Chapter 1: Soul Searching

Down in the shadows of the mountain ridge, there lies a small village named Greenwall, home to all kinds of adventurers. Every day, droves of hunters come from the lowlands with fresh meat and trophies, while explorers from the highlands regale tall tales that fell before their eyes. Both forces converge to mingle over the simple bond of travels and a fresh glass of mead.



"And finally, the bear-sized man destroyed the bridge, tumbling far, far below to the ravine! Leaving me with *this* beauty!" An adventurer laughs, presenting a gold encrusted necklace to the patrons of the warm tavern. He rests with his axe stationed at the counter, shielding his cup from anyone daring to take a sip.

"I'll tell you what..." He bellows to his neighbors as he readies another swig. "I can trade ya this for the largest cut of steak you caught today!!"

He gestures towards the archer, who carries a large quiver and an even larger cut of game animal wrapped up. She leans back into her chair, slyly remarking back "Well...if you could slay a monster as fast as you say you did, a mere bovine is no challenge." The tavern erupts in hearty laughter as the barkeep collects their empty mugs.

"Hey, before I close down, I got a job offer roll in today!" They pull up and display a flyer across the counter. "Came from Origa. Says the reward will be worth your while. Any takers?"

The crowd surrounds the flyer with interest, but that interest soon turns sour. Boredom, skepticism and bafflement were now stamped on their faces.

"Is...is this a joke?" A hunter picks up the flyer to get a closer look, thinking the real offer must be on the page somewhere. "An exorcism in a place buried in the mountain top? Surely it's the wrong location. The only thing that awaits there is death..."

Others chimed in with various comments; this is a scam, not even specters would bother with those ruins, why bother working for a two-bit exorcist in the freezing cold?

"Bwahahaha! What a deal~" A bearded man was swaying around the room. He had a bit too much to drink, being more vocal compared to the other patrons. He takes a blurry gaze at the location on the flyer and stumbles back with a holler.

"That ol' terminal hasn't been touched even during my elder's days and even before his elder's. Nothing up there but bones 'n dust. S-sooooo boooorin' that even the...even da bones' spirits would just up and go." He laughs at his gaudy observation and crashes back into a chair.

A hunter gathers his belongings and scoffs at the drunkard. "Sure...next you'll go on about the dark specter with three eyes that haunts the walls again...an old tale meant to scare babies..."

"Dat tale...the, uh...youths see more than these weary eyes..." the drunk man hiccuped.

The barkeep sighs and tosses the flyer to the side as he begins to shut down the place. "Well...guess it's getting late. Gonna be a blizzard coming in, so stay bundled if you do venture tonight."

Most of the patrons walk out satisfied, but the drunkard remains behind. He mutters on landing a shot on a fast bird and chuckles to himself as he stumbles to the exit.

"Boy...that ol' lil job is such a riot! G-ghosts...(hic)...spirits 'n other hollowed out such ensuch...Issay...let-let em be with each other up there...scare eechuther to deth...."

The barkeep escorts him out as he continues rambling. The drunkard takes one last look at his sanctuary with hazy vision, before facing the winds once more. While he is a bit disheveled at the owner cutting his fun short, at least he knows that the lady standing by the wall will get an earful of complaints.

At least, he assumes it's a regular lady, staring with piercing purple eyes...

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The barkeep shuts the lights down and locks the tavern up. As soon as it goes dark, a hooded figure walks where hearty laughs once echoed. Glancing across the room, she walks towards the piece of paper left on the floor. The words spoken about this sheet intrigued the stranger. *Exorcise? Mountain top? Freezing? Specters?* All said so proudly and yet they looked unhappy with it. While processing their verdict on the job, one word faintly repeats in her head. The one word that feels…right…

"Hollow..."

Nephala was plagued with this eternal pit within her being. A sense of aimlessness and isolation. She tried to engage with others in this world. However, there was none quite like her. All with flesh, fear, dreams, confusion. All brushed off her existence with stories or fleeting steps.

She tried to fill this void with knowledge, being witness to the vast unknowns the world has shown her. As an experience, she is content with every surprise that occurs. No matter where she went or what she experienced, its uniqueness gives her wonder.

