the foreign nostalgia that crept on Sarephel, irking her to push it away. It seemed like forever since she saw this ancient side of Kaunzi, ecstatic and cheerful, her sister. Waving around, Sarephel’s eyes followed the menu that conducted her sister’s wild symphony. “I think I’d like more places like this in the tower. Everything is so different here.” Sarephel nodding blindly following the onslaught of remarks. “Their clothing shops are messy here, I wish they had more business. Do you even know when the last time I went shopping was?” Finding herself silenced by dark red sizzling exploration placed in front of her and another glass chasing it.

“You always could,” Sarephel stated, retrieving her beverage. “You don’t work every waking hour.”

“I might as well be!” Catching herself to gauge her volume.

Stealing back the menus, “Like, who’s watching father now?” Taking a peek.

“Izeal. Daddy’s old guard. Like...” Kaunzi returned “When was the last time we got to hang out together?”

Frozen, glancing off the menu back to Kaunzi.

“Exactly. Sarephel, I miss the old days. When you and me used to... Wrestle and run around the tower causing trouble. Nothing stopped us back then.”

“Except daddy and his aids.”

“I mean, did that stop us?” Kaunzi posed, opening her gullet to half the glass. “We didn’t care back then, life was just a game.”

“But, we grew up.” Sarephel jading over.

“So?” Kaunzi asked, a straw hanging crooked to her mouth without a vessel. “Did we have to? Is all of this just to live?”

“I don’t think I get it.”

“Where are your dreams? Your aspirations?”

“What are you going on about? I have them.”

“Are you happy with your job? You could have become anything other than a soldier.”

“I became one because I wanted to.”

“Stop lying to yourself, you did this because of me.” Kaunzi shot out, returning to a calm disposition. “Ever since we were young... Ever since I took self defence and we stopped hanging out, you joined a few months later. I graduated into the guard and you came in behind me, begging father to get you in early. You've always been right behind your big sister. You chose to give up your happiness for something else. That's why daddy tried talking you out of upgrading all these times. He understands what you have to sacrifice... What I've sacrificed.”

Bitter frown chewed into Sarephel, the insinuation of her slavery wrapped in like blatant lies. “And what would that be?”

“There is no one who can replace me...” Kaunzi sombered, “I am the hidden star of an entire generation and unless anyone else can prove worthy of Fathers guard, Izeal can't go on forever. He's only watching dad because of this emergency. When I'm off duty, I'm living with father, sleeping by his door. That's not what he wanted for his children. It's his duty to protect us so we can grow and nurse our own.”

“You want to know why I joined joined?” Sarephel asked poorly, revealing the stagnant slag of her new understanding. “Because I wanted to overthrow father... I was just some rebellious girl with an ego seeking power because she couldn't have her selfish little way.” Heart aching under the frustrated reflection.

“And I didn't help with that at all?” unconvinced and eyes lazing, offended.

Holding the pride of her better past, Sarephle reinforced. “I loved the security of knowing I could protect myself. I didn't need anarchy to feel safe anymore. Daddy let us because it taught us discipline. It made us better people...”

“It did, but we grew up with the short sight that having that strength was our dream. There was so much around us and we were both so busy being someone else's dream, that we couldn't follow our own. I love being daddy's guard, but there is no life beyond that for me. The only time I feel this free is when I've been... Black listed from my own home and work, waiting on the free time of my messenger to restore my reconciliation. Really, I could be attacked even now but, this freedom is so rare, I'd give up my own safety just to relish in this brief moment as short as it is.”

“I guess you're pretty happy that I angered the hornets nest, huh?”

“I appreciate this but please don't screw up again. I can enjoy being with you without almost getting killed thank you very much.” Looking around, her second glass was parting half way. “It's alright.” calling out to the waitress. “You're not interrupting anything.”

“Are you two done with the menus?” Their server asked behind the counter.

“I’ve barely been able to read through them.” Sarephle mockingly scowled to her sibling.

“Can I get another red jacant?” Kaunzi ordered. “And do you carry any electra beverages?”

“I don’t know how you can stand those things, they always give me a headache.”

“Variety is the spice of life, who wants to drink a boring drink?... What do you want to do?” Kaunzi asked, her form bouncy again, tails dancing behind her. “Because you can still do it. What makes you happy?”

“I’m bored when I’m not working”

“Working isn’t the same as living. You have someone who is though. What would you rather be doing in your life than being a guard?”

“Being with her. As far as jobs go, I like mine. Besides, everyone keeps complaining that I have special privileges so it’s hard to let that go to waste.

“Is that really what you want to do for the rest of your life?”

“Retirement is pretty good. If you’re lucky, you’ll get a life before your an elderly woman, Kaunzi.” Sarephel joked.

Coming in between “You’re red jacant” the waitress placed, returning in X information. “We only have lateth in stock.” Shaking firmly, Kaunzi declined the option.

“What, I thought you liked flavours.”

Furiously defensive, Kaunzi informed “I’ve never liked lateth” Tinting to a side of disgust “It tastes like someone pulled a raw metal fork out of a bottle of acid.” Returning to her menu, Kaunzi searched before ordering. “The... The soup of the day, can I get it with salad and fries?”

Nodding, the waitress wrote down the request, turning to Sarephel. “Sorry.” Sarephel admitted. “I’m going to need another moment with the menu”

“Just holler when you’re ready.” The attendant announced, parting back to the kitchen.

A small streak of quiet broke in “If you’re worried about me...” Sarephel reopened

“No,” Kaunzi assured, finding her words. “It’s... I’m worried for you.”

Insisting, still sucking away at her straw, “I didn’t ask for that.” Mumbling

“I know but, I just wish I knew what was all involved before I lost myself in this mess. This is the first time I’ve felt this free since we were kids.” Her tempo stumbling over itself. “I wish we could always feel this way. I wish I could live a life.”

Tired of the repeated punchline, Sarephel instilled strongly “I understand what you're getting at.” Pouring through the text in front. “Everything's alright.”

“Forget everything,” Making her point sternly, Kaunzi continuing half flustered. “Forget work, forget obligations, forget your privilege, forget me. What would you do if you could do anything?”

Sarephel retracted from her menu, hand raised. “I'd like to order a sauteed yonyin melt with a side creamy yellow sauce.” She announced, shrugging to her sister. “I don't really know, I can't really think of anything better.”

“Just... Think about it.” Solemn, Kaunzi requested, eyes deeply begging to see her sister's. “And don't hold yourself back for my sake...”

“The only reason I want to upgrade is to be with you.” Sarephel admitted “I wanted power but I'm happy as is.”

A small smirk drew on one half of her sister's face. “You've got a long way to go to rival my place.”

“I think we'd both prefer that we go back to being sisters again,” Noticing the glimmer returning. “While we got the chance.”

“Work adjourned...”

In the distance down the road siding the track, Herosae tower sparkled off it's glassy wooden curves. Their home, welcoming their return. Brushing along the roof, young trees extended their greeting arms onto the seldom driven dirt road. Kaunzi stretched back in her seat, head hung back. Her sister greeting the bows as they came, sun bouncing off her face.

“It's got me bothered,” Kaunzi relinquished “Restricted's involvement along with every underhanded organization... Are you sure of who you can trust?” Inquiring as she pillowed her finders under the sagging hollow head.

“No, its had me since yesterday.” Her sister dryly admitted, returning gaze to the bumpy carriage. “Can we Even trust our superiors?”

“I'm not sure we even have the choice to at this point... Like them or not we're looped into this until we find a way out or around it. Fortunately for us we can solo our way, unlike the rest. Might just be the only chance we have in stepping back from this brick wall to see what's in front of us.”

“Any plan for when we're back in?”

“You know what I'm up to. Keep digging, either find a slip up or run into a tall man who like to greet meddling teenagers along the way and get him to spill for me. It's you that didn't say anything at the meeting?”

“Yeah, I didn't really feel like being chewed by Big Burly the Gruff again over being a hindrance.”

“He seems tough, but he's mostly bark... At least, while you're with me he's harmless.”

“I've been entertaining the thought of you telling him off.” Sarephel chuckled.

Dryly, “Don't get used to it.” Kaunzi demanded. “I'm not going to fight all your battles with them. They got a problem with you, they have their ways too. But... I know you can handle yourself. Try not to piss them off too badly.” Nudging Sarephel “So, what are you brewing?”

“Take this lead where I know best. If the crime scene knows what's going on, I know someone who can sequel for me... If anything at least it's somewhere I can finally use my guns for once.”

“Freaks just soaking up the ammo?” Teasing, her demeanour shifted. “Honestly sounds like something he would do.”

Chapter 9: Reunion of the Revenants

Splinters and perforations, the wood still bore the scars of notices, papers still stapled to beams and corners alike. No matter how many billboards were installed over the frequent markings of careless advertisers, any surface they could pierce with a cheep stapler was pinned up over the towers illustrious history. Below the sixty eight was known for how bad it was, but the walls were never really this marked as Sarephel could remember them. People moseyed along, poor esteemed individuals who in spite of their ability to live, spent their earnings shoddily on everything but the essential. Anyone could afford to eat, but no one could afford a habit. Indicating her hunch, Sarephel moved her hooded figure into the darkness, knowing she wasn't far off.

Allys, though darker and much drearier, appeared more cozy than their popular front side road. Empty, her search continued. Down the halls, through the backroads. Pipes and tied wires crossed above. In the opening ahead, a small loading quarter stood two men. Their conversation hushed to the sound of her steps, noticeably changing pace into a malevolent gossip over an apparent 'kobbleholf' who had been harassing him all month. Beyond them was a raised platform and stairs leading through it to a farther network of trouble. Without change, Sarephel passed by and out of ear shot, their shady business bore no fruit today.

Out passed the courtyard, a few men stood, two women with them chuckling along. Their eyes drained. Standing with a horrible hunch, one woman began telling a story of her room mate who appeared before the door naked to any stranger knocking on it. Their conversation began to bore Sarephel and she left.

After what seemed to be an hour, her manhunt stumbled. The shifty people she met were a run of the mill and utterly regular kind of shady folk. Even the two foreigners she investigated knew nothing. Wandering carelessly, her path came onto a wide ally, some stairs pulling out from a local business; a man walking out from said stairs. His face was familiar. Large crooked scar, tight melted cheeks, his hair all fallen out with a tiny tuft scruffy and thin. She pulled the cloth over her, walking along, his gaze reaching her. Into the next ally she walked, pretending not to care. He kept to himself, turning away to leave another way.

This dark and shady ally wasn't abandoned. Two individuals walked down, crossing the strange familiar man's path. Their paths rolling around the invisible circle of comfort they didn't care to cross. Open wide, he passed by the odd ally of attention. A stranger nodded as he walked by. One man turned to a different path. Wherever the scarred went there was someone around. This walking network revealed his connections, walking steadily below, two hanging shadow above him. One of those shadows was the chills that he emitted, the second waiting for a moment to strike.

Everywhere was a person in sight. Sarephel could hear the conversations, deadening her breath, all her senses were anxious. "Tellem, next time if he ain't got the time, he ain't holding his weight." Trying her damndest to stay silent, in the maze of upper walkways. He already seen her outfit, she could not be found behind him. Not yet. Leaping from one wall to another, holding the strain inside as she exhaled slowly from her stretched, shaken tank of air. If not for her efforts, at least no one ever looks up. Balconies and ledges were abundant but the back road opened up again. Sarephel forced to walk on foot. No one was here. She waited for him to turn the corner and jet for it. Peering into the path, he looked behind, Sarephel ducking out in time. Climbing the wall from outside she got her height to peer back in.

His gaze still set as he walked forward, tripping on a box. "Glad no one actually saw that." Continuing, he muttered to himself.

Sarephel began to plan her attack, making it ahead quickly was painful and difficult but he was alone here. More voices came out, sweating Sarephel returned to her stalking tempo. "Fawnally, om'on realizes ma brilliance." Determining it was ahead, Sarephel held tightly to the edge. Two men appeared turning tightly into her target who threw one aside. "Um, 'orry man." Showing a streak of mercy, Sarephel used this advantage to get closer as her target struck up a few words.

"You'd be watching yourself. Clumsy rot like yourself is bound to ruddle the bosses name. Right then, off you be before I have to reckon you again." "Mutts." He whispered under his breath, turning left at the three way. He passed by an alcove, a kind of outside holding area, roof lowered to the first level. Boxes in between, he gazed into the moving shadows that came from them. "Augh!" He groaned. Being dragged into the abyss, his mouth covered. The sweet sound of a mistress called him.

Sly and as venom "Vlane," She greeted, "It's been a while." Sarephel retracted into the dim pale light that shallow illuminated her one side.

"You!" He grumbled, pulling the entity from his vessel. "What is this?"

"A present. Last time we met, we didn't leave on the best of terms so I thought it would lubricate this conversation."

"A needle? You're drugging me? You've got some gumption to show yourself here again! What is this some fictional truth serum or something?"

"Well, actually it's a deadly neurotoxin that induces blood curdling hallucinations, so yes but you won't like them."

"Why? We did as you asked."

“You should also know that it distorts your perception of time, stretching out your suffering for what seems like days until your adrenal gland eventually explodes. I hear the nightmares that kind of pain makes is very complimentary to how real they feel to you.

Furious, “You'd laugh at it too, wouldn't you, you sick...”

Sarephel cut off, laughing sadistically. “Don't get too upset, straining will only make it work faster.

“Why, why damn you? Why?”

“Feel it working yet?” Falling him forcefully back into the pile of boxes, she whispered just audible enough to instill. “Where is your bosses new hangout? I've missed the old bastard.”

“Why should I tell you?”

Returning to the light she held out another needle. “You don't happen to want the antidote do you?”

“Like you'd give it to me you cantankerous wench!”

“Well, if that's how you feel.” Sarephel waved it loosely by it's tip. “I waste this cure, and you die a terrible death, otherwise we can make a deal. Your choice.”

“So, I die. Big loss.”

“Don't give me that honour among thieves shit, you're a coward who is going to die a whole lot worse than anything Camine can send your way so spill before I find another chump to backhand.”

Wet anguish poured off his skull, down the bridge of his nose and itched the end. Cold sweat
add three lines

Pressing harder, Sarephel reminded. “You've got about five to ten minutes before you loose cognitive thought, I suggest acting faster.”

In the voice of a broken man, the poor dastard scowled weakly "After we did this for you...”

“Don't play that. I never asked you for anything, leaving wasn't optional. Should have taken to the hills when you had the chance. Staying was your mistake.”

Bright glimmer rolled off the welcome mat. Dim but visibly guarded exterior blocked the way in and not an another orifice in sight. Camine's lair per usual contained one entrance, and two goons to bounce the front of shop. The biggest flaw was the designer rafters and tile roof, indoors, it was just a poor choice. Click, fell a pebble but no response. Down fell a pipe brace, clanking loudly.

“Horey crap! Ya' see at?” One bouncer said.

Raising her brow, the other bouncer studied it. “Is this place falling apart?” Going out to inspect it, eyes shifting.

“You don't ink um'ones trying to lout us out, do'ya?”

“Relax, no one's around... Yeah, this thing is as rusty as old man's nut. It was a matter of time until it came down.”

“At so?” Walking out from under the cover. “You'd ink at this greeaaaat” Mockingly “Herosae feller ould take bedda care of da' place.”

A whistle caught him off guard, his partner following their instinctive turn, reaching for their weapons. “Ah!” Sarephel shouted. “I drew first.” Both guns drawn atop the tile platform, aiming precariously steady at their heads. “Put'em away. Toss them toward me, by the barrel. Come on. You have all the time in the world after this is over to think about how you're going to kill me. You've got three seconds before I cap you.” Nervously they complied. “Open the jackets, I know you're carrying. Pull them out slowly... There you go.” The bouncers pulling the cloth aside, exposing Sarephel's hunch. “Out with them, just the same. Don't think, just do...” Tossing them aside, Sarephel congratulated them in her demeaning manor. “Good now leave the lobby and don't even check if I'm still here. If I see you turn around, I know how to fire those automatic pistols you just dropped there.”

Defenseless, the two bouncers left as instructed. Sarephel dropping down the claim the weapons. Carefully, she entered checking if the ruckus had alerted anyone. Pleasantly she strolled in, passing the arena seating to the main room. Tapping the foot of a patron, she slid him a present from below. “Here, have a free gun.” Hood over her head. Walking into the center, around the stairs down to the bedding and along the other set, Sarephel wrapped her arm around one of the server's knecks as they passed by, whispering. “Tell Camine he has a guest that demands his presence, and bring me a tremendously gay cocktail.”

The server nodded, turning to prioritize the request. Back into the bar they went, dropping the order before running into the next room. The eyes of at least a dozen patrons fixed themselves on the stranger, concealed in thick rag, her anomaly struck a hefty deal of curiosity. One man got up behind her, determined to straighten her out for the rude interaction with the server. His walk turned astray, Camine flung out of the curtain. All dressed lavishly, golden jewellery and fur wraps on royal coloured robes hanging only by his waist. Scarred biceps and pecs. His stomach barrel sided and toned muscle with the rest not quite fitting the same level of fitness. Once her sight caught Camine's attention direct to the hooded woman, the patron walked on by finding a good drink to watch the show. By his face, Camine didn't appreciate the interruption. “You've disrupted my meditation. I hope you have good reason.” He called out, audible for the gathering to hear.

“What? You're fryer grease and girly mag time?” She returned. “What a loss.” A patron spat, choking at her loud remark.

“Words like that will get you lynched around here!” Asserting his hatred. “Take that damned hood off.” A vessel crinkling in his head.

Dropping her entire robe, she revealed herself “Long time no see, how did you like that gift basket I gave you?”

Walking to his pretentious throne, Camine retained his composure. “That threat wrapped around a bottle of Carrals Reserve, I still have it for a special occasion. Might drink it over your grave.”

“Ah, but you left town. You also forgot to mention the bottle of baby oil and that erotic novel I left for you in there.”

“You are an impertinent one, Sarephel. No class, no dignity; look at me, I've got all of it, people swarm around me because I'm powerful and you are a punk with a sword.”

“I've got a gun aimed at your head dumb shit.”

Turning in a hurry, his expression of shock riddled with frustration put him at ease. “What, was that a cheep ploy?”

“Yeah, and now that I've got your attention...” Sarephel announced, whipping out her side iron after all.

“Hold your fire!” Camine shouted, almost every patron had their own drawn. “You plan on killing me? You've done a sloppy job of it. Look around you, you fire that around me and you'll be more holey than a drunken saint at mass.”

“Ah, but look at me. As long as I have your head locked to two semi-automatics, no one can pull the trigger. You're now my hostage.”

Heartily, Camine laughed. “Hostage, for what?”

“Tell me about the holes.”

“I did, drunken saint, yadi yada.”

“I'll be telling you about the holes in your head yadi yada, now tell me everything about those passages through the tower and exactly what your men are doing with them.”

“You don't get it, do you? You think you have all the power because you have a gun pointed at me. Let me tell you where you are horribly mistaken. You should never mix your hostage with your target. You kill me, you know nothing, everyone shoots you. You see, really” Dropping his hands. “I... Have all the power here.”

“I cap you, no one gets paid to shoot me, I leave here alive.”

“You shoot me, they'll be mighty angry they don't get paid, they shoot you, you die.” Closing in, Camine returned, condescending his way up to her. “Isn't it funny how the tables change?... And what if you miss, the closer I am the better chance I have to dodge... Really.” Coming right up to Sarephel “By the first law, you don't get your information, you loose. And you don't have it to kill me.” Taking his final words before being jabbed. Staggering, he ejected the needle from his side, tossing it aside with the force to shatter it.

“I should inform you that the liquid of that syringe contained a highly deadly neurotoxin that induces blood curdling, nightmarish hallucinations. I don't need to hit you now.” The patrons returning to fire

“Don't shoot her! Only she knows where the antidote is!”

“Best of all, you're alive long enough to pay your men before you die, and I'm sure when I'm done here they will be flocking to you like a hoard of hungry vouchers. I get to watch you crumble for all the times you tried to mess with my girlfriend, and when you're through I can go to the next gang of wannabes and interrogate their leader. Interesting how the tables can change, huh?”

“I don't want to die... Please... PLEASE!” He shouted. “Just kidding... I call your bluff. I've been drugged plenty before, I know a placebo when I feel it.” Returning to his feet. “Without your bluff, and your pistols dropped to stab me, which, I have not a clue why you were dumb enough to drop them; intimidation? You're back to square zero, you have no threat, and you are in my hands completely. Interesting how the tables have turned, again.”

“Yes but imagine if it wasn't a placebo, if by some chance that what I injected you with was an even more powerful serum that you couldn't detect as a drug. Perhaps something with a little more in terms of impairing your movement. And once again, as you have mentioned earlier, I am the only one who has the antidote for.”

“I think you're out of luck.”

“Really, because I picture you on the floor in a few seconds.” Snapping her fingers.

Stiff as a log and twice as loud, the floor shook as Camine crashed into the ground “What!?” He exclaimed, winded

“Hold your fire.” Casting her arm to the crowd. “As I was saying. What you were actually injected with was a paralysis injection. Once it sets in fully, your vital functions will stop. Now unlike most paralysis injections, without my antidote, this will kill you much faster than a simple neurotoxin. After all, this isn't any old chemical reaction, they're nanobots. Too small to do anything constructive, but they can still work their way into your heart and congeal your blood until pop goes the pervert king. Isn't it amazing how the tables have turned?”

Deep malice flowed through him, holding him in a caged fit of horrendous rage and humiliation. Coarse breath howled through his lounges. “Alright.” Burning crimson plastering the edge of his bitter face. “Now, you have my attention.”

“Good. We were discussing those holes in my daddy's tower, mind telling me how you got wind of that?”

“Yeah. Those holes were made by me, after I ran out of room to put all my damn money.”

Picking him up, Sarephel's patients wore thin. “Cut the crap.”

“You see...”

Merely moments after the sharp thud hit his side, Sarephel rose him higher. “You can still feel pain.”

“Look at this place!” Camine cussed, his anger billowing behind a very serious laughter that

choked hysterically under his frustration. "My men already dwindled with your crusade... My loyal followers missing. My empire is crumbling under the filth between my nails and you want to piss all over me now? As I see it, I've got the next hour to piss around with you before this really kicks in to make your life a fraction of how miserable mine is right now so hold your seat, I'd recommend getting a snack for you and your damn harlot..." Falling down to her knee, he rolled off "I deserve that..."

"What's the matter Camine?" A strange voice called from the side. "Big man fell down?" Walking down, an even more muscular man than Camine came into the ring, skinny and spotted in burn marks that made up the image of a bird along his left arm and neck.

"Selmo, you shmuck."

"Now that the big guy is down and out, I say someone ought to look after the place while he's gone. What say you lady? Twenty five hundred down, you take him and dispose of him to the boys up stairs and leave me the joint, huh?"

Disgusted, and unimpressed. "How about I cap you right here instead?" Sighting her actual firearms on his head.

"Right now, there are three people who are gutsy enough to take his place, two of them are aimed for you. You drop those guns and we can settle this without having to shoot you, otherwise you're not making it out of this one. Come on, just you and me, and anyone else who's brave enough." In the house of jokers, every face lit up around her as she looked about. Still being aimed at, her careful undertaking fell under the coup of every sly varmint ready to slit the others throat for the jackpot. "Got no other choice. Shouldn't have stirred the vat honey but while you are, I'll step in." Lowering her guns, Selmo continued. "Everyone, drop them before this gets real ugly and we don't know who we're shooting... Kellar." He called, yanking the man from the back out. "Kill her and I'll make you deputy." Kellar staggering back, "An you don't even have to fight me." His mind changing by the moment of looking into the stern man's dangerous eyes.

"You," Sarephel pointed towards the bar. "That drink I ordered." Nodding they brought it out. She sipping it carefully, remarking after spitting it out. "If this was any fruitier, I'd have to go back to dating men." Crashing the glass across Camine's face as she dropped it casually.

Entering half heartedly Kellar gauged his opponent, far too tilted and extending his arm unprofessionally, he took three test shots out of range. Approaching in a lowered guard, Sarephel opted the same response with a less cocked footing, her arm extended out without the intention to hit. He skipped about unamusingly while Sarephel gauged the rest of the bear pit. Withholding far too much, she could see Kellar didn't have much of fighting spirit in him. Beckoning him, he flinched to engage. She saw enough and moved in, lowering her left arm guard and her stance. In a coward's retaliation he moved forward to punch, only slapped away by her extended arm. Again he tried, comboing, her other hand raised to deflect each hit. Turning with each hit, she spectated the sidelines, circling their pitiful quarrel. Now engaged, Kellar struggled to even get close, always a tad out of range. Faster he advanced, faster trying to keep up her sidestep and retreat. Sarephel ducked back, foot planted into his stomach. Slowly backing off she beckoned him again. He realized something, the strike of his face changing he retreated.

"Get in there or I'll beat you myself!" Selmo cursed. Kellar returning rapidly. His fist whizzing past her, and soon his whole body came flying over. First glance from his back as it hit the floor was

the definite treads of her soles before his neck.

“Get up.” She demanded, Sarephel taking note to a new contender. Chasing Kellar off he came running back as Selmo enraged his fury anew. The new guy was tired of waiting through their charades, lead knuckles and brass teeth, tattoos and bad hair cuts, his stance held proper to fight someone and intend to hurt them good. Kellar held back, waiting to strike from the side or behind, itching farther around every skip. She ignored him for now, tall and ugly took her attention. Planning something, he herded her around, aiming her just right. Without a beat Sarephel turned to Kellar, cowering his guard over his face, only to be whipped along the side by the inside of her foot. Returning to face the other, his lunging punch got knocked away as Sarephel intercepted twisting inside his intimate range and cut up his jaw with her returning elbow as she stepped even further into him.

Stepping in, Selmo finally showed himself. “That's cute.” He said entering his stance. “You got a brain, I knew that, but you seem to be holding back.” Moving in on her, the split of powers roared up at the side lines. Hollering and shouting, the mangled voices dog piled the other anticipating the big show. “Anyone want to join me? My offer stands, whoever wrings her neck gets to be my deputy.”

“So, you're just going to make everyone else fight for you?”

“Cleaning house, really. Don't worry, I'll be right here, waiting for the moment you mess up. Show me what you really got.”

Three combatants got the idea to enter together, each circling around her. Targeting one, Sarephel rolled her arms up the centre of his strike, kneeing his gut. She wrapped around him, the other two striking while another entered. Blocking one, the other came in receiving a standard issue parry and clobber “You're running out of moves, girl.” Selmo heckled “Show me something new.”

Shouting from the floor “I guess I'm no longer in the picture, now am I?” Camine butted in.

“Dead men can't talk so cram it roadkill.”

Falling flat, the next victim came crashing through into the pillow pit, another man breaking in on his back. Two more tried splitting her off again, holding chains and blunt weapons. With the ugliest sticks she'd seen in months, it's wielder closed in, twirling his two splintered stakes. Spiked in crude rusty iron, Sarephel kept her distance. Trying for a strike at her, Sarephel intercepted, grabbing him by the joint of his arm and slid under it tripping him. Chains stepped up, swinging his clout. Over Camine's body she leapt, dragging him up with her to guard the chained swing “Errr!” Camine groaned.

“Heh...” Her assailant chuckled.

“You better hope I don't get out of this.”

Kneeing him from behind, Sarephel got her chuckles too. “Here” She said, passing the meat shield over to her happy birthday boy. Right in the gut as she turned, Selmo forcing her back.

“I told you not to mess around or mess up,” “And looks like you did just that. You took your eyes off me.” Sending her into her old friend with the ugly killing twigs. Dodging his blow, Sarephel turned with a knee in his side and a choke hold grapple to the floor. Bouncing off his grounded

shoulders, his grips fell. Retrieving his bludgeoning batons, she prepared, planting one stick between his cheeks.

“Stay.” Sarephel commanded on the griping man's back. Grabbing the man with the chains, Selmo forced another member back at her. Telegraphing a full strike down, chains grappled the club. Twisting it, Sarephel slid under his grip forcing it up. His retaliation with a kick tilted him unbalanced, dropping her grip on the club she helped him lift him up and back on his ass, drop kicking his gut “And that is a practical kick.” Stealing her weapon and new chain toy, she swung out at her circling opponent. Hitting directly, everything stopped. Her gaze catching something unheard of. Standing still, Selmo grabbed the club pushing it away.

“Heh...” Huffing cockily, he smiled. “Your loaner is worthless.” Taring the shirt off his side. Embedded deep, the bird along his arm who's beak cawed in fury, cried in anguish. The scars of burns made a brilliant tattoo of a tiger taring into the falcon and a symbol of his beliefs making up the sun above them, just below his neck. “If you only knew the pain I can withstand, you'd be running lady. What now?”

Staggering back in a waddle, Sarephel reassessed the room.

“Thanks for wiping out the competition for me hon. You've made my job a lot easier.

“So your the last tough guy here then, huh?” Pulling her guns out again, Sarephel declared “Here's a deal,” Announcing firmly.

“What, you going to end the fun?”

“I'm ending this bullshit.” Continuing her announcement “I take brick head over here and you weaklings can sort it out yourselves who's the new boss, funny how tables turn...”

The crowd stood silent. “And why would they? They know they ain't got what it takes to be the ruthless leader we need. There is no one left with a mind to oppose me. Any ant without a mind know someone will overthrow him if he's brittle. They need someone strong to guard them, someone who can take the load and knows the other gan...”

“Tough crap!” Firing aside his feet and returning her aim. “All of it means Jack squat If I kick you into the floor boards. If you're dead, their in thick anyway so I can kick you off however I wish.” Retreating her pistols. “I want to see just how much you can actually take.” The cold chills flowing down from her waist, all tails flowing back. Taking a new stance, her form showed a brand new school.

“Well this is new.” He said preparing his guard.

Lunging out with tremendous speed, Sarephel curled around his side. He swung aside, swatting away but she caught his arm, and pulling herself in with it, forced her leg into his chest. Unhunching his he was kicked off, her footing regaining to lunge again. With his other fist he struck, deflected with an elbow in his ribs, following a quick knee into his abdomen. Unable to grab her, his free hand reached to grasp not even a hair and deflected again she jabbed him another time. Escaping under his legs, he closed the gate, her shoulders blocked at the door. Forcing her arms in under his knees she split the crack with the strong tendons of her biceps, lifting him over her, out of his clutch.

He grabbed her, bear hugging as he pounded the floor on his back. Both legs lanced his neck, jarring his grip to escape. Dumbfounded, he staggered up, head rattled and woosey. She attacked again, close to his intimate range he reformed her favourite knee lunging with a twisting redirection of her body into one of the pillars. Unscathed, Sarephel instead leaped off the wooden diving board and flying into his over twisted body. Onto his knees he fell, Sarephel lining herself up, before he could recover. Standing barely able to react, he thrusted instinctively, realizing the trap he jumped back as she was already too close. Her elbows barely missing his jaw bone as her uppercut yanked back, only for another lightning lance of her kick to jar him against the same pillar he tried to pin her against. Another knee into his gut, and as he collapsed forward, her locked elbows came crashing into the back of his skull.

Looking out to her stunned audience, she called out. "If you want him, you can have what's left of him" Panting. "But Camine is coming with me. Enjoy the meat salad over there, or take his place, I don't much care."

gun against his head. "And what do you think those are gonna do?"

"Conversation starters, so start talking roadkill."

"Start talking roadkill." Sarephle commanded, picking her puppet up to a limp sitting

"Here Daddy," Childishly Camine mocked. "This is where the mean girl assaulted me."

"I could just skip to locking you into the PKE machine and let Intel have their way with you. Their always looking for pretty boys like you to work on." Breaking Camine into tears of laughter "What's so funny?"

"You have every answer at your disposal and you still can't figure it out... let me spell it out for you... No, actually, I'll let you use your head for once instead of your 'ladylike' hands."

"And im not sure you realize the position you're in."

"I know very well."

"So talk before I turn you into a vegetable."

"What, so you can usurp your familys power again to get what you want? You know I'm not really keen I your game of family secrets?" Camine taunted. Aloud, to the remaining few left in his audience. "You know if you played along we'd let you in on them..." To no response "Fine! Silence, is it?" Roaring back "You want to know who tipped us off?... You want to why we are in your damned back roads? What we're doing there?... I've got a good one for you; come a little closer..." Reluctant and narrow eyed, Sarephel stretching his cheeks. "A long time ago, when I was just a boy, my Aunt used to tell me that one day I'd be a king and then some dyke would come by and rape me out of my kingdom." Dropping him, Sarephel walked towards the bar, hailing the worker still hiding there watching the whole thing. "Your daddy knows a lot more than he like to gives on." Shouting loudly, Sarephel halting to it's absurdity. "As I've heard, I think you should go ask him about it. Jog that regnant memory of his."

One drink in down the hot grim streets dragging her victim behind her, trailed by a raving protester, his anger bouncing off her like rubber twigs. His body bouncing off the wall with much less elasticity, crawling back to his feet and continuing to berate. “You said it would drive me into madness in minutes,” Vlane exclaimed. “But look at this you lying harlot!”

“It's called a placebo Wet Water. The mind is a funny thing isn't it?”

“You've got a lot of gull you conniving, cantankerous, filthy...

“Uhuh, uhuh...”

agitating, instigating, ornery, asinine, barbaric, virago, impertinent sly, crooked, underhanded, loutish, scabrous, impious, impertinent, impudent, arrogant, cocky, vain, narcissistic, contemptuous, egotistical, disdainful, derisive, cheeky, insulting, mocking, malapert, intrusive, vulgar, sadistic, detestable, deplorable

“...despicable, bellicose, bedeviled, provoking, demoralized, callous, belligerent, virago”

Walking out into the main streets, still nodding at each ugly remark as they continued their scene. “Ornery, barbaric” People staring. One such person approached.

“You ma'am, can I ask why you are carrying this man?” Holding out his badge. Pale green light fleshing through Vlane's skin at the sight.

“Her ex!” Vlane claimed. “Walking out on me with some guy.”

“Like I'd date that.” Sarephel remarked reaching for her own badge casually, as she walked.

“Why do you always say this? Everyone you talk to, wouldn't d...”

“You're not the first one she's said that too.” Camine butting in.

“Sixth Tier royal guard,” She identified. “Sarephel Lysel Herosae, apprehending a criminal back to the station.”

“And he would be?” The guard redirecting Sarephel behind her.

“Probably stoned.” She mentioned, leaving the men to sort themselves out.

“Alright then.” The guard attended. “Let's get you checked out.”

Defending “So, you're just going to take her word for it?” Vlane argued. “Guards have romantic lives too.”

“Sixth tier down here, if you only knew who she's probably taking away you'd be reevaluating your love life.”

“Yeah,” Camine shouted. “Wouldn't you like to know who I used to be ten minutes ago...”

The air had changed, unnervingly calm and tiresome “Here.” Sarephel announced, administering a sharp sting. The ally began to lift higher as nerves returned to feel it's filthy ground, a floor up from their meeting place. Still numb at the tips, the touch of moving fingers rejuvenated Camine, anew his limbs could speak their prideful banter and directed accusations.

“What next?” Aiming his convicting hand. “Drop me off at the station to be interrogated? Don't you want to have one last moment before they turn me into an electric casserole?” His animosity culling the lasting damning words from his spitting oral gateway.

“Nope, I got what I wanted. You're free to go.”

“I don't believe you.”

“Look. I have my own reasons for doing this,” Her ears cocked guiltily. “And whatever you think is irrelevant”

“You're just as pathetic as you've always been.

“There are some people I rather not deal with right now.” Her ears now twitching

“I feel honoured. Tell your girlfriend I said hi.”

“Walk” Sternly demanding.

Staggering off, Camine turned to boast. “Take one good look honey!... Coz when I walk into that trap around the corner,” Pointlessly directing to his doom, “You're never seeing me again.” Striking desperately under his sturdy mask of malice.

Sarephel already turned away, flipping her diplomatic farewells as she walked, the glowing light of her tablet walling him off from in front. “He's there.” She announced, walking unhindered past the hauling fury.

“Why did you have to send us all the way out here?!” The familiar gruff voice shot out “You know how busy we are dammit!”

“Take it or leave it.” Sarephel returned, still engaged in her messages, blind to the final blazing stand of dishonour she incited. “Hey, sis...” Her message read. “Just bagged Camine, you'd think I'd get a little more of a thank you from Mr. Gruff.” Message sent, quarrels of pride still ensuing behind her. “Camine squealed something a little upsetting. What's worse is it wasn't like him, it wasn't his normal ring leaders squabbles, for a moment I almost believed him. He said that father knew more about this than he told us... It's been eating at me.”

“Good job” Her message returned “Oh... He's not a very creditable source.”

“It's not like I could ever trust anything he has to say, I can't explain why it's still stuck with me.” The memory replaying in her mind that as though for once in their relationship of enmity, upon reflection, he seemed to be completely open. It would be like him though, to only do so at his leisure.

“Something to bring up with Father then,” Her sister returned. “I'd give it some time. Besides, I

have some things to mention to him too.” “Record check came back form Jaela, she pulled a positive on the results. I'll see if anything else comes first though, gives you time to think, maybe figure out what you're going to say.” “It's not really a simple thing, I get that.” “You are sure it's worth mentioning... Right?”

“I have things to do in the meanwhile anyway, I'll meet you at Daddy's balcony whenever you're ready.” Hesitantly, “Yes” Sheathing her PDA.

Floors fell underneath her, once again returning to the floor ninety three, beauty and all it's calming glory.

The elevator rose again. Heavy thoughts dragging it along as though an mas of demons clung to it's ridges, getting caught in the gears. One by one, the waves of platforms ascended her beyond the public gate into the faculty stations above.

The unbeknownst golden rays born into the sky, crawling into the hollow behind the deck, evening was coming into existence. From her side, Kaunzi appeared, grieved behind a convincing facade of duty. “Father is ready.” She announced humbly, Sarephel taking note, her face still undecided. “You know what you're going to say?” Shaking her head, Sarephel turned fully to her sister.

“Anything come up.”

With a weakened mask, Kaunzi nodded. “PKE on Camine came up positive, he wasn't fully lying about Father but neither of us really know much yet at this point either. Rather, he believes it truthfully, is how I should put it.” Deeply, Sarephel breathed in, returning herself to the duty at hand. “I know it's not the news we wanted,” Kaunzi consoled, firmly holding Sarephel's shoulder. “But it doesn't criminalize Father. I can take the lead if you still need time to think.”

Pulling though the frustration and confusion, Sarephel creased the sides of her lips “Thank you.” a tone happier than earlier.

Side swept, their shadows poured crooked into the open gathering room aside the pillow seats and mats. Their figures reflecting off the waxed floor rippled like frightened beasts as they walked, their bodies still calm above the worn hall mirrors. Pacing out into the open from his home, Father Herosae greeted them. However busy, the sight of his daughters brightened up his face and for a moment while looking at him, all allegations seemed forgiven. “You two wanted to speak with me.”

Sarephel confirmed, her sister taking over. “Father.” She greeted, then to the man at ease by the doorway “Izeal... Jaela pulled out the records even more but nothing futher has been revealed.” Kaunzi informed. “I was hoping that you could shine some light on this man named Twal Degraden.”

A silent gear paused in Farther Herosae's head. “I've... Heard of a man by the name, I think. Let me ponder. I think I met him once... I think only once. It would have been with my father. I wish to say he was an odd fellow but most of my fathers business was at that age. The only reason I seem to remember him was something else I had heard, that for the life of me, it remains a blank. If it is who I think, he had pulled my father away for a moment to discuss business.”

“The records list him as an investor.”

“Ay, he was.” Coming to his memory more clearly. “There isn't much else for me to say that isn't already written. And thinking about it, actually no, there isn't much use of reading on it either. I remember hearing he had a rather large drama that surrounded him. That is what identified him to me that night. Right.” He recalled “He had an argument with one of his co-workers...” Dawning off him, Father Herosae clasped his beard. “I'm not really surprised anymore that you should bring his name into light. His work helped end the research into controlling bio matter. There was first a spark over morality, then inevitably the credit of discovery before it's official closure and it followed into a scandal of stolen research. The drama had lead into many rumours and slanders towards both sides that it is impossible to pick any truth from it at this point. It was a fiasco that most citizens had pondered over the course of it's matter well past the conviction of the other party; sending that man away into TX83 over solid terms of treason and conspiracy against the tower, claiming T... Twal as the rightful stander. What though have you on this?”

“It's reassuring, but I had not come across the scandal. Could he have erased it?”

“If there is any truth, it may be a guilt. Over time, enough people will forget, sources lost, cares for a drama easily passed away without proof.”

Sarephel added “Who could just erase something that big?”

“That puzzles me as well...” Their father sundered, his mind turning a new set of cogs. “It seems to be an anomaly.”

“And what of the man sent to TX83?” Kaunzi inquired, a curious gleam to her next lead. “Is he still alive?”

“A man, for over fifty years in confinement. There ought to be little left of him if any. If you are planning to see him, his name is Yaundrae Haro. If he is still there, I couldn't credit him but it may give you a new light.”

“I want to see this Twal, but we can't convict him yet. It's all very condemning but I want to hear the other side of this.”

“The sooner, the better.” Imploring, Father Herosae deemed in calm urgency. “Though it's just a single piece of this mess, it would lay a great burden off all of our shoulders if we could tell the origin of this catastrophe.” Kaunzi nodded in form, “Oh, and Sarephel...” Her father continued, “You had word to speak with me as well...”

“I...” Sarephel stuttered on the spot, still unclear. “It's just something bothering me.”

“I understand, there is a lot going on lately, we all need some peace. Tell me about it.”

“Well, I don't know how to really say it... Or what the protocol is.”

“Forget your work for a moment,” The soothing voice of her father sinking in. “Just speak.”

“Do you... Know anything else about these tunnels, than what you've told us?”

His face saddened, looking onto his other daughter who also hid the fear inside, her shadow cast

darkly upon her father's feet “Mnn,” Exhaling, he sighed with a nasally vulnerability, he opened his mouth with a pause of thought. “I do not suppose there is any way to defend my honour that is sound or infallible... Come.” Beckoning back to the balcony. “Please know I have taken every immediate action, in respects to it's consequence for my people and my family, before thought of any other motive.” Passing into the light. “You both know how much you mean to me, and there are matters that you don't need to burden yourself with but I would do anything to lift this weight from you two. If there was some truth to prove myself better, I wouldn't see you suffer a moment longer. There are no secrets between us. -- Gaze out to the reaches... Do you see the mountains that border the western horizon beyond the blinding sun?”

“It's kind of bright but...” Sarephel confirmed.

“Yeah?” Kaunzi added.

“Every evening, and every morning before I meditate here, I look off onto it. We sit so high... Almost, gliding the tops if we think about it hard enough. And below us, every person who we share trust. This monolith of hope, our dreams, our desire of fulfillment. Home, family, our existence all rests on them to continue the legacy of this tower. We all play a part in it, every man, every woman, every child, ever visitor and guest is a piece of us. You two especially play a role in my life, and with all the trouble you gave me growing up... Even now, you are kids with weapons, and hope to make a difference. Time and time again, I think how much we've all grown but I think to the children with malice in their hearts. I think of the adults who's hands hold tools, and minds of children. The power they have, mislead, irresponsible, the power to crumble our dreams. Children have always made forts, I cannot fault them for their youth. They make cubbies, and walls to hide in, things that can be managed... But something on this scale is beyond our hand to fully recover the integrity of. Think the burden it would be, for a child to burn their house, to find their fire had wiped out their neighbours. It happened, in Alturnial, a few hours east, a child razed half the village by accident. His parents couldn't let him join the festival so he started one on his porch. The poor child, imagine the shame of being so careless... And again to our state. That story was the first image that arose when I heard about these holes...”

“Some people don't care.” Kaunzi countered.

“Maybe, mislead, but the damage would be insurmountable. Should it all come crashing down, like a tree infested in bugs who eat it's very flesh, where would the birds nest then? And how many would actually fly before it ended.” Father took his time. “What should be the day, when we loose our footing and no longer do we deserve the honour to speak with those beautiful mountains on equal standing... Once this is over, I will survey the damages and rebuild what must be rebuilt.. Eighty years is a long time for a hole to exist, it shouldn't fall quite yet... Nevertheless, it's unsettling.”

“We'll make sure it doesn't happen.” Sarephel reassured.

His grin breaking the crack of dusk, “You bring me a lot of pride, and worry. Please don't hurt yourselves for my sake to smile, it would hurt much more than I am as is.”

“This hurts me too, I'd rather this pain go away than linger.”

“It's a sad day when the child must take the role of the father, to protect their old man. I wish it were a different situation, but I am no warrior, and you two are far too young”

“We should head out.” Kaunzi informed, holding both of their shoulders, and tugging Sarephel away.

“Ay, should you find anything, do forward it to me. Even if the man is only a shell of his former self.”

Bowing, they retreated, Izeal returning post. Beyond the roofed patio, they returned to the vacant living room. Adjacent the kitchen and aside was the bedroom. A worn seat in the carpet along the door. Shoving her distracted sister, rolling over the back of the couch like old times, Kaunzi snickered as she walked by.

The door closed, following down the hall, Kaunzi began to talk quietly. “Do you believe him?”

Dragged back in, Sarephel considered it, assuring her indeterminate trouble. “I still don't know, I want to but it still doesn't explain why what Camine said came up true.”