However, none have given her direction. None appeared to be the key to surpassing this emptiness. None until now.

"Those up in the mountain were deemed as hollow...like how I am." For the first time in a while, direction was given. A path forged. She leaves the tavern, skimming through the flyer once more.

"Cleaning this...Terminal...leads to a grand reward." The shade ponders as she folds the paper. "If I were to reach it and help, then maybe...maybe they may know something about hollow beings! Maybe they can help me as my reward!"

Her eyes glow vibrantly against the dark hood. The sun begins to hide on the peaks of the mountain, coloring the sky in a deep orange. As people begin to travel back home, they notice this strange figure.

The surrounding fear and confusion is something Nephala hopes to understand. She doesn't care about the people's paranoia to her mystery; rather she wants to uncover it as well.

Nephala's gaze is fixed on the top of the mountain, even as the remaining daylight causes some irritation. "An exorcism on a mountain top." She echoes as she begins to lean back into the shadows. "The only path now is up..."

Her form becomes swallowed by the darkness and the town's rambling returns to silence once more..

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In the shadows, there is nothing to be seen. It is a place of uncertainty where only one's imagination paints the path, where one's fear comes to life.

In the shadows, Nephala is safe. Nephala is free. Nephala is Nephala.

She dives through the shadows with ease, akin to a bird flying through the skies. Barreling in the bleak abyss, all she sees is small patches of colors to go up. The only path forward.

Nephala emerges from the ground, far from the tavern. A shadow casted from a well's roof provided a good enough exit from her swim. With the people going indoors for the evening, it was easier for her to walk without any moments of distraction.

She begins her trek up the mountain alongside the growing dusk. Nephala sees that the sun is casting more shadows for her travel, but she refuses the shortcut. It's a rarity for her to see things from this high up.

[&]quot;Mom! It's the lady from the ghost stor-"

[&]quot;HEAD INSIDE. DEAR! DON'T LET THE DEMON SEE YOU."

[&]quot;That can't be a real wraith, can it?"

[&]quot;Stick near a lantern. Or else."

[&]quot;Why did the sun have to set NOW?"

As Nephala goes up the mountain, the air grows more bitter. It wildly blows a freezing force down the slope. The path ahead appears to be more hidden, as if no one has taken it in a while. All that lies before the shadow were snow banks and small rocks.

The cold front didn't shake Nephala's will. She barely felt the chilling breeze over her. It was just another windfall, no different to the ones occurring at the mountain base. However, it wasn't the cold that was her worry...

FWOOOOOOSH!!

A stronger wind is blown down. Snow was kicked up and conversed in the air, obscuring her vision. Nephala dug her feet deeper into the ground and pulled her hood down. She believes it's nothing she can't handle. As long as she is by the ground and sees the mountain's peak laying ahead, she will not give up.

The ground below her, however, did not agree.

The snowy terrain began to crumble open. The blizzard caused the snow to loosen and swirl around her. Nephala's footing proceeds to sink deeper. She should have dove into darkness before.

As she gets deeper into the snow, Nephala tries to find the nearest area of shadows. Some form of escape. But as she reaches out with her hands, more snow proceeds to come over and bury her. The once watery shadows are now solid mass of ice crashing down.

"Hmm...! If I must..." Nephala grows irritated and tries to find a way out. She attempts to use her own magic to crawl out of the shrinking space. A small violet glow starts to shine from the collar. Dark sparks begin to crawl out of the Eye.

Lightning surrounds her. She raises her hands to guide the shadowy current. It starts to form itself into a shape. A shape of large hands to shield her from the terrible blizzard. It struck hard but she refused to kneel. Not when she was so clo-

crack

The gem on the collar begins to split open. The pressure of all the snow falling down strikes Nephala. Soon, darkness would bellow from the crack, violently and wild. She tries to keep the magic in proper formation, but it just breaks through. Fatigue soon

overcomes Nephala. The once ethereal hands now drags everything with her, clawing into a gaping abyss.

What's left of the ground before her folds into itself. Looking below, in front, up to the sky; it is all dark.

Nephala passes out, falling down to the abyss...