“It doesn't.”

“Can someone outdo a PKE machine?”

“Doubtable, he would have be lied to, or convince himself of his own illusions. Then again, PKE has unravelled many self fed lies in the past, which is why it's used. More likely it's the prior.”

“So what does he know?”

“Intel is still running him without an update so not much as of yet. Anyway...” Turning the corner. “I'm off to TX to interrogate a madman, if there is one. Why he wouldn't opt out by now is beyond me so I'm not too hopeful.”

“Hey!” Sarephel caught up. “I'm coming too.”

“Nah!” Kaunzi waved off. “I've got this handled.”

“What, you're afraid I'm going to botch it up again, aren't you?”

“No, it's probably nothing and you shouldn't waste your time on it.”

“This could clear father up, I'm coming.” Sarephel instilled forcefully.

Groaning “I'll update you if I get anything.” Kaunzi assured.

“I want to know what's going on too, so stop being an ass.”

“Look!” Kaunzi shot. “I'm giving you time to be with her... Okay? Just take it.”

Sarephel's frustration melted, realizing the implication. “Oh...”

“Go, spend time with her, alright? Take the night off, for your sake. I told you, I'll update you.”

“Mnn.” Sarephel confirmed. Hopping staggered, she began backtracking. Kaunzi watching as her sister leave around the corner again. “Thank you!” Sarephel hollered late, peeking around the corner, Kaunzi barely visible.

That is one of the names that I pulled up from restricted access

Chapter 10:

Whispering footsteps echoed down the deadened hall. Each step billowing up the guilty excitement within her and deepening the trot along cold tread streets. Everyone was busy, their homes vacant apart from a child's cries. Pouring into her, the long stretch slit the thought of her wasted effort. Hesitating at it's ends, Sarephel knocked, each following tap rang louder, stopping at her fourth. Lasting only a moment, the door swung open and like a lost puppy, Aera came dashing out.

Her head rested inside Sarephel's arm, nuzzling it's way deeper, merging with her. Tenderly, Sarephel's heart reached out of her, the a cold fading retreat in her lover's sorrow. Wet, cold ghostly cheeks stripped the heat from Sarephel's side, though Aera's back burned with a clinging moist warmth. They stood petrified, each instance setting in, Sarephel still formally dressed for war. Sarephel felt the frantic force of her lover dragging her in, as Aera lifted off of her. The door flying closed behind them.

Poorly lying, Aera looked to Sarephel, greeting her in casually “What happened? Where wer...” Before faltering into tears. Sarephel opened her arms to console but Aera already dug herself in again without notice. Moans of mumbling grovels rumbled it's mucousy tears from the cloth bosom filter pressed against Aera's weeping mouth. Inaudible and shaken, “I was so scared.” Aera pulled off to enunciate. “What happened to you when the signal cut?”

Four finger ran along the roots, just under the surface of Aera's hair, as Sarephel consoled the tragedy. “It's alright, I'm here now.” Aera stepping away, her composure still ragged and shaky.

“I see that...” Her voice chimed still clogged and clenching from the rain. “ I like the flowers you just left on my doorstep earlier... I didn't sleep last night.” Dragging the blanket slowly off the couch, her sombre monotone was the only clear way past the dams of her stuffy nose.

“I didn't mean to do that to you.”

Aera nodded, convincing herself. “I probably wouldn't have slept anyway, knowing where you were.” Seating herself and Sarephel followed. “What happened though? The last thing we saw was a monster and everything went blotchy... Until...”

Bitter sweet, Sarephel licked away her love's tears from the sanguine jam coloured cheeks, colour starting to flow back everywhere else. “It's been a long day, but my Sister has had my back for a while.”

“Ung?” Aera questioned, groggily. “Where was she at?”

“Funny story, really...” Sarephel admitted, smiling for Aera's sake. “One screw up lead me right to her actually. Wince then we've been spending a fair bit of time together lately, I haven't got to bond

with her like this since we were still kids.”

The evening died down with the solemn rejoining and caress of laying aside on the couch. Their voices calmed and mellow, discussing the time apart. “So I

*was I trying to write something here or?...

She felt it, in the quiet like a floating bag, a prelude of discomfort. “You know what we ought to do...” Sarephel suggested, chasing it. “Teach me to cook.”

For an instant, Aera almost believed her. “But you know how to cook. I've seen you.”

“Not well, not like you.” Her stomach growled “I'm hungry.”

“Augh!” Aera sighed. “Is that what this is about.”

“I figured we could do something” Sarephel enticed. “Other than dwell on today, aaand probably teach me something, while feeding me in the same process.”

“You just want to eat, don't you.”

“I didn't even eat before I spoke with daddy. I got distracted buying you those flowers and I forgot.”

“I haven't even eaten at all today... Fine, what do you want to make?”

“You choose.”

“And now” Peeling herself away “You're going to make me work?” Aera teased, groaning as she arose. Stiffly Aera's legs stumbled back into motion, the dim kitchen lit brightly blinding the adjacent rooms and Sarephel wandering in behind. Opening the pantry wide, food was in great abundance. Stacked neatly, near every fruit or vegetable imaginable, canned in you-name-it syrups sauces and brines. Noodles, pastas, as long or curly and some as unfathomably unconventional as alien hardware. Flours, flours, every variety, many of which Sarephel never knew existed. Every spice she ever tasted hung by the shelving with care, with more along the stove side wracks. Bagged along the floor laid root crops. Soup stocks, powdered or by carton, a vast entourage of candidates. Without a doubt, there was enough possibilities here to end well past their illustriousness life span. “Ehh...” Aera mumbled, one eye still open, squinting in the light. “I could make tattchin, I guess...” Unenthusastically, blood filling back up to her head as she stretched, humming with the movement.

“Sure.” Sarephel decided, reaching in from behind, peering over Aera's shoulders as her girlfriend withdrew the recipe. Her head fell back onto Sarephel, as Aera moved onto the fridge, loving on the go. The door opened with another bright beam. Aera grabbed another item or two and once Sarephel could see into it, another fresh stock of everything closed in front of her.

“You got enough stuff?” Sarephel complained in awestruck bewilderment. “You could feed half a floor with that.”

Guiltily Aera returned “I hate to waste food, but there is just so much I wanted to try that I could

never get my hands on without going out of my way to come up here. When me and Halana went shopping, I just saw so many things, I couldn't help myself. I don't know where she puts it, but at least Halana can eat the amount of two people.”

Taking a moment retract off Aera's neck, “Which makes useful when you skip meals because of me.” Sarephel admitted, pressing her lips down again, resting her top teeth along the skin.

“Don't worry, I'll deal with you soon enough.” Moving awkwardly to the counter. “You want to learn to cook?”

“Nnnh.” Mumbling with a nod. “I'm watching.” Still dug in.

“Take your sauce and get it going on the stove.” Holding a can opener auspiciously close to Sarephel.

“Do you really want me to stop?”

“No, not really, but you can be romantic later.” limply waving the implement. Catching, Sarephel rolled around and stationing the cooker. “You know how to use a can opener right?” Sarephel snared sarcastically. “Start the burner at medium high while I get the pan. No slacking or half rations, I expect that can opened by the time I get back.”

“Is this how you boss everyone at work?”

“No, just you, coz you can take it. And Tami, divinity help that girl get motivated. Sauce pan!” Aera announced, “Not necessary, you can use any pan almost but today we will be using this.” Informing, she dragged aside the dark crimson strands and plopped onto her lover's shoulders while retrieving a new tool from the drawer. “Cutting boards are on the back wall.” Passing over the blade, handle out. Her voice casually quiet. “Cans get rinsed and put in the bin on your left.”

Merrashrooms diced, sauce bubbling, the noodles dropped in the mess. Sweet smells of dorant fruit, like plum sauce and woody oak, the tender herbs being cut overwhelmed the room. Aera still at it. “At this rate, I'm going to have to come over there and seal that sweet mouth of yours.” Sarephel incited, turning to kiss it.

“See, it's really simple.” She directed “Once your done, drop them in and wait.” Carelessly Sarephel chopped, figuring fair enough. “Finer.”

“You're going to make me work for it aren't you?”

“No stealing my lines.” Aera scolded softly, taking Sarephel's hand and slowing it down. “You have time.” Her reach running along Sarephel's side eliciting a small dance from her partner as her arms rubbed past her tails.

“Oh, when I'm done here...” Remarking salaciously sadistic, “I'll have my way.”

“No you won't.” Aera teased cheerfully.

“Oh yeah?” Turning meet her, knife laid aside as both arms rose freely to meet Aera's neck and

cheeks, lifting slightly as their lips met, pulling Aera back with her against the counter. Her eyes dancing move lively, chuckling with butterflies escaping her tied lips, Aera leaned in with it. Embracing it a second time, then retreated, taking up the position, still wrapped around Sarephel's waist.

“Alright...” She announced, chopping the last few overlooked stems of Charro and kissing along the neck as she ran the herbs off to work. “Their good enough.” Stirring the noodles which were finally forming their elasticity, mixing the spices in between. Aera fell back dropping the spoon along the counter. Sarephel firmly holding her up, her lover's back pressed along the pantry “Made you wait, huh?”

“Almost maddening.” She replied taking breaths, culling the hairs along her chef's beautiful bountiful hair. “You really... Got... Me going for a while. You're so mean.”

“I love you.” Aera sealed off, sliding down the wall, dragging Sarephel willingly with her. The two tails hovering just off the ground behind. Their embrace dragged them around the kitchen, rolling along the floor, crunched into the wedge below the counter, and exploring the room dancing before finding themselves back again where they began. Both propped against the shallow swinging door they cuddled, tired, still caressing the others side. Beautiful aroma of caramel distracted by the ugly hint of potent undead. Aera jot up, the smell was gone, just caramel. “Augh!” Aera rose, the sweet sugars turning a darker shade in the pan.

“It's good, kinda like... Barbecue for the pan.” Sarephel consoled.

“Yeah, coz the spices ended up charring. The noodles are overcooked and fall apart when you pick them up.” Discontently collecting the stiff soup in her fork.

“I enjoy it.”

“That's good...”

“Hey, other than getting distracted, which I'm sure we can both agree was pretty difficult to avoid, I made a damn good plate of tattchin.”

Aera agreed, “Though, the flavours are all there. It's kinda hard to mess that part up.”

“Hunger is the best appetizer.” Sarephel professed.

“Apart from you.” She said, planting a sticky peck on Sarephel's cheeks.

“Oooh, it's terrible! Why'd you do that?”

“So I can lick it off later, consider it a midnight snack.”

“That's gross!” Sarephel squirmed, rubbing it away. Plate aside, her girlfriend on top. “Aaah!” she wrestled about, pinned to the couch, covered in kisses and almost falling off. “There's not enough room to do this!” Sarephel surrendered submissively. Aera stopped.

Deeply starrng. “We could move this to the bed.” She suggested.

“Who's?”

“I don't know, our pick, it's not like anyone's using them right now.”

“Fine, just let me finish my food first.”

Falling timber they fell, leaping stiffly and flattening out along it's sheets. It wasn't a big bed, but bigger than the couch. Crawling, her ears flat back, Aera pounced. The bed bounced with the impact, the beautiful mass draped around her bringing Sarephel to laughter. Tickled, Sarephel wrapped around, arching herself towards her knee bent beauty as Aera rose, meeting to kiss. Their lips more restless, warping and squishing together, stealing each other's air. Their hands met, entangled, yanked back and pulling Aera's knees out in front. Rolling back, she pulled Sarephel with her, straightening them both out. Kisses planted along the collar bone fell down to flesh, Aera rolling farther behind, lifting her chest up with the active gift. Digging Sarephel into her heart. Clothing nudged aside, grasping and plucking the inner edges with her mouth, following Aera's desires deeply. Groping Aera's bosom and lifting them herself, her love's stretch was fulfilled, lowering back to the bed smothered in all. Shirts lifted, Aera's back burned, her sides soft, singing upon the touch. Weaving between the layers, Aera's hand slipped in along the hip, her love accelerating with the prospect. Rolling over, the roles changed without dropping pace.

Across the room, a shirt flew, Sarephel grabbing back her heater while her heater undid more. Lifting Aera up, she grappled the sweet lady aside, falling under her. Her arms up, Sarephel began unbuttoning the shield on top of her, her brassiere lifting. Both undone, their lips locked with a curling arch of Aera's back as Sarephel ran her arms behind to undo the prison holding her favourite cushions captive. Soon running down the back, holding onto her other favourite cushion with one hand still up top, running inside the prison cells. Echoing ripples of faltering breath eased out from love locked longues, Aera sliding in to exchange gifts. Her face resting along the tender hillside, tracing the hardened rock in the centre. Warm hints accompanied the unique smell that flows with the sound of static as tights rolled off the skin. The familiar detail that tied together the night.

*Reinsert: *Scarlet cheeks glazed in the tears of eros*

In a tragic mess, laying satisfied, Aera tucked into Sarephel's arms. The sheets all wrinkled, blankets warped aside the bed, two pillows missing without a trace. She came up for one more kiss, and curled around Sarephel, nestling into her scalp. A strong, pungent hue upsetting the balance. “What is that smell?” Parting from a second whiff almost gagging. “Is that what I smelled earlier.”

“What's wrong with my hair?”

“It smells like death.” Aera stated bluntly. “We need to wash that. What did you do?”

Groaning, “What did my sister do is more like it.” Sarephel recited “I was up to my shins in black swamp mud following my her into a bog, bathing in frigid creek waters, and running out of complimentary shampoo from the hotel bathroom.”

“Why did she run you through a bog?”

Slanted ears, and pulling off. “It's a long story, a pretty depressing one really.” Sarephel turned

away.

“Fine.” Aera said yanking Sarephel back down “I’ll ask you later.” Still pulling Sarephel back, fully grappled around the chest from behind. “I’m still washing you.” Aera walked her puppy out to the other room. Sarephel locked her arms, tired of the guidance, lifting Aera onto her back.

“No, no, you’re coming with *me*” Emphasizing the dominant power.

Deep strokes run along her scalp, chasing away the spirits living in Sarephel’s hair. The shower still running in the back. “That is so much better.” Sampling the revived head of hair. She rinsed it out, after the second run through, scrubbing Sarephel’s face. Plugging the tub, Aera retrieved the attachment. “Here’s something your bathroom lacks.” holding out a strange plastic add on that fit nicely along the tubs edge. The slope rose mid way to a wide smooth lipped bowl with slots at it’s basin and along it’s sides.

“I see...” Sarephel said plainly. “But what is it’s actual purpose?”

“It’s a home spa, so you can lay down without drowning, and soak your hair. It was here when I moved in and thought it might actually be big enough for both of us.” She said, laying down in it.

“Not very adjustable, is it?” Sarephel mentioned, lowering along side. Fitting snugly, she tried getting more comfortable, struggling to do so until finding the right spot.

Warm rain fall poured down, rising the tides along their sides. The soothing spatter was like earthen hands, nurturing natural bliss that consumed her under the surface of the shielding reach. Meditating beauty, the numb impact of rain beyond the veil like a fish philosophizing the heavy air above the otherworldly gate of it’s pond. The tender cherish of her company as natural and unhindered as the air itself in their Gaian wrap. Heads peeking still above the water. For a moment it all came back, the shower stopped, and Aera returned beside her. The exhausting day faded away.

**Reinsert: Dry salivation and a redundant cold sweat. A living rem cycle to patch the tarnish.*

“Like you’d do that.” “I bet...” “Hold on! I have to use the can.” Opening the door. Halana turned, coming face to face with the couple passed out and up to their necks in water. “Ohh!... Sarephel, you’re here...” She uttered awkwardly, Sarephel awakening. She rolled Aera more aside, covering her girlfriend’s privates and her own with the sleeping lover. “Really!?” Halana astounded, tossing the towels in the corner above Sarephel’s head. “I gotta go, so hurry up or I’m going with or without you.”

“Promise not to peek.” Sarephel said wearily.

Aera waking up more subtly, turning slowly to meet Halana. “Hi, how long were we out for?” Asking almost instinctively

“WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED HERE!?!?” Tami roared.

Kayli passed by, astounding. “Holy shoot, your bed is a freaking mess.” her sister laughed

“WHERE DID THE PILLOWS GO!?”

“We were going to clean that up before you arrived” Sarephel uttered aloud. “Weren't we?”

Aera couldn't respond, humouring herself beyond the crushing embarrassment as Tami's comments worsening by the moment. All she could do was nod, hiding the tears of laughter she held back “You two,” Halana commanded, “In or out, I need to go?”

Both girls staggered out, wrapped in towels. Aera blushing furiously. Her towel started falling off, grabbing Sarephel as they walked backwards to hold it up, she tripped over the back of couch. “Here are your FREAKING PANTS!” Tami shouted, beaming Aera across the face with her own tights, bursting the girl's teary dams over in hysteric laughter with her legs kicking off the back. Sarephel still firmly planted on top, unable to push herself back up over the lip.

“I can't get up!” Sarephel squirmed about, her girlfriend completely inaudible

“Yo..u.. you, h... Help!” before another laughter spurt. “I can... I can!... CaaaaHHH” All the sedatives in the world couldn't hold her back.

“And your FREAKING SHIRT” plastering the white button up across Sarephel's head. Aera burst open, her hands quickly running from her head down below

“Aaahm. Gonna, aAAAhhhh!” Aera screamed, Sarephel joining in, trying to pull down her slipping towel. “I'm gonna wet myself! G-get off!”

Giving up, Sarephel started rolling down the couch. “Alright!” Halana shot out. “That's not something I needed to see. I'm kicking you two out of here. Go to her place!”

“WHAT IS THIS!?” Tami exclaimed “How is this even possible?... HOW DID PILLOW EVEN GET HERE!?”

Elicit laughter continued heartily under the moon lit gazebo, a large blanket stretched out for two. “I thought you got over it?” Sarephel remarked, perking annoyed.

Hysterically squishing her forehead into Sarephel's unbarred chest, and failing to ease the strain on her speech, “Oooh, that was bad...” Aera got herself together “I don't even think Kayli's ever done anything that nasty to her sister...” Finally peeling off the giddy curse to look her lover in the eyes.

Sarephel's eyes, which shone guiltily, “If we didn't pass out, no one would have known a thing.” The confirmation of embarrassment on her voice

“But, we did.” Assuring, her hand lifting her partner's leg over her own, under the fuzzy bliss “Can't change it, all you can do is laugh.”

“I hope they're not too upset, Halana was not having any of it.”

“She'll get over it,” Her hand moving up the waist “We're only mortal.”

“What?” Sarephel playfully paganized, “Do only the gods hate forever?”

“If they did, I'd pity them.” Choking sympathetically, “Sorry to say, Halana's getting over it.”

“I’ll drop by,” Lowering herself into and under Aera's chin. “Say sorry to her later.” Arms wrapped, toying her pillow's hair

Sweetly the breeze blew just enough to feel, the south wind blowing across her cheeks as Aera tucked in the flap between them; the blanket's centre protected their backs from the chill wood planks that in their place now felt warm. Snuggly taut, bundled in mass, one pillow to rest Aera's head, her circulation sacrifice for Sarephel's head to lay. Sweeter yet, blowing rustles from the radiating moon tint hair, carried the adorning fragrance of warm evening splendour. Taking it all in, Aera nestled closer, melting. “I like it when you use my shampoo” Aera's hand lifting up to tangle with the damp silk strands.

Without moving. “I like it when you use your shampoo, too” Sarephel mumbled inside the skin,

“You could do with upgrading a few things, your shampoos for one, maybe buy some fancy teas, go and treat yourself.” Adjusting slightly. “Life's too short for the the same old stuff.”

“Can't afford fancy stuff...” Sarephel conditioned, mellow, accepting her discontent.

“How do you not afford to buy nicer things for yourself?” Her disbelief overpowering the shock of hearing Sarephel's poverty. “Your pay could buy a lot of things, I know plenty of places to find amazing deals...”

“I eat out a lot.” Retreating for air, “After I met you, over half my pay went to the Eel where you worked.”

“Have you thought about eating at home more?” Aera suggested, reasoning with the results.

“Life's too short to not try every food.” Falling back in, Sarephel's ears resting along her girlfriend's collarbone.

“Well...” Aera admitted, “You've got your priorities... After you wed me, I'll just have to feed you from the restaurant, and I'll do it myself so no one messes it up on you.”

Though muffled, she could still make what out it meant when Sarephel eased out. “I'd love that.”

What felt a solid sleepless hour, they cuddled, two halves of a baked vegetable wrapped tightly. Passing the moment, Aera had wondered if Sarephel had slept or suffocated after all. Tranquil, her breath however calm still moved. “So...” She woke. “I ran into your old friend Camine earlier.” Returning from her womb, fanning off in the dim cast that nearly eclipsed the moon.

Sour flare rang off of Aera's lips. “And what did he have to say?” Unimpressed with the night cover shading her plumed expression.

“Nothing worth mentioning,” Sarephel remarking the course outline of his typical banter. “And he won't be for quite some time.” She relished proudly.

Sarcastically, pleasuring the idea “You finally found a cork large enough to fill his gaping

yapper?”

“Close enough.” Returning to lay, flap cast aside to breath. “To quote him, he's turning into an 'electric casserole' as we speak. By the time he wakes up, he'll be locked up so tightly, even my sister will have trouble contacting him.”

“That's good.” Aera relaxed. “And what about his cronies?”

“Disbanded, or better be. I don't know, I sacked the hideout pretty hard. No one was left that could be a threat, just some punks and whoever was passed out behind the bar. The guard raids on the holes are chasing them out pretty good too, he took some big losses there. I'm gonna say you're free now.” Reaching out to hold her love.

“I already was free...” Aera rolled out, the light basking off her moist skin. “It wasn't him. Camine was just their boss.”

“Yeah, and I kicked their asses. It was just the two guys.”

“They don't like loosing.” Aera reminded. “After two, they called their friends”

“And I kicked their asses too.” Sarephel scooted nearer.

“Then word got out, and Camine lost his mind. Six men getting handed multiple times by a girl really got to him.”

“And then I kicked his ass.” Wisping tails danced behind a wide perky smile lacing her silver cheeks

“Yes,” Aera reminisced, grinning gratefully. “You did. I didn't know what to say. Like a cheesy novel you just kinda showed up.”

Sliding up, Sarephel gazed into the bashful glaze and emotional eyes that shot away. “I knew something was up that night.” Caressing Aera back to her. “Those goons were hounding you when I walked in and they didn't leave until you disappeared. I had a good idea what they were up to.”

Returning gaze, a faltering whimper held shut behind her boldened gates. “And you came to check up on me.”

“Like any decent soul would.”

“There you are,” Aera recalled, shaking her head. “First thing I see after they surround me is his arm contorting behind him as he's being lifted up in the dark, and 'I didn't know you babies could scream like a lady.’” She quoted

“Nah, nah-nah-nah.” Sarephel corrected, arcing back, deafly. “That line came a little later, I didn't want to scare you. It was 'well that's a very fine way to treat a woman', ” Crawling back on top.

Rolling her love over, Aera smiled, continuing. “I'm just standing there, shocked at everything and right in the pale light is my angel.” She recited, holding onto Sarephel's hips, playing with her tails.

“I do enjoy my work.” Sarephel propped proudly up against.

Stealing a tail as she flopped to her side “Thank you so much.' 'I don't have much to repay you with'... Completely flustered, and disoriented.” Holding the warm cover to her chilled chest.

Crawling back up, seductively Sarephel continued their story. “I didn't want anything but jokingly I just said 'I don't know, a peck on the cheek.' all nonchalantly, like it was some ridiculous romance novel. I didn't expect that yo...”

“And what do I do?” Cutting off, bordering hysteric “Just about raped in the street, and like a fool I just walked in and kissed you.”

“You looked so embarrassed 'slowly' walking up to me. Oh, it wasn't just like one kiss either.” Sarephel teased, “You liked the first one so much you wanted another.”

“I only kissed you twice...” Aera defended, her love agreeing fullheartedly.

“Halana was pretty worried for you.” Sarephel added, retrieving for her pillow

“She's good at recognizing people. She even knew they'd be back again the next night.”

“So did I.” Cocking the pillow back under her chin to snuggle close beside Aera,

“When did you realize... That you loved me?”

Unprepared, Sarephel stumbled, tentatively trying to answer “That unexpected kiss kinda just stuck to me since that night...” Rallying to find the definitive moment “Though it wasn't until like the third night you actually invited me in to your place. I think that is when I got to know you.” Covering her lover, as she curled over the bare chilled abdomen. “You really grew on me. I knew I loved you even more after Camine threatened you, it burned me up pretty good inside.”

“That's the thing, Camine never cared about me, you were the one dishonouring him, I was just the means by which he swore to hurt you with.”

Recalling her fury, as she rose “And the second he threatened you is when I dropped him a bottle of cheap booze and a love letter with something else to pass his time.”

“Love letter?” Aera Laughed, seriously. “What, that you'd 'love' to drop the entire special guard reserve on his ass if he didn't leave town?”

“It worked, didn't it?” Returning, Her girlfriend, yanking the covers over from Sarephel's side, tucking them both in. Sarephel calmed down, dawning a new thought “I don't really think Karelyn likes me.”

“That's random.”

“Well? Does it wade?” Cracking the slit of stars from their full covers.

“She's not really comfortable around lesbians.” Aera admitted.

“That ain't hard to believe,” Sarephel agreed, readjusting her tails, “Even at your old place, every time I came over she'd go elsewhere for the whole night.” Culling them up in front of her

“Remember when she walked in on us at the restaurant?” Aera reminded “‘Mrs... Aera...’ like there was a train in front of her. She's never formal like that.”

“You don't suppose we stopped her from moving up here? Do you?” Curiously concerning, Sarephel mingled her legs

“She couldn't leave her social life behind down there, as much as she likes working here.” Assuring her nestled feet in with Sarephel's “Besides I was the influx worker, I was only borrowing the place until another house opened up.”

“And yet there are so many homes available here...”

“Yeah but if you actually lived down there, you'd see how many people don't really have dreams to work towards.” Her fingers began weaving through the furs of her stolen comforter. “There is no reason to work or even work well, they'll be stuck there forever.”

“You're talking about your family, right?”

Edit note. Make Aera believe she has a choice, and Sarephel feel it was by chance Aera escaped being worthless like her deadbeat family. As a result, Sarephel believes that the people that you are around has more of an impact, and thus Sarephel holds it against herself for when she makes Aera's life less happy... Which, obviously changes at the end.

“It's their choice not to strive for better, and they admit it.” Combing the roots. “They could live in better neighbourhoods, enjoy their work instead of drinking it away til next morning.”

“At least they run the factories.” Sarephel consoled

“People just have no ambition, they don't realize how wonderful it feels to be really good at something. They can just stay there getting overcrowded with addicts, inject their fade, and clean the hydrotanks. It's not my life anymore.”

Running her lips along Aera's shoulders, “Thank the divine you never picked up your fathers habits...” Sarephel admired.

Stealing more fluffy comforters. “Would you still have loved me me if I did?”

“I don't know what I'd see... If you could never smile the way you do.” Peering in the moonlight to see her face, “When I look at you, I see someone with life in their eyes. I don't see yesterday, or your scars, I see tomorrow. You left your pain back home. Your happiness becomes my happiness. You could have, yes, you had every opportunity to be like them, but you broke free from it. That was a hard choice, if you gave into it, you wouldn't be the woman I see in you. I see your potential...” epiphany* “How could I ever love someone who has refused to live?” Wrapping around tightly, her face dug into Aera's cheek, breathing gently along the neck.

*Sarephel has an epiphany about what she says

“You just want to get laid again, and that's why you're using this poetry aren't you?”

“That's your shell talking, face it, you're girlfriend loves you; the sex is just a really nice benefit of loving you.”

Chapter 11: Pursuit

Deep morning cascaded along, the dawning sun casting well beyond their beds into the air above the world. Morning low mists tingled, their mild chill seeping through the ventilation and between the balcony bagged lovers. Tightening the gap, their laze and tender warmth lasted from dawn to morning hunger. At last, they could not deny their woken crypts, scuffles under the luminant wall and cognition encroaching on them restlessly. Rising, Sarephel took the first taste of late born air. Pale shadows outcast the tower and a vague mist to disrupt the world. With a wobble, instinct took her unpleasantly aware body to the station, brewing another cup for her companion back at camp. Primed with energy, Sarephel finished her pot to turn into the covers again before she could forsake her bed entirely. By the door, wrapped in their tent, Aera got up.

“I see you take good care of the gardens.” Aera spoke, her voice rejuvenating. Two tails casually dusting the floor under her cloak.

“Coffee will be ready, eventually.” Walking up, Sarephel claimed a kiss and a little more.

“Take this.” Aera bestowed, unravelling their blanket as duty took her to the bathroom. Sarephel wrapped herself back up, falling into the chair. Their clothes piled along the table where their camping plans first took place. Among the disorder rested a black topped glass tablet, still disabled. She retrieved it, slouching back over the side arm. Staring blankly, Kaunzi came to mind, her mystery taking hold ever slowly. Setting it aside, Aera finished, wandering near. Seating on the other arm, her knees interlocked, stealing some blanket as she nudged forward. Sarephel adjusted, sharing the chair crooked. “What's this?” Aera questioned, pulling the cold glaze off her side. “Oh, just your tablet.”

“I was looking at it.” Sarephel mentioned, chin resting on her girlfriends shoulder.

“What did it have to say?”

“Nothing, I was just turning it on, it'll take a while.

“It's going to be something to drag you off again, isn't it?” Holding the loading device loosely, her eyes set upon it.

“Depends on what Kaunzi found.” Hugging, Sarephel began to wonder herself, “When it's on, let me know if it's worth reading or not.”

“How am I to know?” Aera confessed, navigating the messages.

“It's up to you.” Sarephel entrusted, part of her dying just a little bit. The pinnacle of this mess was probably written right there, maybe. For a moment, Sarephel regretted her words, ready to take them back.

Aera sighed, "By the looks of it, there's a lot of important stuff that you should know about. It's fine, I know how important this job is... Who's this drinking buddy, and what is a PKE?"

"Hand!" Sarephel

"What? Is it embarrassing?... Oh, it's about Camine." Aera returned, running her arm behind her. "It's all yours."

Pouring over her new information, Kaunzi found a few new discoveries and this information about Camine was groundbreaking.

"Coffee's ready." Aera announced, breaking off to grab a cup. Their leg lock tangled them, Sarephel flopping back into normal position and holding. There were more than a few new updates. Plans were being circulated between the infiltration teams, and Kaunzi's elites, Sarephel included, plus one other recommendation. Catching the gist of it, her ears corked with another annoyance. Lazily her arm dropped onto her equipment, and flung her side iron to her left.

"You can turn the simulation off dad..." Catching Aera's attention. "I'm awake." The hologram vanishing.

"I don't envy you..." Aera admitted. "Always on alert like that."

"It's the 'werwing' noise of the projectors that always gives it away."

"Coffee." Aera offered, gifting the steaming mug. "Any idea how long you'll be out today?"

Sealing it with a kiss, "Not sure, I'll stop by the restaurant later though." Sarephel assured, reaching out for her gear.

Even more annoying than the 'werwing' noise, the conglomerate hum and tacking of keys in the office space always weighed on her patience. Door "QJ425" Just as desirable as it's always been. It was open, dark, blinking, just as she left it. Knocking Sarephel greeted the troll "Hey stealth wuzzard!" The secondary electric doors closed. He heard tampering from outside, grieving himself past his headache. Sliding her keylock, the door opened.

Clasping his head, Garath groaned "Now is a really bad time." Tapping the door lock, Sarephel already bracing inside against the weak closing mechanism.

"I need a second, rather you've been requested upon your talent by your old friend Tannor."

"The day just gets better." He turned to her, his face ridden with sleep loss "What, is it another test of my allegiance?"

"I take it Beralda didn't go all that easy on you..." His unimpressed expression dictating the rest. "Think of it like this; after this there will be no questions about it."

*Do I look like I'm ready to perform in the field?

"Yeah, and why am I uninformed about any updates, why do you have to come by?"

“Information leaks have gone so far as even the offices on this floor, I came in person.”

* “Okay, lets say we're on the same page here, what's so special.

Letting go the doors. “Apparently Camine and the employer were drinking buddies, buddy spilled that detail and the guys location, Kaunzi is pulling up the full local on it.

“And you need me for what?”

“I'm informed your hacking skills rival that of commands mid security access.”

“Now you want me to hack into the tower?” “What do you think.”

“It was a shocker to me too... Kaunzi is taking the fall on your protocol 33 upon my request, and Tannors recommendation.”

“Like I've ever gotten a fair shake from any of them, especially you...”

“I need my stealth wuzzard...” “Nerd wuzzard?”

“I still don't trust you, even without the protocol 33”

“Catch twenty two though, if you can't trust me, it never happened. Come on, we're bringing you down to central command for your access.”

“Yeah, what's so important that command can't do it?”

“You need to watch our backs against real threats.”

“From the big crawlers with their probing devices?”

“It's not the sentries we're afraid of, it's what we can't outrun. This area will be next to a war field, and you just need to sit your ass down in front of a data console 200 floors away.”

“How long until we move out?”

“Five minutes ago.”

“Some things don't change.”

Retrieving her pocket device, She read the updates. “Some things do... Change of plans, she's readying the entire special reserve right in behind us. You're in this right?”

“Like my choices say any different.”

“I can order you a coffee for when you get there.” Sarephel sympathized.

Climbing the ranks, each floor whizzed past with tremendous pace in the private elevators. Bright cold silver lights took the strain off the flashing along the door edges. It's matte chrome walls

and non-industrial motor was a pleasant vacation from their main public transports below the office floors. Opening at Central command, Sarephel greeted the guard into the new space; Garath coldly scuffing the stone floor, keyboard and amethyst key drive in hand. A small glimmering gemstone dangling from the drive's chain. Kaunzi slid up into the group, "Here are your comms, Garath you've got a private stall." Redirecting to the intercom. "Charecy will help you set up, she'll give you full access, you will have unrestricted reign over all tower systems, especially unregistered devices."

"And that's what I'm looking for, correct?" The affirming focus in his voice inspiring confidence.

"Anything posing a threat or an advantage, your job is to disable and reclaim them for our use. In worst case scenario, you will have to mitigate the damages."

"Way to put pressure on a guy." Walking on, Charecy offering his seat.

"We need to gear up better." Kaunzi criticized, checking down her sister. Their path altering. "Armoury is down a floor by dispatch." Returning her gaze in front as they picked up pace to a quick walk. Ear pieces crackling.

"Connecting, test, test." Garath came in over the communications.

"Comms connected." "I'll let you set up, after we've geared up, I'll update the situation."

"How did the interrogation go?" Sarephel inquired. "You didn't say anything on that."

"He was trying my patients at best. I'd like to leave the doubts til later but for now, he was pretty disturbed. By his claims, he really was set up but theirs enough pride in him to dismiss his memories."

Walls spread with isles of arms and ammunition. A nice selection of specialized swords and batons cultivated one section, it's ravaging implications drawing the adoration of Sarephel's waning heart strings. "Catch." Kaunzi alerted, tossing a decked belt. "Some tools we'll need, extra lights and power cells, overwrite module and remote access hub. Plus quick clips. Speaking of which, grab a few more, I'm taking a pouch. Catch." Tossing a satchel. "Polar rounds. Might come in handy. Put it on later, lets book it." Entering the elevator with two vests over her shoulders. Surrounding the shaft was a network of pipes, that separated and rejoined as their decent took them to the main security check. Sarephel geared up, climbing into the stiff heavy liquid vest.

Tannor met them, waving casually, and turned to advance. Striking the main elevator for the stairs, they took a great sum of shortcuts as they darted for the sub levels. Each flashing level passed more disorienting than the last. *! stolen, go ahead, call the authorities... They can't unhug you.

The line buzzed. "If we're all set up." Garath introduced. "How about that update you promised, Kaunzi."

"Alright, we're hitting the big shot. Camine spilled the location of the employer, it's a coordinate inside the holes, so it works a tad differently. Tannor identified the address structure and after a little research I discovered the target location matches the old office of the suspected Twal Degraden. It was abandoned after moving up and it's been slowly forgotten. In other words, he never left, just washed it

away into obscurity like everything else.” Returning to the main shaft.

Stepping in, Tannor questioned doubtfully “Do you suppose the employer and Twal are one in the same?”

“Suffice to say I can't tell, it's still the biggest connection we've got, and it puts Twal directly involved into this mess. He is officially our target, and if we can undermine the Employer while we are at it, then mission bonus.”

“Likely Twal won't be there.”

“Like I said, mission bonus. I want more leads in the very least. Twal is a public figure as a prime investor of the tower, he can't easily disappear.”

“So what about that Haro guy you saw?” Sarephel inquired, gravely curious.

“He was reluctant to say the least. Every other word was curse Twal this, damn Twal that. I'm pretty sure that hate has kept him alive long enough when he had every opportunity to opt out. Like believing that one day he'd see justice was enough to keep him going.”

“Not to feed that motive, but he probably will...”

“I don't blame him for feeling that way, but the only future he has now is a psych ward.” Pitifully Kaunzi sympathized, frustrated under the circumstance. “He says they succeeded, that their experiments really did move all on their own, but he was pretty hysterical. If there is any justice left for him... It's died long ago.”

Below the main floors, Station Plaza cut off the main elevator shaft, still scarred and scraped from the days before. Along the sides of the grand hub stood a line of new elevators on both sides, medium sized hauls for the lower sub levels and Substations' grand platform along the back wall. Industrial by industrial floor, the caged lift poured light onto the hard working blood of the tower's proud and underwhelmed workers. Before long, Kaunzi withdrew down the underground stretch market. Mainly repair shops, greasy meals and immediate exports, their travel soon ended at the large balcony that overlooked the generators. Burning yellow radiant light seeped out and reflected off the massive clear water dams that walled off the deep river lake. Rumbling deeply, their thundering pistons and hydraulic pumps culled the natural water, pounding it off into the heating vents then to the distillation tanks that supplied the tower. Many large cylindrical shafts along the tall ceiling carried away the excess of heat and replaced the cool fresh air from outside. Balconies following down ten floors curved in with a thin pitch deep moat between the lake bottom. Machinery sprinkled along the platforms below and tube piping in intervals between them.

“Sorry.” Kaunzi apologized, eyes dug into her tablet “Re-fixing our map. It's a good few floors below, and a ways back. It shows there is an elevator somewhere along this wall.” Looking up to watch Sarephel drop off the balcony. “Or, we could do that.” Walking up to overlook the railing. Sarephle swinging to balance on the ledge she landed on. Two men rushing to help her. “I admire her careless spirit.”

“You know you do just as clumsy of things, right?” Tannor reminded.

“Yeah, but she doesn't need to know that...” Dropping down to meet her sister, slipping forward off the railing and patting her sister on the back. “You survived...” Cheerfully recalculating. “This way, we're on the right floor. Tannor following in from behind, confusing the workers even more.

“It's along here” Informing, Kaunzi snuck along. “Rhien brought back reconnaissance from the scout squads and found a hole near the spot. Twal also owns a storage room, consequently just adjacent to his office, my guess is it's his own personal entrance into the back roads. By the looks of the papers, he helped remodel it once he moved in.” Turning the corner. Quite visibly, there was an alcove along the side that turned in. With an ashtray and a makeshift bench, it appeared as a simple rest area but the inner corner begged differently. One trash can standing on a metal panel was all that separated them from the entrance to another shade of dingy. Drilled was a hook hole, and lifting it up the hinge locked at a forty degree angle, pulling up the plate as a whole along barred slides. At it's back, a metal ladder dropped down, the clear flag of the hole's existence from below. Conveniently hidden on the top as an unregistered electrical maintenance cabinet, hidden under a can of crap. “I'm not sure exactly where from here” She said, climbing down. “So Tannor, you're taking lead.”

“Our plan is to find the old air vents,” Landing, he said. “Should they still exist. By the specks we can just slip in. From there it's anyone's guess what we'll find. The halls followed by new halls with little to no doors. Knowing their orientation, Tannor guessed the general area, choosing each path accordingly. After a maze, they stumbled on a number, then before the next door he halted. “That's the one...” Subtly quiet, retrieving a device from his side, Tannor slid it along the wall, signalling to remain put. Retracing a single retreating step, “Garath, can you find it?” Clicking, the panel turned. “Impressive.” Waving the team forward along the wall, they came onto the storage room. Dusty, degrading wood and oil resins lacing the rat nest of crates and cardboard boxes. Closing the wall behind them, they gathered along the left wall. “Does this pull up anything?” Tannor inquired, still by the panel lock pad.

“It gives me something...” Garath confirmed, signal still holding. “Wait... Frick, you're right, everything in there is unregistered. I'll search their protocols and determine what's in there...”

The old crate hadn't seen a new home for more years than Kaunzi had ever seen as she cracked it's fused residue and carefully slid it away. There it was, rusted and dusty “What do you think?” Her sister edging in. “You think you could squeeze that?” Kaunzi inquired.

“Looks pretty basic” Garath continued “It's got a small network with some isolated signal relays and a few amenities. Looks like there is a coffee pot and an AC hard wired to a timer, the guy must come here a lot. There are two devices that are powered off, they require a cold boot so I can't access them. They're some real black market hardware, all the software is probably attached too. Otherwise, it's pretty basic, the rest would have to be remote accessed and there are no signals yet. If he gets up, just be aware he might have something hooked to go.”

“Just keep a steady refresh.” Tannor issued, Falling onto the ventilation spectators. “Well?”

“We're set I take it.” Kaunzi asked rhetorically, undoing her belt.

Musty and old, the abandoned area lit up; bright beams pierced the slots, dancing in the disturbed dusty crawlspace. Between the the shutters, old lavish furniture sat dormant since their first installment, one chair however showed great sign of ware. Sitting as prescribed, one coffee pot on top a wooden table encasing no more than a half cup. One light along it's side, someone was still here.

Indeed. Two screen panels open, his work cut off by the side tilt of it's projection. Unenthusiastic and serious in his lack of focus his, screens flicks by. Each panel attended to and discarded a moment later to open another. His ears perked. To his right, a large rat crawled out from the depths, the abyss of a barrel aimed between his eyes. His hand reaching to turn off the screens. "Careful what you do there..." A voice called form the other side. Kaunzi, arms drawn akin. The screen shut off.

"Do you intend to kill me? You would have shot by now..." The age catching in his throat. Twal slid back slowly, arms gliding across his desk, helping to push back his chair. "What business have you in my quarters?"

"These aren't your quarters, they were abandoned a long time ago Twal. You've kept a lot of things secret, haven't you..." Rhetoric throttling in her voice.

"And what have you on me?" Not shedding a single notion of fear. His tone smoothing.

"Conspiracy for once." Sarephel applied, pressing on the tension. "Not to mention framing, and falsifying information."

"Altering official documents," Kaunzi contributed. "Funding and orchestrating prohibited weaponized science, and running the back roads underneath the master's knowing."

"Oh please," His patients running a thin vein in his timber. "These speculations are highly unfounded. Put the guns down, and we'll settle this maturely" Almost inaudible, they heard a bleep.

"We've got plenty of dirt, I'd appreciate it if you cooperated from here back to the station."

"I'm not under and more obligations." Rising slowly from his seat. "You lower your irons and I'll lower mine." Motors clicked with the plates removed, two mini turrets started rolling their barrels.

"Fine." Sarephel surrendered. "But we start talking." Guns still drawn.

"What say you, Kaunzi?" A strong pride riding along Twal's speech, burning embers in her.

"I say I don't trust nagas, I shoot, you die."

"Then the sentries fire and you both die for nothing out of your sheer ignorance."

"What is with you?" Sarephel shot indignantly. "You know you're in it deep and you still act as though you're a saint. If you're so right, why do you need guns to protect you?"

"That does not change this."

"Why because you think you have the upper hand?"

"If you really think I'm a monster, you won't listen to reason, you still don't."

"As I see it, you plan on killing us anyway so at least spill it Mr. Innocent!"

"You keep wanting to peg me as the villain" Returning to his station.

“You sit back down.” Kaunzi issued.

“You shoot, we all die a martyrs.” His annoyed mocking pace rambling it back again “You children are so dunce.” Retrieving his screens. “And don't move irregularly either, they'll at shot moving targets.”

“You forged the blueprints, making these tunnels.”

“And I suppose you have proof of that...”

“You were constantly discussing business with the family, and everyone in it. You're name is on most every change and expansion has your name on it.

“This Tower would have never been made without me.” Sternly Twal retorted, retracting back, conveying to Kaunzi.

“Is that a confession?” Kaunzi inquired, pressing harder, “Did you think you could erase every change you made?” Bluffing her knowledge, cautiously angling Twal around.

“Jaeramind, your great grand whoever it was, authorized the changes!” Returning sight to Sarephel. “He knew very well what they were.”

“He knew?” Kaunzi cursed unswayed. “Why would he be so careless?” Shedding her antipathetic disbelief.

“I funded this, without me, your great grandfather would have never afforded such an endeavour.” preaching to his audience. “Where do you think all that money came from? Food, supplies, building material, workers. I gave everything for this, and I was given this in return. All of this was given to me, this office, these tunnels, my very business... By none other than your great grandfather, Jaeramind Progarial Herosae”

“And he accepted this?” Sarephel questioned, doubtfully.

Kaunzi forwarded. “You knew no one else would accept such deceit, why else would you hide it so much?”

“Look at everyone around us,” Twal instilled. “We have homes for hundreds of thousands of people to follow their dreams, jobs, families. This miracle, through whatever means, has brought happiness and you still look at me with disdain?”

“You framed your colleague to profit off his research.” Sarephel countered. “And you're still making personal money off of black business.

“You think it's so black and white? This tower was built off that 'black' business.” Both sisters bitter, taking in the truth. At least, what he believed. Unwavering he had onslaught profession after profession, the claws digging deeper in. “No one told him...” He continued, pausing shamefully. “Celro, Jaeramind's own son... Not even his own father told him. Guess that's something he was ashamed of, huh? And yet I'm at fault? This law you enforce on me, was omit for my sake, with your

very home in mind.”

Sarephel “That doesn't forgive your stain on this home of ours. Just try and justify all the fade, other drug*, and ostian addicts that have come in because of your drug trading routes, the lives at risk from selling advanced weapons to our enemies, that until now we had no knowledge which to defend ourselves against.”

“They chose to live those lives, they're all just the product of their own doing, I just made a living in giving them that choice. Just like how your father houses all those addicts and forgives them for making mistakes, does that make him a villain too?”

Kaunzi, “And you chose to give them that option.”

“I am not your villain! I was given all of this, and now you intend to break it away from me. I'll tell you who your villain is, I already have. They chose to live that way.”

“You never did it for the people,” Lowering her arms. “Black arms is far more profitable than your morals can allow. Good work Garath.” Tapping onto her communications piece.

“What advantage do you think you have?” Twal reminded, Kaunzi following suit.

“Took you long enough to claim those turrets.” A brief silence took over, the sisters grins widening. Garath's salute renounced his control, revving the guns both ways. Twal's expression fell cold

“So, would you like to come with us down to the station?” Sarephel implored

Chill sweat condensed along his sides, casting irritating drops along the porous aged skin. “It's it...” Twal hollowed sombre, tainted coarse to himself. Grumbling weathered throat flopping his words nearly illegible. “Everything.” His words died out, only the outlines of his lips remained and the tracing pattern of his silent eulogy. “Is gone.” Fading into stillness, his eyes darted sharp “My dream.” He spoke aloud... You, you've taken my dream. You sick puss sack, you've kill yourself. You've killed your own dream. This oath, this will that you follow will kill you.”

Restraints in hand, Sarephel closed their gap. “Sure.” Retracting the pins. “

“You think you're safe? In the end, I do everything so no rat can spoil my cheese, and two unlearned CHILDREN!... Come and break a mans heart clean in two. You will pay, by your own hand, you have undone yourself.” Professing sternly, cornered with his teeth sharpened and his claws bled nubs. “No one is safe!” A drowned creature, clawing it's way from hell.

“So, was the money worth it?” Restraining the cunning fish, “Real good it does now.”

Chuckling, his pious banter settling confidant. “It was the money...” Cuffs clicked.

“See?” Patting him on the back. “Was that so hard to admit?”

“Bio engineering can be quite profitable, but my goal is much higher now. Should I spell it out for you?... No... I'll keep you guessing” Reconsidering, the lights dimmed down “Not that it matters

now..." A dark red light flooded into the room. Each screen lit up and an image of the tower displayed. Twal's voice carrying without his lips, a recording played, the image reversed for the front entrance.

"What in damnation is this?" Kaunzi uttered, stepping closer. The voice issuing the same spiel.

"You have ears." Twal cursed. "Use them, I'm not wasting my breath." Frustrated, she quickly sauntered back, lifting the old man. "Do you think that harming me will make any difference?"

"And if I blow your head off?" Reaching for her pistol. "Cut to the chase! What conniving, long winded shit are you playing."

"Kaunzi," Sarephel intervened. "It doesn't work like that, put the gun down." Holding the iron down. "Does he look intimidated to you?"

"What about all the people you claimed to brought happiness to you selfish lying snake?"

That... Dream of mine... Changed for the greater good. People would have been saved by my hand."

"You've got a way of stalling that pisses me off."

"Let's just say that my retirement date was set to be a lot farther down the line, but if I can't have my dream then no one can." Kaunzi's rage folding in on him, "You made me do this," Returning to press his forehead against hers. "And I'll take this whole damned cystpool, and every cold hearted rat like you two with me! Look at them." Directing above. "Ugly, abominable harbingers, deadly!" Like a swarm of piranhas, they crawled out from the waters. Central, *station plaza(?)*, The walls of Herosae tower flooded, sentries hauling up the sides. "Karma should bring you to your knees, but I will take her place. I will be the one to bring you to ruin. She is in my court now."

"You really are a callous snake. You spent a lot of time worrying about being caught," Arming her needle. "I think you yourself knew all along what you were."

"All there is to loose now." Receiving the sting. "Is my retribution."

"He's not talking," Tossing her drugged victim aside. "DISPATCH! Send a small battalion to retrieve Twal. Give orders to the reserve, change of plans. We are under a full scale invasion! This is a code black, Rayon, just issue the damn alert." Running to the computer. "Garath, what did that bastard type into the computer when he was talking to us? It's got to be what started this thing."

Crackling in, "I don't even know what it is," Garath replied. "It's all hard wired but it's pretty deeply embedded. I'll see if I can't isolate the protocols..."

"Get me Rhien on the line."

"Patching."

"Rhien, we need the maps that your scouts made so we can book it out of here, we're under seige."

“Leon you bug,” Rhien shot out. “Send her the data while I see what command wants. -- Command, what do you damn well want? We're supposedly under attack so this better be freaking important.”

“Leave him, come on,” Kaunzi pulled her sister. “We need to go.” Crashing out the door. Tannor followed out the side passage. “Here is a dumb question...” Tapping into the command line. “But what is the status on the anti-sentry defences?... Yeah, I figured. Boot up the holomatrix, Issue any high tier guard an eather sever by priority of rank, we need full tower coverage immediately. Get father to safety, evacuate everyone!” Flashing bleep, Kaunzi pulled out her tablet. “I got the map.”

Chapter 12: Crisis

Deafened sirens howled beyond the walls, muffled barriers that held the cage in, unable to escape. Each hallway edging on a cold whipped terror, the faint voices of intercoms culling the people away from a madman's vengeance. Musty, shallow echoed halls played off their footprints, cultivating the vexing panicked anger of isolation from the innocent. Full retreat returned them outside, the metal hatch slamming behind them. “Sorry the tunnels couldn't take us farther.” Lamenting, Tannor resolved, resuming lead to the elevator. Horrid noises erupting from above the work column balcony, pieces of metal clashing as workers rallied defences against the unmistakable whoosh of a lone loose sentry. “The elevator is going to take a while.”

Scampering away, Sarephel abandoned plan. “I'll take the stairs, it's probably less logged (with people).”

“You're probably right.” Kaunzi followed, racing after her.

“Sorry again,” Leaning against the door, Tannor rested. “This is where we're going to part.” Waving them off.

“Don't get murdered now, I'll kill you if you go and die on me.”

“I love it when you talk dirty.”

Rush of workers strayed past them, huddling down the stairs to safety. The loud passing of destructing huddling them closer. Stopping back to the shopping hall, the streets laid bare, metal gates holding off the once busy stalls. Behind them, screeching death sighted them, charging forward. Without stopping, Kaunzi unsheathed her blade, following it's pursuit with her intercepting counter. Leaping over it's ramming haul, a deep incision rippled the skin festering boiling phosphorous blue aether to spill; lining a trail straight through the vacant wood barred gate elevator, frantically spasming to the depths glowing brightly. Looking up, one descending freedom to climb them up again.

Station Plaza sat in ruin, three monstrosities dismantling the walls while more swindled the market outside. The sentry cannons, freshly depleted of ammunition. Bullet holes and flack shrapnel causing a noticeable detriment. Outside was no wheres near more pleasant, turning from the carnage, Sarephel could not bare the grim sight of those who took the first wave of the apocalypse. Right outside, fast to his arrived, their ride busy dodging the suicide strikes of falling sentries to meet them. Jumping in, the hoard of somehow unscathed martyrs rallied on point. “Fearless monster's aren't they?” Sarephel agreed, watching the abominations rain farther, bevelling the pavement. “I can't believe how

detrimental they are... Just think, two days ago we were fighting these things off while they were sleepy... Now they're fully awake.”

“Where do you need drop off?” The pilot called.

“To the top, I reckon fifteen floors above the highest freak you can find ought to do.”

Standing firmly, both spectating the shuttles side gaping doorway, they stood morning the destruction. Every monster capable to destroying their home infesting every corner sprouted rock pits of sickness in their guts. Parts of them flaking off as another glass window shattered, another gunshot fired, every beautiful grain of wood splintered before it's ripe age. The whole of it's entirety disgraced and polluted. Sarephel couldn't help her fury building.

“There's not much we can do but fight them off.” Kaunzi stated. “We'll work our way down, take out what we can and hope the rest of the guard can apply their training to charging trains.” Each passing floor, and the rising advantage over their enemies resonated deeper. The silence grew, and roaring propellers banging rambles became inattentive background noise. A gravitating pressure feathered about beside her. Circling maelstrom of deep purple aura like mist blossomed around her sister's feet, Sarephel's breath still and firm, a very living gaze in her eyes darting out dangerously. Her fury quelled, now before her wakened sibling was nothing more than unbreakable focus that manifested and poured off the floor like smoke. Kaunzi smiled, their height raiding near the hundred and sixties, almost peeking to the height as their untargeted ride pulled them nearer. Kaunzi's hand laid upon her sister, a blue light softly stroking Sarephel's back. In a calming tone, she nudged “Go get'em killer.” Pushing Sarephel gently off the the edge, and following her falling swan dive.

Rippling winds carried her along, as Sarephel homed into the tower walls, lifting off again to target her first unfortunate victim. Sighted, her step directing her blade drawn free fall. Dancing from the walls edge, Nathena burrowed it's fangs in a spinning motion, pulling out to claim it's kill. Falling in time, Kaunzi broke off, Sarephel mirroring to claim another. Diving down, her focus building inside the accelerating plummet that Sarephel trailed. Overwhelming strength flowed in her, her next victim feeling the numbing anguish of her impact and the ripe air which he blade exposed to. Though their size almost standardized, the largest mother she'd seen tore it's path in line of hers, shattering the decoration in it's blood lust rage. Shadowed by the tower's east facing fury, it's walls lit up. Spinning gravely the impact concussion eviscerating the flesh from the blackened core, rupturing it's back in a blinding light that warped the very rippling sight. Sweltering fiery determination that rolled off it's blistered corpse and landed rolling from the lower balcony.

Instantly trembling back to her footing, the burning force that quaked her blind focused sense had set aside to recover. Sarephel gripping the railing returning notion yanked her back, kindling a fearful fire. An epiphany that threw her off the side, and cast a blazing purpose lit path. Each monster in her path only strengthened every step. Swift, clean, and unhindered, her shadow figure before the green illuminating outer forest reaches fell the countless unending levels of her trial. Dead, silent panes before an abandoned busy rest, now empty but the spilled panic rush that discarded food and papers fell. Like the time between breaths before the storm hit, the moment before the terror, and the moment after the warning. Breathing in, the void plaza cast her travelling decent, glistening a dotted radiant drop that floated with her decent. Glistening liquid trail of anguish. One abomination's tardy entrance to clean the counters.

Sarephel came crashing down, each step closer beating harder in her chest. Their rampage

cutting short by her blade. Falling to her, the shattered roof tiles and splintered wood broke way, tripping the beast far below. It's climb slit along the railed edge on the lower platform, and fell back looking into the retribution of it's agnostic death that rid it's faltering half life. Whether instinct, or not, fear coursed it's volatile existence to cushion her fall. Sword enlodged between it's sensors, both angles mirroring equal fury.

Quivering loose held, wavering grip metal object, shocking electric sparks cut by wooden handle. Her voice failing whimpers as Aera's last stand rocked harshly before her. Standing stuck by the cracking wooden braces, the mass of the sentries' enormous body forcing it's way into her kitchen. Loud shattering explosions quaking behind the creature, a blue light and deathly squabbling horror arose to the splattering squirt of her assailants phosphorous blood that burned off her cheeks like fire. One glowing horn protruding presumably from it's forehead. Retracting to a lacerating gutted swipe which rippled the air shattering every glass object around her and lifting the very air. Sparking purple electric current leaped painless seeping from object and person. Between the two halves, Sarephel, glowing azure in aether and aura. Fading bright in the smokey illuminate kitchen, her love stepping over the sliding upper half of the now retired war slave to calm the shaken chef. "I said I'd stop by the restaurant later, didn't I?"

*explain more about her appearance, light and glowing.

Shaking her head as disbelief held Aera back, she was pulled into her warrior's chest, digging herself in deeper. "You are the worst!" Shivering fiercely "One of the most romantic entrances," Jittering stuttered, she retorted, crying. "And that's what you got to say?"

"That's how you know it's really me..."

"You c-c-cam... You did..."

"Of course, I'd tare this town down myself if you ever got hurt... Why didn't you hide?"

"Th-th-ther was no where t-to go."

"Is it dead yet?" Frightened, frantic cries jotting out of the pantry. Kayli noting her safty. Her sister soon following

"Your right, Halana... not cool, REALLY not cool"

"I d-don't know how," Aera staggering trembled steps, explaining, having to balance along her counters. "But, Halana managed to fit in the fridge."

"I've been in worse." Halana defended

"I couldn't find anywhere else to go except the cluttered cupboards and it was too late, the stove was turned on."

"Shhh, shh." Sarephel hushed, holding Aera back to her "It's alright. You just need to find a place for now, while I stand guard. I need to get back out there and fight these things now that I know you're safe."

Aera nodded, throwing the entirety of her bottom cupboards out to climb into breaking the inner wall to find leg space between the baking pans. "Sarephel!" Becking her attention. "I love you."

Sarephel nodded, walking back over the rubble, scooping the fiery liquid from her enemies decaying spill. "I love you too... And I'll paint it on ever wall with their blood, if this is blood --So every one of those mothers knows, their not welcome here." Disappearing out the door by the wrecked patio roof. Blazing brightly for all, She continued her stride, a warning sign burning "Exile" In olden text.

"Sarephel, Sarephel!" Irritated ringing, calling her out, Garath tapped through.

"Yeah?"

"Surveillance is picking up activity below you."

"On route."

"There's a massive swarm converging on the thirty second floor by your locations, there's a lot of them. It's organized, looks like their running a second phase, the calamity might have been a diversion. Kaunzi is held up above, you need to drop on this asap."

"Affirmative."

"And... Be careful, it's messy down there."

"Aww, you're worried about me."

"Just get your ass moving."

Crawling loosly, their numbers fell, most having already infesting the inner walls. Planted firmly, her blade mounted bridal ugly steed rushed her to the ground, off kiltering it's balance while it fell. She leaped her spring board, taking to the last unfortunate freak in her path, severing it's play time any further. Falling before her graceful roll landing few recovering steps, the true chaos had become very real. Broken arches and caved walls before broken pipe and wire alike. A serviced guard retired along a broken shell building. Flask bent bleeding the unmet ichor of his parched fading lips, staining the splintered ground instead, the cap still taught. Dark, unlit corridors and passages from the skinned walls and torn wire veins. The holomatrix inactive, likely destroyed. Floor thirty two, now a decimated war zone failure, hopelessly abandoned desolate wasteland. "Sis, I'm on my way now..." Her sister informed as Sarephel's decent into the abyss folded her the blatant apprehension that held her firmly aware. Creaking tiles, and splattering metal pipes running water, movement somewhere carelessly rubbing jagged edges. Playing faintly, dimmed behind the distant walls the wretched beating of drumming battery. "Hold on, Sarephel, you take care of the baddies, I've got a development happening out here."

"What's going on?" Slowly tapping back her responded. Her !*X coloured eyes ever fixated down the dark halls, gardening swaths of sight surveying her surroundings.

"I can't tell." Kaunzi paused, gauging articulately. "The !* river name, river is boiling, or... It looks like something is rising out of it, kinda big by the looks of it."

"Got it!" Sarephel replied, breaking pose. Rattles of noise clashing over the wire. Two more

converging freaks making headway to show face. Breaking formation, her adversary approached full frontal, flailing furiously before her with shocking tipped stingers; only to loose it's fingers. Sarephel vanishing when it's walled defence flung back in flame, her stance ducking under the second's dog pile dive over both of them, slicing it's underbelly. Then slung off her armless opponent's blistering topside. The approaching howl of another paddling up the hall.

*Assume intermission

Plastering, broken jointless mass collided below, the carrier down to the depths. Hopping off her ride into the depth, her bloodied blade lighting the rocky cavity. Sparking wires exposed to the running pipes, ugly tinted maintenance level lights still somehow working as they flickered dark green. The hole lead down below off on the side, a gathered swarm to meet her at it's point, crawling in from it's orifice, somehow even more from atop where she emigrated. Shrapnel and debris flying from the impact, joining the party as they fell all around her. A small pool of mist gathering around the soles of her feet, purple wisping aura that gravitated the shambled room and dispersed quickly.

Her first move, slicing upward in a leaping lunge, vaulting it's on coming tendrils and severing them before it's discharge. Down it's center with a spun strike before retreating behind the blistering mass. Another following behind, loosing it's target who's movement launched her over the first victims back, and head first to her next jousting victory. Frontally assaulting through his brother, one solid cut down it's center top plowing the back line as Sarephel's course lead her to the encroaching circle. One lunged forward, only to be dodged, and cut as she side stepped towards another. The next falling pray to her agile dexterity, wrapping his side, returning herself to battle from the shield of the hulking mass as before. Her speed increasing with every step, their attacks becoming programmed into her muscles. Before it's hugging grasp, she already closed in face to face, both grabbing sides splattering aetherial fire. Process did not compute, slowly collapsing with a gushing gash horizontal below it's sensor. It's target abandoning him for another to weep internally silent. Bypassing her next, Sarephel tumbled over the last standing in her hell path, the denied combatant chasing through the fellied door guard. It's emotionless husk flooding out, Sarephel emerging from behind, the stooped haulk crashing into it's friend. Flanked from it's side. Both corpses sliding out from the road of shattered junk down the chamber which they came.

Lifting off the top plateau Sarephel descended a tall helix staircase of outreaching platforms that cascaded to the war ground below. Holograms of rippling art flashed dimly, the loud echos of turret fire and soldier falling back. Receiving the blunt of it's attack, holograms played clever distractions while the guard waited for their opportunity to sever their next assailant. Flack cannons stunning the hardly mortal machines, to get a hit in with something that counts. A glint of pride filling in her to see the progress that communications passed for the fresh of taught guard in order to fight these monsters. Engaging to assist, Sarephel halted a dangler from it's crawl to the call to arms above, lifting off to the lower levels falling six floors. Decimating the target with her quaking impact, it's topside gave way under her stable feet as she leaped back. It's corpse drifting down the stairs and falling out through a hole in along the railed pathway. Sarephel leading the battalion back into the fray of war, the guiding sight of her tails engulfed by light and the composure of a veteran without hesitation.

The swarm, sparse and distracted took notice, slowly converging towards her as though a compelling force gravitated them to her presence. Retracting confidently from her side, *!mirage* came to hand, initializing it's startup brightly and waving it enticingly. The oncoming came without thought, blindly rushing in numbers from every corner of the overwhelmed chamber floor. Dancing her red flag, grazing the death machines as they passed. The convergence pilling up, intensifying their hive

mentality and conglomerated onto her as a whole. The mess of bogies narrowly scraping her as Sarephel began to struggle with whatever cuts she could get away with. Facing to take one out, another struck simultaneously, forcing Sarephel to disengage; taking refuge along the back side of a shrapnel feed sentry who's limbs pinned by piercing bars flopped weakly. The onslaught fell upon their crippled comrade, with one good cut into the first freak to climb aboard. The rest began to dog pile, Sarephel climbing the stack of squirming abominations, severing their limbs along the hasty ascension, pulling off while more fell in from the sky. Another came from behind, as she danced over top, carving her bowling ball into the scrambling pile. Only half escaping the burning wreck that piled and more charging her.

Sidestepping, she took the next that came, a tendril flying through her image. The first bleeding out, the second uncovering Sarephel's true form from behind. "Took you long enough to turn on..." Twin images flickered, *! mirage* finally operational. Two more routed in front to take her life, deceived and dispatched on a silver platter, a round of cheers coming from the sidelines. Abandoning her noble footing, she leaped above the confused sentry that she stood on, her cast image faded to the large mass that managed to clear his friend to reach her. Another illusion dissipating, Sarephel only slightly higher than her mirage, lobotomizing the confirmed brainless wreck. Impaling as she landed, crippling her footstool to it's burning grave in the completely engulfed field of putrefied blue flame that surrounded her on all sides.

Arms shaking, her grounded saunter towards the onslaught hallowed her mortal power. Still motivated by the fuel of adrenaline, their bore tactics droned on, each edging closer past her blade. The cuts digging more shallow, and their numbers once again rising above her. Mirage danced, hollow image sweat tear ripped off her face to another surprise attack. Her position compromised, one large electrified tendril tickled her nose overhead, barely rolling back to avoid it's collision. A paper cut slap to the wrist, leaving the sentry to stew over it's actions and Sarephel reoriented her surroundings. Breaking into her reserves, she caught her next catch soon knowing her brute force was waning her abled legs. Twisting her sword blade up along her side, she thrust it into the unfortunate fool who came head on. Leaping for it's back, it's tendrils narrowly missing. The newly christened unicorn faltered, it's horn being yanked up taring the skin along it's meaty forehead. She stumbled, cutting clean the tendrils of a vengeful spirit that crawled upon the un-corned monster. In her attempts to flank, many more came onto her thwarting her back overhead the new pile of corpses and finishing her vengeful antagonist with the rest.

Her pedestal shook, the slop of whatever mess made them melting under the pressure and burning husks. Sarephel gazed out into the following, at least seven still here and dripping in less frequently. Her footing shifting to fall back, sword held to defend. One little surprise fallowing in from the side of her stack, cutting into the unknowing tree climber, then retreating in behind her. "So you decided to show up?" Calling to her comrade.

"You gave me the opportunity to rest, I am grateful, now it is time for me to return the favour. Sorry, fifth Tier guard Daradal Kenuith, it is an honour to fight by your side."

"What's your count?"

"Three under yours, hard earned."

"I offed near twenty before showing here."

“Ay, you can use all the rest you can get then.”

“You think they'll fall for that trick again?” More piling near the sinking iceberg.

“I hope so.” Their number fanning wider. The sidelines catching sight of his next move. “But I'm thinking not.” With sight, the sentry slid in, forwarding the march behind the desperate squire. Picking up on Sarephel's bull fighting, Daradal abandoned the melting shield from the charging path to be robbed by a dropping strike by his higher up. Sarephel reconvening behind the shield, Daradal nicking back to back for the not long guests. Both sides encroached by peeping vanguards. Sarephel quick on her strike, felt the falling off of her partner who's only recent experience fighting the creatures head on left him befuddled in blocking defence

“Switch.” Sarephel rerouted, yanking him to the armless foe behind him. Sarephel darting to intercept and regain their shallow footing, blade first into her newly deemed meat barricade. To her surprise, Daradal had already made headway onto his second. Another crawling damnation reached the walls summit, crushing their mushy defence down into an raging inferno that engulfed the predator with the high ground, crashing their party promptly. Gathering some height on her new barrier, Sarephel leaped back, cornered by two uglies and landed along the burning blood covered assailant, cutting it in the process.

“Switch.” Daradal requested, a fresh hell rolling in the tide from beyond his second kill. Stabbing nicely from behind, the burning man began to burn himself. One more tendril horror crawling the burning mess. Sarephel, and Daradel flanking in from under the sides, catching the corpse hopper from behind. One very unfortunate victim rolling in with the tide, spilling out a blue ocean. The last freak making a final stand, charged from the rooms centre, and was given a viking funeral; burning in the ocean of warriors blood, no further accolade was given.

A roar of cheers erupted from the rally of supporting guard who rushed to the hero's aid. The leaky faucet seemed to have ran dry. Their brigade urging onward, Sarephel merging with them. Leaving the glorified residential recreation tunnel.

“Good work, that seems to be the bulk of them for now.” Her wire congratulated. “We've got a few minor cases just below you, see what you can do about them.” Garath slung dryly. “Oh, and Kaunzi is unreachable, the signals still there though. Most likely she's abandoned her comms to see what's in the lake.

Below her, Kaunzi came past their pickup, beyond the ransacked stalls and discarding her devices, plowing into the rippling tides. A solid mass erupting from the surface, tainted dark hues dying the water like the birth of a baby whale or the blood lusting frenzy of killer fish. Erupting from the soiled surface, peeking it's flesh head, and elongated limp tendrils; Kaunzi's blood chilled, skimming the tides with great haste. An aching gut swarming panic urged her to it's waterlogged dissonance. It's form, distorted, evolved and harrowing laced anger. Resonating a strange, frightening atmosphere that enveloped her senses. The flesh of this beast stretched firm thick skin, that seemed weak and rested in anguish. Climbing aboard the massive log, it seemed almost docile, flopping only to it's surging agony. Her presence burning a deep frightened anger aside her steps as she walked closer to it's apex. An acrid taste of disgust overcame her senses, curdling the tears that fell off her without a whimper. Fire cultivated behind her eyes, churning ravished sympathy from howling sorrow stung heart. The bright haze by her side, a white festering light wavering in a trembling hand. The acrid taste biting down on her lips enough to tare the skin. The tears burning as they damned her cheeks. Her

soaring angel withered above her, falling with her hands and her knees gave way. The sharp regret swirling throughout her silver tainted aura, spilling her guts from the release.

This was the first time that taking life ever touched her so strongly. To kill a child, born innocent in a dying devil's laughing husk of circumstance. Calming the gurgled cries, frantically hushing the beast to sleep and failing.

The hallway littered three more atrocities before broken wooden archways, Blades drawn, Sarephel stood strong. The overwhelming pressure falling over her. The sentries, they had crawled to a standstill. A blue haze rippled in through the open hall door at the end just beyond her adversary. Her adversary that stopped. She could almost feel it, feel them, feel herself. Everything stopped. In this brief moment she came to realize the pressure that had lifted. Time felt meaningless, her senses tranquil, not numb. Slowly, she began to walk towards the hallowed light flowing inwards. Past the sentries, past the broken arch. Her voice open and freely uttering softly reflective. "Is this what you saw?" Her bewilderment shivering her tension into limp retained balance "What is this? I feel... Lighter." Combing over, it was as though she heard the loud screaming inside her suddenly vanish. She had not realized that all this time, there was such a voice, whaling on her. It seemed so very gradual that she hadn't noticed how it effected her. The silent screams that she ignored, now a tranquil serene of peace. Whatever happened out there, Sarephel knew inside her that Kaunzi was responsible. The comm spoke deafly, unheard. Uttering it's astonishment. Every sentinel had stopped but Sarephel was oblivious. Confounded in the hazy blue mist that rolled in like wisps of smoke, she felt the subtle shift turn to her. Slowly reanimating, the abominations returned to life. Their direction unguided, converging to eliminate her. Her strength renewed briefly long enough to dispatch them from existence. Her comm returning their astonishment to the next development. Her peace coming to an end.

"The convergence is separating, their going rampid on everything." Their misguided attacks, falling onto one final request. The day fell onto evening, the silence of the wolves came to a close.

epicentre (*chap 6? &now)

Walking the devils line, daring

Wouldn't it be nice if guns worked on these beasts?

You're one to talk, I haven't got to shoot a single person all week.

wailing

Main opposition eliminated, moving to next area.

~*emanating from the maelstrom's epicentre (C6)

Chapter 13: Closing

Amber evening sun set in dark orange over the tower restaurant. A warming glow of light resonating mournfully reflected off the splintered remains and back up into the eyes. Irritating warmth that burned dim on cold skin and ravaged heart, when closed tears begged their warden freedom to play. All the beauty of the peaceful golden dusk perceived as a bitter cold resonance of a slap. Aera was beside her shattered dream. Tables were crushed, floor ripped and ravined with scarcely a lamp that

hadn't been decimated. The golden dragon statue now laid to rest inside the watery grave of it's fountain prison and it's head peeking out of the torn wooden partition. Kitchen walls caved with door casing widened cracked beams. Black soot staining the ground where flame had cremated monster. The long lattice window now just a drafty window and a little bit longer. The fountain still bore water, surprisingly though it would not run, only leak. Her hot tub, blessed by it's soft fake squishing stone, left completely unscathed apart from it's gazebo now crippled.

A death of it's reminiscence, material shaken shambles, ghosts seeping out from the grains. The memories she sworn to honour. "Aera!" Sarephel called, her love idle as stone, fixed to the carnage. Her haste soon aside to wrap arms onto the shivering statue. "You're alright, aren't you?" But Aera wouldn't answer. Her breath slow but boldly healing breaths returned her words to herself once more

"Sorry..."

Holding tighter, Sarephel nuzzled into her partners neck. "Sorry for what?"

"Look at it..." Holding for the strength to not cry. "All the memories... Forgotten." Breathing in to the mournful sob. "Every grain of wood that told a tale, as though for a moment I lived in those moments or was a part of them, gone... Forever..." Regaining her breath. "Just yesterday, I was looking at a piece of wood that looked like some kid had chewed. I thought it a shame that someone ruined the corner of that beautiful wood barrier but the more I thought on it the more it told a story and for a moment I wondered if it was you. All these memories that existed before me, surrounding me, inviting me into their family. And just when I started to really like this place. Like I began to belong, and then... This..."

Sarephel's eyes shown guiltily helpless, standing still with her love. "You want to see my teeth?... There over on that table." Aera turning slowly to see. "I'd rest my head on it and gnaw the underside. It didn't taste all that good, so I'm not really sure why I did it." Though turned over, along the wall, it was still intact. Staggering over, Aera slowly returned the table upright. One rocky edge underneath as she ran her fingers along it's rim. A shallow pleasure calling her heart back from the depths.

"And all the stories that were lost to this disaster?"

Turning Aera to meet her. "You'll make new stories" Arms locked. Her hands firmly resting along the biceps. Sarephel's eyes looking deeply into the dreary songbird.

Chuckling bitterly unamused as she stepped in. "This is a story I wish I could forget." Holding dearly, the feeling of Sarephel's comforting nod moving through their bodies. "I'm starting to think I should have become the sue chef instead... I'm joking." Apathetically muttering her reassurance. "I wouldn't have to clean up the corpses of the past." Dropping her weight, Sarephel sighed, looking wearily into the cold walls that yanked her lovers eyes away. Her arm dug in behind Aera, holding the bent beauty stable as she curled her girlfriend backwards over it with her own weight. "Sarephel, what are you doing?... Agh!" She shrieked, loosing her balance, and legs kicked out into Sarephe's arms. Holding them with her lifted knee, she reoriented Aera's legs into a better position, propping her girlfriend more comfortably. "Sarephel, please put me down." Aera contested, "This isn't time for hitting on me." Being walked along the rubble, avoiding the damaged floor and the shattered glass. "This is embarrassing!"

“Good.” Sarephel announced, the blinding golden sunlight trembling Aera's eye lids. Sarephel's warm smile glistening in the crawling light that revealed her nurturing tired eyes, still too bright to see. “Take a look at that.”

“I can't.”

“Well, when you can, it'd be good for you to look at something that isn't traumatizing because it's making you into a real downer.”

“Well I'm sorry!” Aera shot out. “I can't help it!” Arguing defensively, “You know what I went through, I'm no warrior, that shit scared the crap out of me, what do you expect!”

“Forget about the restaurant, your safe now and those things aren't coming back.”

“I can't forget about it...” Aera sobbed solemnly “Their gone... It... It's gone. Less than a week on duty and...”

Fed up, Sarephel interrupted. “You're not a warrior, stop taking responsibility like one.” Pouting, Aera shut up. A gaping wound in her pride bleeding out on her face. “You know,” Settling down, Sarephel joked grimly. “I could just drop you.” The drafty beyond blowing in from the setting lightbulb.

Catching the humour, Aera replied cockily. “But you'd still rescue me before I hit the ground, right?”

Sighing, her ears cocked behind her aside glance. “Unfortunately...”

“Why are you so pessimistic?!” Aera loosing her patience.

“You first...” The stumbled pride walking off on Aera. “It's not your job to take care of ungodly freaks.”

“I know”

“All you need to protect against is coffee stains and bar fights; abominations aren't in the insurance agreement. Look, the only one holding your blame is you, so stop defending your slavery to this coz it ain't your fault...” (“I'm guilty to that enough as is”(?)) A hint of guilt glaring off her glistening glowing sun in eyes. “Not when coming here should have been the first thing that came to my mind.”

Reaching up, Aera's arms laced over, seated upon Sarephel's shoulders. “But the people.” She reminded. “Your job is to keep them safe.”

“You can't always save everything. You're safe, that's all I could ask for.”

Aera nodded silently, “And you...” Handling her misfortune, the mourning weather bantered seating and splinters resting latent as an irreversible consequence. Nothing more than petty squabbles. The bright blister of light pouring off the horizon dimmed, and a dark realm waving blood orange coalesced with the purple shaded forest green ocean across the lake. Dotted hillside home steads lit

their evening lamps, with the prelude of the nights unwinding epilogue drafting in along the countryside. Lights showing up, frequently, gradually slowing down. "You were right," Aera snuggled close, head dug droopy ears. "It'd just take a little while and I would find family here, I just wish the timing of all this was a little more convenient... There are a lot of things I'll never know after they repair the walls, and replace the furniture... What's it like on the other floors?"

"It depends, I've seen some places barely scratched, other places were completely eviscerated. They plan it'll take at least a week until all the floors are taken off auxiliary power. The wiring is pretty fried all over, it'll take them a while to get it back safe again. Clean up is working to... Mitigated the shock before bringing people out of their homes. It's kind of morbid in some places."

"Are you hurt?" Aera's voice echoing the returning nurture that drew Sarephel's gaze back down to her lovers unged eyes.

"Not extensively. Medical (standby) checked me over," Her ears tilting to one side. "I'm actually just avoiding the check up right now coz they'll take like an hour poking me with an assortment of stupid implements. I'd rather be spending this hour with you."

"You should get checked out either way."

"I will, I guess... I'm fine for now. I'm more worried about Kaunzi though. When I asked her what happened out there, she immediately disconnected her comms. Garath said when she entered command that she looked pretty distraught, and that she fended off the medical personal from even examining her by sword point. I know that she doesn't take anyone's crap when she doesn't want to, but this is odd for her."

"I can't imagine what you two had to go through out there."

"It's been a long day" Lounging against the side beam refixing Aera along the railing. "I'd tell you more but I'd rather just forget about it for right now. Besides, this is much better to look at."

"You can tell me whenever, but it does make me curious."

"I know we talk about it but, it's hard to imagine that there is such a vast world out there. I bet not a single person was aware that we were under a crisis. I wonder what they think of us when they see this massive monolith... I wonder about it, even as I live in it. There are so many things that I refuse to believe but to others it is a reality. They truly believe these things and I wonder if they are aware that they fed themselves someone else's lie or I can if I'm aware that I deny the fact blindly. I think for the first time, Camine told me the truth because he knew it would hurt me but I think I can accept it... It's that or I'd let him win. In my victory of emotion, I have lost part of my heart."

"I don't understand."

"It's true, I guess but it's not my fault." Reconsidering her words. "I suppose, I just gave into their head game..." Shaking her soliloquy aside, "It's nothing. I just need someone to hear me."

"I'm listening, you had a hard day."

"Yeah, I should drop it. It's too nice of an ev..."

“No... I'm here to hold you, you can tell me.” Aera assured. “I'd rather you get it off your chest now than run away from it until later.”

“You sure you can take my baggage? It's a lot to take in. I'd rather burden someone who can handle it.”

“Your burden is my burden, whether or not you tell me

A sum of tension noticeably dropped, and guiltily Sarephel's voice conformed, a single gleam resonated on her lips. The open drain beginning to pour. “I'm just wondering if I've been wrong all this time about something. All this training and conditioning to be the guard that I am, if that pride has undermined me. If I was victim to my own head game.”

“What kind of game is that?”

“The one that is more fun to look at. One that I have control on. It's no fun when your wrong, but it's no fun being right about what you hate.” Bitterly press on her lips, a phase of gangling chain slipped off the shoulders. A tempting serpent in her gut slithered in to fill the gap but her smile fell in it's place, relieving the duty of her burden. “I don't have the answer yet, I'm just thinking... And I think I've picked the answer I liked best until now, knowing I could defend it, and not prove it.”
(Continuation- I guess it was me, choosing the reality that suited me.)

Rolling her head against Sarephel's side. “Where was this?” Her hand clasping in on her love's, a sympathetic hint of compassion from her tongue.

“I think a few places” the sun dimming on their balcony, the mountain almost completely consuming the light. Sarephel's eyes gazed out to catch the last glimpses of it's fiery crawl. “I suppose maybe with us, but I'm opt to believe that's a different problem.”

“Like?”

“Like when I think I know best after screwing up. Kauzi would like me to believe that I need a new occupation, I'm not really sure what to make of it.” A round of careless footsteps playing in behind them.

“But she's your big sister,” Aera assured, “Of course she's going to big sister you and be a know it all.” Ignoring the noises, her ears twitching away.

Aera's staff, blundering in the background “Holy shit they ransacked this place harder than I thought.” Kayli uttered.

“I think more likely that when I'd get upset as a kid, cursing to the world how unfair it was, hypocritically because I didn't have my way... Holding onto that as I grew up, with louder guns and bigger sticks.” A loud thud wobbling in the distance. “ I gave some people a lot of credit, people that caused this mess... That's a long story about the past that I'm not all that up on understanding myself.”

“So what happened? Have you figured it...” The table falling in the back, landing wickedly on Aera's backbone. “Let me have a damned romantic moment, or I'll cut your freaking dick off with the

finger hatchet!”

Shooting back, “Here's the damn coffee you asked for!” Kayli cursed.

“Rough times, huh?” Rhetorically, Sarephel commented, eyeing the distraught waitress. “So what was that about?”

“Everyone went home after they called off the alert, Kayli actually asked me if I wanted something for once in her life... Well. she went back to the apartment considering someone broke every glass ornament in the kitchen, including the coffee maker.” A glaze of confusion bouncing duncely off Sarephel's face as Aera dipped into her mug, eyes locked above. “When you busted in.” Aera choked, blissfully hiding the flush reminiscence of her hero.

Cockily Sarephel took it in. “You liked that didn't you. I'll do it again some time. Like the first time we met”

!* Place 5 lines of the backstory here instead? (Chap 10, page 100ish)

Toning back to the contentment of their evening, the lights growing brighter along the invisible shaded hills, Aera's mind pondered “What is it like, being outside.” Her eyes fixated and jotting slightly from node to node. Thoughts circling in her mind.

Merely estimating, Sarephel answered “Disconnected.” Pulling her first response forward, expressing her impressions farther. “It's not in the same sync, but I wonder if it's just me.” Their hands connected. “They are welcoming, in a new way, and offsetting in the same. I've never mingled personally, but they are peculiar.”

“Like us?...” Aera remarked. Sarephel affirming, nodded slightly, a hint of relation calling her smile as they laid against the support of the railing. “You know, every day I've lived here, I've walked around. The shell of these walls lays so far from it's core and the light that peers in is so distant. I took windows for granted, like the wooden floor roof and pipelines was my sky. Whenever I look out, I often remember there is a world beyond the partition.” Scooting her sore rear from the uncomfortable thin edge that creased her.

“What's this about?” Helping Aera down.

Their arms locked, turning to both face the outer world “Even though I'm hurt... I am grateful.”

“It has been little over a week now” Father Herosae announced, “Since the horrible travesty struck us.” A projection of him and his stage cast on the wall behind him and among other areas of the tower where crowds gathered among the splintered bullet torn wood and chipped stone war fields. Eager for the answers. “It is with great shame that I should have to address you all today; for I feel for the children, and the parents, the loved ones that could not be saved. The guard who sacrificed themselves to protect our home. And the guilt, though unknowing to what extent this would take at the hands of a single mans pride... To have this happen, I feel a tremendous weight. You are no doubt curious, let alone eager to know what had become to arise such a malicious attack. It's time many of you knew what had been withheld from even my own father, by his father. Be assured, that as of the evening three days ago, the competent and efficient Stealth and Enforcement divisions very own Rhien, Leon, and Beralda have successfully cleaned all back roads. This brings us to the news surrounding a

once valued community member, Twal J Degradon and his involvement in this matter..."

The speech ran on in the background. Separated by a hall and a traditional set of curtain doors, Sarephel sat among her group of comrades. A conversation of the like reserving their division in the greenroom, the other higher ups to their own section. "You hear that? They're talking about us." Beralda commented, joking "Maybe we should go out and wave at the audience while our old man's still rambling."

"So this is our day, huh?" Kaunzi remarked holding a small cup of cloudy liquid.

"I guess" Replying blandly, Garath sprawling even deeper into his seat. "I'd just like it to be over with so I can close the file and go back to something better."

"It's more just a formality for atonement to the citizen at this point. There isn't much worse for daddy than admitting when things have gone horribly wrong. As far as he's concerned, he just wants to make sure everyone understands what these secrets have done."

Jumping in, "So he's being Fatherly again." Tannor added.

"Roughly speaking..."

Waving in from the open hall, Sarephel's face lightened up. "I made it." Aera announced, greeting the small group. "So, can you introduce me?"

Taking Aera's hand, still sitting in her chair, Sarephel opened "This is my sister, Kaunzi. Her partner, Tannor. And my partner..."

"So this is Garath..." Aera's thoughts ran off her tongue.

A nerve pulsed visibly as Garath's spine straightened up. "Alright, what have you been saying behind my damned back?"

"What is there to not say about him?" Tannor teased

"If you weren't hiding behind the master's private guard, I'd have some words for you."

"I can beat both of your asses," Kaunzi informed, returning to sip her tart syrup.

Sitting in her loves lap, Aera smiled humorously. "Is this what you work with?"

"No, their much less entertaining in the field." Sarephel answered. Arms tightly holding her prize.

"Hold on." Kaunzi informed. "I'm being called, you two keep it civil. I trust you to keep the peace in my absence." Looking to Sarephel.

Garath turned to keep his peace, staring occasionally "So," he spoke. "This is the lady that you are very honourable to..."

“Jealous?” Sarephel replied.

“You're damned right I am.” Bluntly shifting to sarcastic returning another remark. “What attracts you to a hardass like Sarephel anyway?”

Readjusting her leg weights, “As your lawyer, I advise you not to answer that question.” Sarephel answered equally as sarcastically teasing. “Well for one I got tits, and secondly my side iron fits a larger gauge than yours.”

“Are you two having another argument?” Aera butted in.

“Aww...” Kaunzi returned. “You two learned how to joke.”

Tannor smiling in the corner booth. “It's kind of cute, really... Like two baby veinlatchers trying to fight with their stubby legs.”

“Well, don't stop just because I'm here. Oh, Tannor, your call in five seconds.” Turning back to the kids “Please continue.” Garath refusing the invite to farther his banter.

A peculiar atmosphere managed to seep in. Though oddly present, the source escaped Aera as to what, turning her head around to the room's entirety. “What's up?” Sarephel asked, curiously intrigued by her loves squirming.

“I'm not sure.” For a moment her ears popped, a clear sound echoing through them. “It's just, oddly familiar.”

“What, are you having déjà vu?”

“No... People are happy; they talk so cheerfully about things that aren't very cheery. Joke about things that are serious. It's just... Kind of homely, like an extended family almost.”

“Why?” Kaunzi asked. “Because Tannor is probably talking smack about me on stage?”

“Guilty as charged.” The devil spoke as he rolled in from on stage, taking his place beside her.

“You are such an ass”

“Yeah.” Admitting his dishonour freely.

Aera took a particular eye to him, questioning the odd sense that she felt; everyone else slowly following in to the more presently peculiar setting. Almost speaking the question that no one really have the gull to usher. In the caught wind, Tannor rose to correct the elephant staring at him “There is nothing between us.” A brief shadow of doubt glazing over in the silent room.

“Kid...” Rhien remarked, “You had one chance, and ya blew it.” Breaking into a roar of laughter that his table followed suit, even Yura, and Beralda especially as he struggled to finish his water.

Aera's broad gleam widened creasing up with her perception. “Hm.” She deducted, the innocent truth showing face. “It's very homely.”

“Say,” Leon reminded. “Who's up next?”

“Not sure...” Beralda replied, pointing his frost nipped ear in disappointment. “Sounds like the old man is running on again, someone best walk out there and straighten his paperwork.”

“It's worst than that,” Kaunzi informed. “He's going off book today.”

“I trust you to bang some heads in my absence.” Sarephel requested, lifting her lap warmer as she risen, staggering numbed legs.

“I cannot express enough over how unfortunate all of this is.” Father Herosae continued. “Though now we've looked through the past documents and identified, the rumours of what are now the back roads should have been better handled and forwarded to inspection more promptly. This should not have taken so long to give the proper attention that it deserved. Even when I was younger, rumours of this would circulate around the academy, but and I admit I took ear, I never could confirm it when I investigated them myself.” Turning to visualize his peripheral sight. “And... Pardon me, Sarephel, my daughter...”

Pulling on the microphone, she lowered it to her lips. “Father, you're rambling again.” eliciting a small sum of desperately needed relief from the depressing reveal.

“I...” Patting himself, guiltily. “I suppose I am, aren't I... I suppose I should also release a more public disclosure for everyone in their leisure. I do apologize but while you are here, I want to continue with thanking you for your service...” Dalbah continued, awarding the veteran accomplishment of his family.

“Well?” Kaunzi inquired. “Can you still speak?”

Smiling silently, her Father answered rhetorically and then pouring his voice a refreshment, his diminished coarse tone whispered loudly. “A tad.” As he cleared his throat, loosing the grip on it. His voice now more audible but significantly weaker than it's normal strength. “This night is getting later and I still have another speech to make. On paper this time.”

Laid aside her, Sarephel combed though Aera's mane, relaxing the tired lass. Evening settled in, most the room left apart from Yura and the four along the booth who's civil differences settled them; apart form Garath who opted himself to the chair.

“Aera...” Father Herosae summoned. Nodding, her eyes fixed to him. “I've been needing to ask you this for a while now. After tonight, my work is still not complete... But I would very much wish to retreat with my family, this includes you of course, to an evening at your restaurant and...”

“Oh,” Aera interrupted. “Sir, please, it's not really functional yet. The place is still in shambles.”

“I am aware.”

“I'm really grateful though,” Rising her head, continuing “That you could prioritize it in the repairs but it will take a while until their done.”

“Not an issue my dear.” Dalbah assured. “I don't need anything fancy, just the people I care for. Whenever it's functional in the least would you mind reserving a private table?”

“Yes, certainly. As soon as I can.”

“This also includes you as well, Tannor. And to be fair, Garath as well, unless there is another guest in mind.”

Pleasantly, for the first time Garath earnestly gratified, however exhausted mentally. “I'm honoured.” A latent joy soothing his warriors mind.

-chap

Blue laminate gloss wisped off the newly stained elderwood upon their fresh afternoon breeze. Doors agape, the bright welcome blew in upon their arrival, a resonant aroma of spring flowers and herb soaked wood to mask the latent varnish. Revived, however scarred, one plated gold dragon turned right side up standing wounded. Three fat red ribbons poorly covering the cracks and one gob of gum sealing the mortal wound in it's jugular. “Please forgive the mess.” Aera called out, showing herself around the corner, dressed formally and menu in hand. “It is the soonest that I could justify.” Dalbah waving her to ease. “Please, make yourself anywhere.”

Making their way, Sarephel, Kaunzi, and Tannor followed in behind the master who's instincts brought him back onto the family reservation. The table by the wall as Sarephel had sat many times prior. “Please tell me you're not working today.” Sarephel begged, her hand open, beckoning sympathetically.

“Your maeuwberry cocktail.” Peeking around her boss, Halana greeted, placing the glass down gently before giving Aera a firm nudge into her seat and stealing the servers menu. “Can I start anyone off with anything?” Retriving her orders, Halana distributed the books, planting Aera's head to remind her of her position; then continued to distribute the rest “You're not working today, sit.”

“All I did was pass you my menu.” Aera complained, watching Halana leave.

“Took him long enough.” Kaunzi lifted her eyes beside the door. “Sis, your boyfriend showed up.”

A darting territorial glare shooting back to meet him. “If you didn't want me here, you could have gave me a memo...” Garath introduced sarcastically, sauntering towards their table. His hands defensively lax against his chest. Readyng himself in the adjacent seat where Tannor resigned himself until Father Herosae retracted his position.

“No, have my seat.” Dalbah insisted, “As I hear, you've kept my daughters safe, Sarephel more than once; you deserve to sit amongst my family.” Garath tried dismissing it, failing to convince his most charismatic modestary. “Besides, I prefer to keep the peace between rivals.” Shifting over to Tannors Table.

“I'm honoured, again...” Garath obliged, awkwardly.

“Oh sit your ass down.” Kaunzi demanded.

“This is a well deserved meal.” Tannor announced, reaching out for his arriving drink. “Trying to make my way to the ground level security station just about ended me...”

“You're welcome.” Garath pipped in.

Turning his diplomatic finger over, Tannor continued. “Someone's direction needed work... I hate to say but I've already celebrated a while back over that one.”

Popping up from behind Garath, Kaunzi contributed toyishly. “From what you told me, you had a latency issue.”

“The halls were hot with enough bogies to break a man. How'd you two fair in the hoard? As I hear it, you two entered the nest.”

“We kicked their asses.”

“Fair.” Taking a sip. “I'm just glad it's over. Any word on the wrap up?”

“Two weeks, that's the estimate. We've evacuated the entire restricted access and we're working to turn the whole place upside down until every last scrap of this mess is purged.”

Displeased, Sarephel began to comment. “It couldn't be that simple though.” Adjusting her seating. “Knowledge is going to be passed on somehow.”

Sourly, Kaunzi nodded. “Not much to be done about that. High up is still trying to deem the punishment of sub floor six's involvement and the guilt to be placed. As for anyone who caught on early, they could have left to who knows where by now. As for the Employer, PKE eliminated Degraden from that roll. He's still loose somewhere, probably abroad with all that went down.” Leaning her weight into the table, her disgust waned to disregard like an impasse which she slowly set aside. Speaking out from her chin resting clasped fingers, her eyes looking sympathetically back to her sibling. “I hope that's not what's getting you down.”

“Em?” Sarephel responded hazily.

“The Employer.”

Shaking her head slowly, Sarephel's ears curled aside. “No, Degraden...” Slumping down into her seat. “He really did believe that he was the hero... For a moment, I wanted to believe what he said about Great Grandfather Herosae.”

“Perhaps...” Dalbah mentioned. “I'm not sure the events that had transpired when I was a youngen, and before such, It is very well possible that our own blood had betrayed his people. We are by no means saints, we are only people.”

Churning his beverage, “I should hope we are far from turning such as them.” Tannor uttered aloud, a touch of fear lining his uncertain reflection.

“Some times I wonder.” Turning to his family. “The things we might do, for the ones we love...”

We have mistakes we can make and if we can't make them we cannot learn. -- That is why it is important to guide others... And forgive them. There is much to be learned from someone who has walked a path much different than your own. Perhaps we have blinded ourselves to ignore the truth; not in our ways but in our trust. If we are to forgive merely because we are imperfect; maychance we ignore the reason and lesson, we thus inherit too their mistakes.”

“What's brought on this prophecy?”

“It too unravels me,” Fixing his gaze to Sarephel. “If truth is as he says... Or, if Degraden truly believed his lie. It's brought me to reconsider what I've come to defend tirelessly. Our great legacy... Perhaps there is as much fault the father that is taught as the child is to learn.” Retiring to his server. (The child could always chose a different path)

“Do we need more time with the menus?” *get Garaths drink*
*disturb teh lesbophob

Upon her departure, Father Herosae continued. “Sarephel... Have you given what I said any thought?”

Nodding briefly

“Then you understand where I come from, I hope.”

Unable to avoid her discomforts, Sarephel nodded again, silently.

“The world you were taught to see is not so black and white, it's time for you to see what the world actually is”

“Wait, what's up?” Aera questioned.

Looking down onto her love's arm, as she caressed the palm “A few days ago...” Her tone bleakly shifting. “Father said it would be good for me to got for a vacation.”

“You've worked hard my dear,” Her father commended. “It is time for you to rest.”

“In a way, I've wanted to go...” Sarephel confessed “There's just too much holding me back at this time. I can't leave now.”

“I'm sure whatever it is can wait for you.”

Perking up “What if I'm still needed and this isn't the end of this whole fiasco?”

“I'm here.” Kaunzi reminded. “You still have your freedom.”

“And Aera.” Saraphel defended. “Divine knows I'm in deep enough with her as it is.”

Butting in, “Wait.” Aera interrupted. “Just because you're on vacation doesn't mean you have to leave the tower. We could stop off on floor one-eighteen, book a synthetic garden, maybe even a real one with windows out. A vacation for you would be perfect.”

A smile running across one corner lit up the other end as Saraphel nodded. “I'd enjoy that, but...”

It's not really a stay in vacation.”

Returning his presence back in, homely and soft. “My Father is visiting,” Dalbah informed. “Celro, he's been travelling for a few years since retiring; he's returning to discuss what's happened here so we have a better idea of the situation. After that, I figured it would be best if my daughter were to get a better view of things, with him should he set out again.”

“Daddy, I don't want to leave Aera behind, and she can't exactly leave either. She just got her dream, I can't ask her to abandon it for my sake.”

“I do not think you quite understand. There is plenty of time in both of your lives to return as you are now. While I have this place repaired, it would be a wonderful time to travel.”

“I'm honoured.” Aera gratified. “But I'm not certain if I'm willing to leave either.”

“Fair is fair. For now, Sarephel my dear, I'm resigning you to temporary leave. But I urge you...”

Pouting as she closed herself in, arms locked firmly to her shoulders. “It doesn't feel alright to leave right now.”

“Just because you could do something admirable, does not mean that you should be the one to do it. I know the leaving your comforts is frightening, but it is also inspiring.” Standing to reach across to her, his voice earnest in care “Do not be so ready to fill yourself heart with the first stones that you see.”

“We are still in the mess of cleaning everything up.”

“You are a lot like your old man... You too, burden yourself without question.”

“It's my duty, It's not really a choice anymore. I care too much.”

*describe his gestures

“We all have choices that we can make.” Dalbah announced. “And some of those choices lead us to misery. As long as you hold yourself to this obligation you've made for yourself, alone, I cannot help but worry. I envy you, my girl.” Smiling beyond the tarnish of his fatherly worry. “I am still stuck here, the responsibility of everyone weighing on my knees. I am, a servant to my own work. One day, one of you may take my place, and I pray you can do better than I. So I urge you, while you are young and can still learn, may see the world for what it is; to see from a different point of view than our closed chambers have taught us. Your father can't give you all the answers, go out and see what I have missed, what you are looking for. Find what truly brings you happiness. You'd never know what to look for if you didn't what you wanted to find. Once we leave our wholly perspective, we can see the things that we never saw before. Once we loose our comforts we can appreciate them instead of clinging to them; when what we do may not only be wrong but may be hurting us, causing our problems... Our unnecessary burdens, our selfish views for the sake of others. I am willing to believe that I am wrong, and like a crab that outgrows it's shell, I too must burn my walls in order to grow. As you've already seen, the PKE on Degraden ultimately revealed my grandfather a fiend. I cannot deny this, but I can live beyond it. You too may need to see the world.” Sarephel waning. “When you are done, if being a guard is what brings you joy, then I will admire your choice. Until then, go and discover what your life means. Do with this as you may... I merely offer you both, the chance to be certain of your path, and not make the same mistakes as our fathers before us. Aera, as I have heard, your family too, has their

own share of downfalls. You can take as long as you need”
(a little long winded)

“Daddy...” Sarephel ushered, a wimper behind her eyes. “I wish that you could come too.”

“I can't change the fact that our people are to be guided better, simply willing it into fruition would be a fools dream. Thus, for our brothers and children, I must remain until the time comes. Wrong as I may be. You are yet to be defined, I cannot bring you to fill a roll that is not meant for you. You are far from a ruler, or a servant while you yourself live as a slave to yourself. It may not feel like it but everything is a choice. I cannot condemn your decisions, only the state of their outcome. Though you may not be meant for either role, you should at least be able to live for your own.” Turning to his third daughter. “Aera... If you find somewhere beyond our walls that you feel is home, I will not hold you here. I would be joyed for you, wherever your home may be.”

* I don't bloody know (Sarephel: Because your way of persuading people is to try and sound like a smartass.)

“Father, are you sure that one of us will inherit the tower?” Her father nodding. “Without a son?”

“You know, I was willing to give the role of leading to your mother, had she the gumption to embody such an enrolment of duty. / --Do you still hold a grudge against your mother for what she did?

(massive intrusion as you can probably tell, meant to edit in but was too lazy, you can officially hate me now.)

Nodding sheepishly, Aera confound her emotions to Sarephel, still stretched over difficult obligations with her tone approached apprehensively, despite her gratitude.

Returning to bother the now settled table, Karelyn brought a picture of iced water that she poured, calling forth the order. “Have we had enough time with the menu?”

“I don't know about everyone else.” Garath announced, sighing coarsely as he adjusted himself to return his booklet. “But I'll have the Odaer on brown, and half the sauce.”

“And everyone else?” Collecting the uncollected consensus that mostly daunted anyone not presently discussing, with the task of being uncomfortably decisive.

Returning cold, the conversation halted. Among the table, sitting eagerly inhibited, the gears cranked to reboot some form of comment on the topic. Between her love, Aera and Sarephel pondered over the idea among themselves before detouring. Garath sitting apart, the cranks visibly grinding internally as a larger more uncomfortable monologue wrapped his mind. Something peculiar erupted along his face, his abnormally unfamiliar posture held him at ease, like a savage denouement closing a series of self corrosive strife. Breaking back in, Garath reissued. “You gonna take your dad up on that offer?” A slight hint of motive underlining his words.

Instinctively quirked, Sarephel pried. “Why do you seems so pleased to know if I leave?”

“You're just... Look...” Awkwardly baffling his adoration with a tenacious insecurity “You are an extraordinarily beautiful woman, and though I know I don't have a chance... I, I just want you to be

happy.”

Raising her eyebrow, and her voice “Oh here we go again,” Grabbing Aera privately around the chest, squishing her in. “Read me, I... Am... Not... In-ter-es-ted!” Unconvinced and bothered.

“I mean,” Strongly defending, Garath continued, completely unturned. “In my work, an opportunity to meet a woman doesn't just happen every day, but... I'm willing to wait for that day to happen.”

Make better conclusion

Lowering her finger slightly, still offensive. “You really mean it don't you...” Sighing with her head propped, now only calmly annoyed. “You know, you'll always be a pain in the ass for as long as you live.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Admitting embarrassed.

Smirking, her eyes narrowing. “You know, it's kind of attractive to some people,” Her tone sarcastically seductive, subtly shifting serious. “But not my thing. One day.” She chummed.

Bawling tears shot out from the restaurant entrance, the crashing drops of liquid empathy echoing off the bystanders shaken tattered voice. “He deserves better than you!” She exclaimed, heartbroken from their minidrama.

“Yeah he does,” Sarephel shot back collectively calmed. “But I doubt he'll get it.”

“Wow,” Kaunzi astonished, slack jawed. “You're savage, you know that?”

“Ughaa,” Garath moaned, sitting beside himself. “You know what, I hate to say it but you're probably right.” Shamefully admitting with a chuckle aside his misery.

Ravaged, the spectator walked away, furiously cursing. Her heart crumbling unnecessarily on her half baked eaves drop.

“I think that was supposed to be a compliment?” Tannor added, uncertain.

“It was.” Sarephel confessed.

“I hope so.” Garath intersected simultaneously, recollecting himself.

A light tarnish laced his image as Father Herosae torn expression couldn't decide between his shock and humoured. “If not for your manners, I'm pleased that you at least have a sharp wit.”

Returning the atmosphere, Kaunzi inquired lightly. “How long do you suppose Grandfather is going to be here?” The exposed sense of excitement slipping in as she spoke.

“Well, we'll have to see when that time arrives.” Clearing his throat. “There is plenty to discuss, but at least a few days as I will be overseeing the responsibilities of Restricted Accesses' involvement with my Father for guidance over this. Some of these matters have gone beyond my capable judgment. I've often wondered lately, and it may have impaired my vision.” Saddened, his sympathy leaked in, speaking in some self doubt. “I'm starting to believe Jaeramind really did it to make good for everyone,

but his actions ill met his heart. Perhaps I am a fool to believe so and he instead was selfish. Perhaps Celro will shine some light upon this when he arrives.”

Evening tides rolled by, clouded waves breaking the starlight. Two stars Twinkled while two more stood still, blinking. The cold dry surface chilled the skin as her eyelids closed. The blurry vision that looked out into the sea shut out with another cloud dimming her balcony. Aera wrapped around, clothed under the outdoor blanket. Sarephel silent. “What do you suppose is out there?”

“I'm not sure.” Sarephel replied. “It doesn't seem so different from here.” Both laying still, the breeze blushing by their cheeks. “Have you thought about it?”

Nodding as she nestled in. Almost melancholy, Aera softly replied almost shy to say. “I might... If... You'd go.”

“There is no guarantee that he's even going. I want to, but I don't really want to plan on something that's uncertain.”

Tucking herself in closer, Aera covered her nose, muffled. “What about just us?” The sound audible beyond words.

“Mmn.” Sarephel hummed. “We could.” Coldly she agreed, a mind of effort resigning elsewhere.

“What's the matter?” Peeking out.

“It's just, what Kaunzi said... It's ringing through. I would love to do nothing, but I can't deny that am still a guard inside. Where I am, it's hard to rest anymore. I couldn't rest when we were romantic, and even when I was in waiting. I mean, with the back road severed, it's mostly a matter of time until most the goons run with their tails between their legs (from the rest of the tower). Things will get better, and that means the guard will be in less demand. I guess I just need to accept that anyway...” “I'm going to have to retire one day, being a guard can't be me only purpose.”

“Me?” Sarcastically pleasing.

“You deserve better than me,” Sarephel uttered. Ashamed, and guilty. “Someone who puts you first. I already failed you when I chose my work.”

“Your work saved me, me and everyone else.”

Gritting her bitter lips, the healing words clinging to a shell of doubt. “He was a mad man, he honestly believed himself until he couldn't prove it any longer. That's what I meant to say earlier, back on the balcony railing. What if I do the same? I'm not invincible, one day I will be arrogant enough to believe the lie I want to live, and dismiss everyone else like a fool.”

“You know better, though.”

“I thought I knew better too... Because I think I already have.”

“Are you going on about not showing up?” Caressing Her loves distant cheek. “I forgave you

for that. I have faith in you... For tomorrow. So please, have faith in me.”

*!Continue balcony conversation(?)

“I tried asking her again... Kaunzi never did tell me what she saw out there. Whatever it was, it decimated her. The strongest person I know, I never knew something like that could exist...”

----- what if we?

“You're really scared of leaving, aren't you?”

A cold tear shedding along Aera's fingers, her love wiped it off with her cheek and nodded.

Morning dawned. It had been a week and a half since that night. A bright cascade of light blaring through the halls into the head office with an endless reflection off deep rich wood. Two familiar faces holding the door as they had long ago, welcoming her passage beyond their watch. Her darling in hand. “It's incredible.” Remarking her clearance. “This is your fathers office?” Rhetorically in awe. A wide slue of coloured light blurring through across the lit cylindrical chamber, with levels higher echoing busy voices (of many workers). A tall elevator opposite of it's entrance, and two more beside them.

“Me and Kaunzi used to come and bother dad all the time here when we were young.” Crossing the chrome chasm to it's end.

“I never expected it would be so...” Struggling to fix the description. “Exciting here. I always figured it would be quiet and boring.”

“It is.” Sarephel assured, closing the doors. “A little glorified, but essentially yes, very boring.”

Tugging on Sarephel's sleeve. “Come on.” A tone of reclaiming intrigue. “You've been here all your life, don't be such a dampener.”

Opening out it's carriage, the second top floor of the great soaring expanse fed directly into a hallway with the encompassing circular walk adorning a lounge of nodes along a narrow walk. Cream lights and custard carved walls, a calming retreat sprawled across the vacant waiting area. Shallow, the hall passed into a greeting room, counters holding an assortment of comforts and luxuries. A voice ebbing out from an unseen larger room beyond the frosted glass. Meerly shadows dancing beyond with a tall two piece window illuminating from behind. Appearing obliviously still attentive to his pleasing conversation, an older fellow emerged, dark jade cup in hand. A white medium short beard converging spiked downward and medium snow hair with a separate tie of his roof restrained back. His glasses gleamed with his smile, which danced a faint moustache with a grinning remark. His notice shifting to his audience, and darting curiosity to the new face, before returning. “Sarephel.” Returning his vessel beside the brewing station, his arms unfolded. “My dear, you are even more lovely than last I've seen you.”

Returning deeply clasping tightly around his back, her head nested into his shoulders. “Grandpa, I've missed you.”

“As have I.” Rubbing her back. “I'd also assume this is your loved one that I have heard about

from your father. She is quite lucky to have a beauty such as yourself, as are you.” Beckoning toward his open arm. Aera, respectfully obliging, felt the warm covenant encompassing with a tender care as though a warm breeze had seeped in around her. “I'm so proud of you.” Lifting his head from his granddaughter, he patted them gently together. “You've grown so much, and Aera, I look forward to acquainting you into our family. For now, I have to return to business I'm afraid. Dalbah has distracted me a great deal, but we will connect more shortly.” Both girls nodding before he retracted to fill his cup “I am grateful you two dropped by to check up on us, otherwise I would be discussing about Alurah forever. It's treated me well in my passing, very friendly people. I won't bother you two with the bore of my business.” Turning from the door to see them, breaking between a bite of biscuit. “You have packed, yes?”

Confirming her gesture, “Yeah.”

“Are you sure?” A furrow of sympathy breaking in off his face. “You seem uncertain.”

“It's fine.”

“The world is a beautiful place, I assure you. You will love it.” A comforting smile came across her. “We will have time to relax before our train and become better acquainted, just let me know where.”

“Sarephel.” Her father welcomed. “Don't be too offput, I know your grandfather has gotten a little touch friendly.”

“And you've gotten quite reserved boy.” Celro reminded, “Don't be so afraid to rejoice, the world is not so shrewd as we believe.”

“Well,” Pardoning herself. “I'll leave you two to work out the rest.” Sarephel bowed, Aera latently following suit. “I'll let you know where we are when you are finished.”

“If there is somewhere that you love, I would care greatly to treat you there.”

Shimmering contrast broke the rays of pouring hazy sun with the deep shadows along the solar lit station. Still bevelled and chipped, the war reminders made a home in the broken ground and the splintered walls. A voice played muffled by an oncoming train, service returning nominally to the people. One child alone squat down to his heels, running his finger along the wound of the pavement. Not a frown, nor realization of it's devastation; the child simply played and a fantasy began to develop. His mother tugging him to their next destination, her eyes fixed farther in front. Flowers rustled from a travelling breeze that the open passage invited in from outside. Their fragrance serving a pleasant mending to the travesty they actually represented.

The smell mixed with fine air conditioning; a semi synthetic aroma that felt clean, erasing the affliction behind her with a cool atmosphere that invigorated the skin in a wave as Sarephel entered the vessel. Soft chatter met her in pleasant voices, children fantasizing about their travels with their parents and couples discussing their plans. Aera in front, dragging her along, Grandfather Celro in behind. Seating among the commoners, Celro began to continue his excitement anew to his Grand Daughters. Words spilling out uncontrollably about their adventures to come, marvels and customs he came to learn.

“Grandpa, I figured you'd have a closed car.”

“I would have... Yes, but I've come to appreciate to sitting here instead.”

“I mean, it being a long travel and you being an important figure and all.”

“I'm no one, really... A few years ago, I would have indulged in the fine dining and luxuries of my retirement.”

“Do people not recognize you anymore?” Her tone quiet, audibly secretive.

Shaking his head, he replied at ease. “It's not about my status... I'll tell you why, it happened one day when a child was playing in the halls by my cabin. Every time his ball rolled past, the kid was close behind it and his parents impatiently chasing him back to their seat. Every time he slipped away, I smiled a little bit more, thinking about my son.” Adjusting himself. “Really, I missed the people. To sit here and watch their days go by. To wonder about their lives. To see the splendour of youth's ignorance. The things I missed when I shut myself away. Here, I am a person, like any other. What good are my luxuries if I enjoy them alone. If I reserve myself, who then will I accompany? I never did get along with the reserved enough to afford neighbouring cabins, their pride built on fear or arrogance. I much rather a conversation with a stranger, humble enough to greet another stranger... One such instance.” He sidetracked, “A well-to-do man once acquainted my adjacent room, he was quite a pestilent individual to endure. Constant to appeal to a man of higher standing, as if it bettered him to bother me further.”

Returning his stories, their carriage began to reanimate in time, and too the light poured in from their other side. Buildings and stalls passed, glazed in a mid day and their shadow cast farther below and onto the water beneath their suspended railway. Aera, vibrating at the sight from the ground, now captivated gravitation felling her into Sarephel. Her arm warmed with Aera's touch climbing her shoulder. “It's amazing, isn't it?” The weight of her love clinging. Veering her gaze, Sarephel slowly cast her vision off into the wide vast Taelyeer river, gleaming clean water. A vague memory of Eden haze and Manna mist to a trauma only Kaunzi would endure. Now peaceful and serene, sparkling dimples reflecting their shadows tail and the ****Try Celestial**** Invictus sun that drew it. The world coming into sight, more potently and vivid. Not a single memory could embody the vulnerability she felt now. Neither the curiosity of her first excursion, nor the ones passing. Though still the same skill and power flowed in her, aimlessly she recaptured the light as not more than a mere civilian. The treeline closed by, a cabin adorning it's side with a large dock and wide decks fell behind the blind of a forest peninsula and the sight vanished.

Her sight now forward, Sarephel looked out to her grandfather who's vision peered among his neighbours. They too returned their eyes from the faded vista into the coach. Growing cinders kindled a tiny joy filling inside her, trying to pat Aera's head down so she could see past the starry eyed child on her lap. Crawling on top, the two sat as one. A young girl had a chuckle out of them, and it too reflected on Celro “So,” Acquiring their attention. “Are you glad you decided to come out?”

“I suppose.” Sarephel replied, overpowered by her girlfriend.

“Yes, thank you so much.” Aera spoke freely.

“You're welcome... I imagine you may need a little while longer to decide though.”

Sympathetically smiling through Sarephel's inhibitions. "There is a long road before we arrive in X, do try to enjoy the journey as much as you can." Retreating his tired eyes from the blind of passing woodland. "If you always worry for tomorrow, when will you enjoy it when tomorrow becomes today. Many things will pass you by, while you can still see between them, you may find the vermilion among the field. If you bore away, the wood will have become a blur. The glimmer lost to the dirt like rubble." His words bouncing off distracted ears. A wide pasture frolicking before him, his foals captivated to their own fields. The green swayed in the breeze and the glimmer danced without blinking. Gazing out with her love, Sarephel's sight shared the bliss that emanated from Aera. A spark of youth gleaming back to the old man. Though her body aged and jaded, she seemed more of a woman, now that she resembled a child: A clock rewound back to noon.

You won't need my wrath to keep you in check.

*Talking about bestowing his leadership on one of his two daughters

Without a son?

you know, I was willing to give the role of leading to your mother, had she the gumption to embody such an enrolment of duty. / --Do you still hold a grudge against your mother for what she did?

Do something about quotes and how we use others' wisdoms in a place for our own agendas; how they are appropriated for use rather than reflection and how the inexperienced or charismatic use them for a lack of personal understanding.

Did this get added?

Awe, you two finally found out how to joke.

Any chance to integrating this?

Are you here to clean my bedpan? Then piss off

Need to describe first encounters more descriptively, before/after/or during.

Tower is blandly described.

Needs more attention to reaction and interaction

needs more attention to tails/ears but not too much.

better introduce characters.

better introduce Sarephel better

describe world exclusive foods

include races

introduce 3rd race

whoes bed did Saraphel and Aera fuck on? (chap 10)

Specifics in case of edit.

Edge of construction (sixty eight and below) page 78

Floor fifty eighth – Page 5, 7, 13, 69

Number of floors - Page 16

Total tower height – Page 16

Floor 93 – Page 37

Insults – page 87

Keep in mind

Grandfather herosae never needed to overextend his reach over the tower, his dream was out of sight
Twal made business and good things out of consequence of evil actions, deceit, extortion, and business profiteering.

Information and Reference

This information and more detailed biographies can be found in the full bonus addition of “The Book of Herosae Tower”

Names

Main characters

Sarephel Lysel Herosae “Sare” - If you know anything about this story, I pity you if you do not know who this is-- Daughter of “Father” Dalbah Herosae, Sarephel works for her father as a guard of the tower. However strong she may be she still ranks fairly low around the main contenders. Though her skill proceeds her rank, she refuses to upgrade her status, especially after being coaxed out of the idea by her father.

Aera (Aeramella) – Girlfriend of Sarephel, she owns a restaurant and is head of her crew. She dreams to have a restaurant somewhere in a small village, hoping for a homely feel and a sense of family; one that she wishes to give others, as she wished that she could have had herself.

“Master/Father” Dalbah Herosae – His title as “Master.” or “Father” comes from the long lineage of the Herosae family who built the tower centuries ago to promote a better way of life, one where people gave up their addictions to entertainment and sloth to focus on achieving their dreams. He and his

fathers before him see everyone of the tower as family, and acts as a parental coordinator figure of great power rather than a ruler.

Kaunzi Sorīa Herosae – Saraphel's sister, top ranked guard and personal guard to “Father” Herosae

Garath Chicoltae – Business partner of Sarephel, whose work is seldom ever distracted by his eccentric but ultimately professional mentality... Except for the possibility of escaping his lonely life.

Halana Palaetii – Best friend and second in command to Aera and her restaurant. Halana works as a drinks expert, who's understanding and divine alcohol tolerance has claimed her in the eyes of many to be the queen of cocktails and martinis alike. Heaven help her cook a stake to save her mortal soul.

Rolaund Ebord Daz – Second year trainee of the guard, attending the same class as Sarephel. Dropped out shortly due to the lack of discipline and determination, now works as a grunt worker for shady businessmen... Nah, I'm kidding, he got his ass sent to the slammer, he's currently getting spooned by a man arrested for sexual harassment and attempted rape. How's that for a life 180?

Meji Khloe – Conspirator and elite scientist working for the underground development of illegal weapons and ammunition.

Tainer?

Tannor – Business partner of Kaunzi Herosae, and highest honoured 'tech ninja' skilled in espionage but lacking in combat capabilities. He has a developed sense of compatibility with his associates and respect for his rivals.

Twal Degraden – Main investor and higher class resident of the tower. His contributions have been responsible for much of the towers development.

Yaundrae Haro – Prisoner of TX83 after a large scandal that deemed him a traitor.

Camine – Mob Boss with very personal relations to Sarephel and Aera by consequence. Alleged emperor of the underworld, he is one of many other gangs who's ongoing are responsible for trafficking contraband and other illicit services.

Executive Staff

Jaela – Executive of accounting, economics and business.

Keltha – Stewardess of accounting, always seen accompanying Jaela for purely business and disciplinary reasons.

Rhien – Head of regulation enforcement, built like a brick and stacked with a scarred eight pack, he is aging but in no immediate need or desire to retire.

Beralda – Middle aged stealth veteran. Teacher and mentor to Garath and Tannor, as well as inside lead for information. Revered, the silent pacifist, is an easy going witty man who is rarely outraged. Despite his heavily disciplined background, he has a calm optimism toward the youth and upcoming generation, considered a great inspiration and support.

Leon – Head of security surveillance. He know when you take a poop and for how long. He also knows when you poop on someone else, and can bring the shit down on you in a hurry as tightly coordinated with Rhien. Renounced as the eye of the beast, he is the go to when Rhien needs to bust a head in.

Yura – Profile and statistics analyst, referred to as “Ma” due to her age and compassion.

“Grandfather” Celro Herosae – Grandfather is the title passed onto the previous “Father” when his position been superseded by his youth. Celro Herosae is the blood father of Dalbah, who after retiring his position receded to a life of travel and exploration to understand the world outside his home.

“Great Grandfather” Jaeramind Herosae – As Grandfather is passed down, so is great “Grandfather” in same respects. Jaeramind Herosae is the man credited for the expansion, and success of improving the tower's infrastructure roughly eighty years ago. Though however great of a marvel it was, it is astounding how he managed to succeed such a feat

Lesser important names

Tanis – Holochamber technician (Chapter 2)

Jaero – Holochamber weapons expert (Chapter 2)

Karelyn Tohlz – lesbophobe (Chapter 1, & 13)

Kayli – Tami's sister (Chapter 6, &10)

Tami – Kayli's sister (Chapter 6, &10) with confusion to Karelyn over who is the uncomfortable one

Whilyer – private archive master (Chapter 5)

Tren – Purse thief (not great relevance) (Chapter 4)

Elmren – Seventh tier guard of private archive. (Chapter 5)

Falan – Cousin of the Herosae sisters. (Chapter 8)

Horal – comedic grunt worker (Chapter 6)

Plendal – comedic grunt worker (Chapter 6)

Vlane – Camine's underling (Chapter 9)

Selmo – Camine's rival (Chapter 9)

Kellar – Camine lackey who's forced into combat. (Chapter 9)

Races

Aeromin'd (*Aero-min-d*) – They are what is the main race of people living in the tower and surrounding area. They are by far the most human in character with traits taking from animals, typically foxes (Kitsune) or other small animals, while muddled mixes such as mutts are referred to as “Kemono” They are typically non-warring unless as a whole, which has earned them a standing reputation with many other races such as the Therasee, though this nature has created many disputes and hatred with the Saguin race.

Saguin (*Säg-win*)– With a mostly warring nature and a culture that goes against many beliefs of Herosae Tower and its people, Saguin are the only race exclusively exiled from entering the tower. Though they are free to roam around and cause many scenes among the people, they're not allowed near the tower or its markets. Often they are associated with black business due to their cultural outlooks on substance and morality, in their eyes it is legitimate and earnest. If they have to bash someone's head in, they probably deserved it though the line on that is often blurred. Surprisingly a very brilliant race home to an incessant amount of bureaucracy and capitalism.

Therasii (*Ther-ra-see*) – Make up a small portion of the towers inhabitants and are more akin to outer regions, their appearance is often associated with an off pigment in their skin such as green, brown or purple. They are easily allied with other races though not for long periods of time. Due to a hardship of accepting cultural differences they isolate themselves to their own race and create two divisions of prejudice, the higher living snooty floors and the lower shut in levels. Though with

association with the tower and it's people, some generations are finding the barriers in cultural differences to be less inhibiting as their former generations making as very open minded and brilliant psychoanalytical geniuses. It's often speculated that Threasii culture is actually more founded than we understand or give it credit for.

Things

Holomatrix -

Holochamber -

PKE -

TX83 -

Cavity/hole/aperature -

(mirage) ***Name it after someone who died of thirst in a desert for the lulz of it*** – A balanced light baton that grabs an image profile of the user and recreates the image as an illusion; earning the nickname “Mirage”. Counter balancing sensors determine the orientation of the image regardless of blade angle.

Natheena – Spectral sever, disabling blade meant to cut off target energy and siphon it out rendering target fatigued and on level with normal skilled enemies. Also used in capture scenarios.

Kaunzi's new blade - shape shifter. Multi-purpose blade capable of injecting different elements into

it's circuits. Incendiary, super-cool, athermal/sever, electric, with overclock capabilities. Though considered complete, it needs inspection after every overclocking session exceeding ten seconds of use, and a brief recharging period daily.

Izeal's blade – Halt. A blade that synergizes with the natural fighters aura, capable of freezing space for brief collisions. Accompanied by a sticky tension, this specialty blade will usually obtain an advantage on opponents for only a tenth of a second, longer if opponent is untrained. It's construction is highly confidential, and only works for Izeal, otherwise the discharges will exert no substantial energy or force.

Foods:

Maeuwberry

Terrot Root – a green fleshed root vegetable associated for being long that will grow a bulge at the top when going into seed. Before then they are harvested outside the tower but can be grown aqua/hydroponically given an excess of light. It's taste is often compared to vegetable substitute for meat though it's nutritional value hold almost no protine. It's consistancy is like a dehydrated cracker spread that has many skins formed throughout. Once cooked it's more similar to a ripe avocado only in texture, and has a buttery quality that is often desire to be deep fried.

Karra – A dark fleshed fruit that has a very potent citrus flavour and often staining purple juice. It was first used for dyes due to preference of taste and the inability to cook out the bitter toxins at the time. At worst, uncooked Karra fruit will give someone stomach pains following an uncomfortable bowl movement. Once refined, it is cleansed of it's impurities and develops a natural sweetness that makes for a potent start for brewers to ferment.

Jacant – Blood red in juice, this fruit has a deceiving deep blue skin that only shows it's blush when brused.

Lateth – Tart yellow fleshed fruit.

yangery

#####- (95%) 3/10 Writing
#----- (07%) 2/10 Rewriting (changed to spot patching)
----- (00%) 2/10 Poetry revisions and description
----- (00%) 1/10 Grammar check
----- (00%) 2/10 Final Edits

Overall

##----- (30%)

Series

----- (70%) 1/9 Conceptualizing
----- (30%) 3/9 Written
----- (8%) 2/9 individual reworks
----- (25%) 1/9 reworking continuity
----- (5%) 2/9 Refinement

Overall

###----- (23.2%)

In the fictional world surrounding the mystical metropolis known as Herosae Tower, a great disturbance breaks the long set peace. The discovery of a great underground secret. Knowledge of this sends the tower and all of it's people into a grave uncertainty. No one is trust worthy, as the truth behind this scheme digs it's root deeply in both the higher ups and consequently the crime world which it had risen. Perseverance, and caution ride a dangerous line between finding the cause, or loosing the trail forever. Even with the best of intent, the wine has only worsened with age, begging secrets long forgotten be reveal themselves before it's too late.

Sarephel does not want to see her family as villains because she would feel afflicted by it. Of her own merits, Regardless of reputation. Deciding in herself how to perceive the reality of others as a way to unnecessarily save herself from nothing.

XXXXXX ***Book 1 reinsert quotes*** XXXXXXXX

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Degredon: spewing rotten ideals like an amniotic dysentery and injecting the young into spite for their selfishness. I have given charity, I have built upon the dreams of others, I am the victim of Jerominds corruption and you could escape it but you are pampered, spoiled by it. Your existence is based on it. That is why you are no different, we cannot change. You are like me, like her. Two cells of the same infested corpse fighting another. I will bring peace, i will undo this curse.

Sarephel: you can start with yourself

Brocken Spectre

XXXXXX ***Book 2 information*** XXXXXXXX

Technology isn't exactly their strong suit. They make calipers out of military grade metal alloy and their still not straight. I'll take my odds up with their interface.

I had only one son, having met what I thought at the time to be the pinical of my requirements I was quick to place myself for the rest of my life with the first treasure I witnessed. Since then, I've met three more treasures.

you are never quite 'there', there is always more

I kind of had it dropped onto my lap, I never came up with those answers on my own.

When you act, you should not be offended when they do not react as you assumed they would.

It's not lot that binds us, it's hate.

Oh come now, you love me

You're going to have to hold on, some chick is asking me really stupid questions and she's not taking any hits, I'll be right back.

Sarephel, this is life, it's not your responsibility to handle everyone else's problems, that is something your father could never restrain himself from. Always worried for someone else, taking the blame for others, helping people who would not help themselves.

The world you were taught to see is not so black and white, it's time for you to see what the world actually is

Ha! Your pride gets the better if you

Sarephel cannot use her aura in the second novel when she isn't passionate, motivation isn't enough as a reflection of intent. Izeal makes reference to this when training Sarephel and how she couldn't activate it

You do the right thing some times when it feels all wrong and you can't help but feel pain inside.

They are actually preserving a section of the tunnel as a training ground for higher level guard and stealth experts after me.

Have you thought about being any less of a prick back to him?

Sarephel walks past peers who should otherwise be opt for celebration, but no one

But we did the right thing, right?

Perhaps, but you did the thing that you thought was best. I cannot blame you for that, nor expect any different in return for our actions. We will resolve this in time

Maybe the right path is littered in turmoil. If we pass through, life may be better, or we may play into it and widen the ravine that borders us.

XXXXXX ***Book 3 information*** XXXXXXXX

(usable?) Sarephle fights Camine Jr., young mafia boss, son of Camine came to reform the gang that his father so poorly held together. Sarephle defeats them all, finding herself face to face with the cocky little shit and he explains everything. Sarephel kicks him in the nuts and replied "Don't reproduce, I'm not coming back in 20 years to another ass hole in the family."

New blade to replace Netheana, Aeramella

After a long cold war, scouts discover an old research facility but barely escape the horror. As experienced with the research facilities, Sarephel is called in to investigate, discovering the abominations that manifested during the. Feeling responsible for everything, she accepts

There are two sides, one metaphysical, the other aetherical, you must determine which is more important but if you want to specialize you may need to separate what each mean to you.

Sarephel turns from lawful chaotic to lawful subjective good and then to neutral good. When she is lawful chaotic she is prideful, when she egotistical. When she is neutral she

I see the turbulence within you, it feels comforting.

It is easy to convince yourself that your actions are without choice; that your actions are driven for you.

You do not get it, that it is not the course of others, nor your mind to them. Your mind is to mind your own. It is not that one has chosen a deem into your person but that you have made one yourself. The balance that is drawn, you have chosen to interpret on paper, that paper is only a construct of your mind. You do not decide the balance, it exists regardless. You draw as you desire; until you embrace vulnerability, you cannot perceive the line that you are trying to discern. So how are you to say what is true with the lenses of of a prideful child.

-Night, insert confessional. Reorient first outlook from this is what people did and I cannot discern, to this is what people did so this is how I discerned myself.

- It's not about making good (but better than it currently is), the line is far beyond my reach by this point; It's about being willing to fix my mistakes[, to do better]. Where it's so easy to say that what happened, can't be helped and walk away. The impossible cannot be changed but this can... I've forgiven myself, now, it's time for me to do better than it is. A man in a different chair can make right the wrongs I've made ten fold what I myself could undo, though I could myself, within great difficulty. I too, am one who can undo the faults of another, and this fault is mine to bare. I cannot live, turning away from the results of my own hand; to reap it's repose, responsibly... This is a perseverance, not a penance, and no one has to loses their left eye today.

notes from phone

Need more fancy script
More cryptic references

Standard narrative - Nuance
Intricate narrative - intimate
Intricate narrative light - action

Temporal – Time – Frequency (consequently temperature)
Polarity – Gravity – ions -
Binding – Strength – severing -
Ethereal – Spirit – plane -

---- Bulk unfixed and unordered

Unyielding, radiance or unbowed

We are the righteous, honorable, eluaterious herosae, we are shit. We see as we were want, one way and that's all we care about. Comfortable to label, justify, and carry out as we see fit. Tmr world isn't or enemy, we are... and we're just trying to protect ourselves from that fact. It was more alive than anything I've ever seen. I've seen the eyes of dead men passing a needle around like a children's party game, cheering and laughing without a soul. Dismissing anyone else, that those people didn't understand, that those people weren't mature enough, that they weren't in the same shithole to disagree and spat on those who were like ordinary filth(to think differently). Slapping away their problems and children away, like they had no choice, like it was because of someone else that they were dead inside. I've ended lives that meant nothing to me, because in my mind they were guilty. They never mattered, but that, thing... that damned husk of meat floating in the blood of its own unholy birth... it was alive. It was more alive than anything I've ever seen. I ended is misery, because there was no choice, and I wish I killed myself instead so it could live. My honour meant nothing, dead, dead fucking honour amongst the trees and fish outside our walls that screamed and mourned my (heinous action). I put it out of its misery, it was going to die on is own anyway, but I still... I can't... damn you all to hell!

I'm sorry.

no more sacrifice, it's wrong but you can't fix it, why would anyone want someone else to die for then, it won't make it right.

Saguin at a bar starts to brag about how he hit sucker punched the shit out of someone. Sarephel walks up and shakes the man's hand, then says "bless you" as she kicks him in the balls and walks of saying how she is going to brag about that one later. Sits at bar and looks to patron. "You have any issue with

me kicking your friends ass?" "His scraps are his own, we respect another's quarrels." Sarephel gets info. Boaster comes up to get mad. Sarephel replies that she has no respect for people without honour "act like an asshole, you get treated like an asshole". "There is no honour, only strength." "So I kicked your ass, and yet you have a problem with that?"

* after trying the weapons circuits* You are only machine droids onto industrial piston*

And yet... I have a soul... * chuckles* guess that doesn't really account too much in the end, huh?

Your great grandfather Jeromind, too, possessed the aura of polarity. Some say it rules curiosity as well but the symbolism plays second to the fact in my mind.

Electricity is superficial, as is touch and polarity is spiritual but not always true

You are conflicted. There is a finite distinction between character and confusion. You have the latter, it's become your character and thus your eyes but it has not changed your soul. A contradiction to do so otherwise; thus proof of order.

It's not a matter of me being right, it is you that worries about such, and therefore it is your concern. You will not learn about truth if you yourself define it and scratch your head later to why it does not line up.

You do not have to sacrifice your innocent eyes, the wisest still hone them, it is merely a lenses which to interact with the world beyond your reach.

Are we still kids? / by heart or by age? I feel as though I only thought I was old. Now age is only out running me. 28 and it's as though I'm still holding dolls and playing house between monsters and bad men. Only now I'm one of those dolls and I've got scary tools.

Extra or unsable

No one is ever truly ready to take the lead. Those who are confident cannot reflect on themselves and those who can focus too much on it. I too still feel unready as I did when I began but I suppose it is best that I too can still improve myself.

Kaunzi, after inheriting the tower, why do you still refer to yourself as titled "Father" Herosae.

For no other reason than to mess with you, call me whatever you want, I'd rather know what you thought of me than arrogantly soak up the praise. Just don't be a dick about it.

Kaunzi wakes up, returns to Dalbah, Sarephel comes in to take over Kanuzi's shift.