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Nothing.

Before, there was nothing.

Nothing but a void.

A void that was alive.

Alive but in pain.

Pain grows closer, as life outside expands.

The void will soon be destroyed.

The last being will end its time with creation.

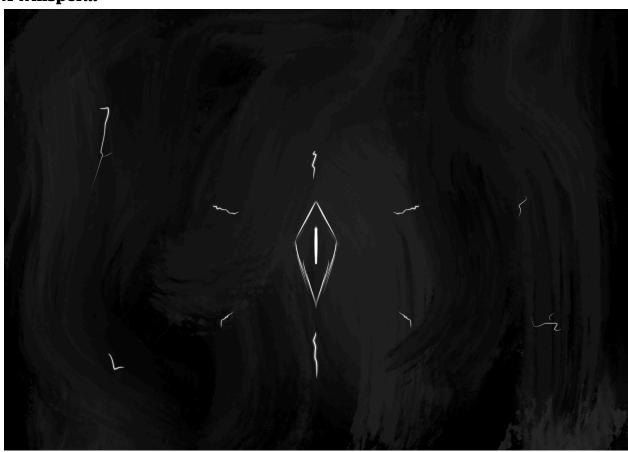
Its essence is ripped apart.

A piece without a form.

A form, held together by a vise.

As the form leaves oblivion, There is a seed.

A whisper...



You are my will. You are my

From nothingness, ______, _____,

this world	
Ве	■ .
	beyond their veil.
Observe this world	
Enloy of Damess	
Nephala	
The vocal winds were silenced	1.
The fragment was sent down	to a new domain.
And behind it	
Nothing.	
	========

It was a strange dream.

One synonymous with the slumber ritual she had tried a few times before. All she recalls is just swirling black pools and small cracks of white. Nothing she has seen in person before. When the dream ended this time, everything had gotten deafeningly silent.

Nephala is lying on solid ground, staring straight at the night sky from down a chasm. It appears that much time has passed since dusk. There are no winds roaring, nor an abundance of snow pouring down. It is only herself, the birds in flight across the night sky, the stars and several meters of rock separating them.

The ground around her, however, was not an example of nature. She was surrounded by a created pond of magic, a dark violet with small sparks of purple seeping through it. The source of this was from the gem, which was repaired.

"Such a long way down...I can't just hover up there from here..." Nephala stands up and examines the stony walls. There are some ledges embedded into the chasm, but each of them are too spread apart to reach manually.

Annoyed with this obstacle, Nephala raises her hands with a swift action. "Very well...let's try it *again!*"

The magical shadows around her begin to spike up, swirl in the air into an orb above her. She sends the energy back to the ground. She thinks of how to use it. All she wants to do is to reach the sky. To see the mountain top. But she only sees the night and some things flying through it with ease.

She understands what is needed.

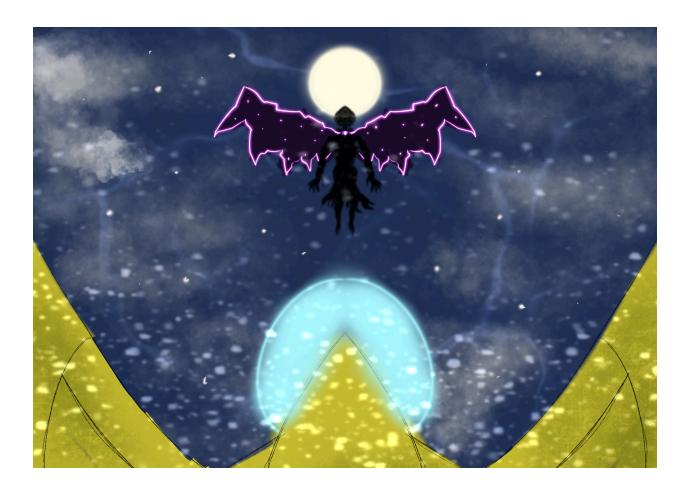
The dark power begins to attach itself to her back, splitting into two halves. The purple streaks of energy form into the shapes of wings, with the shadows filling in the space. The wings' forms are maintained, but some of the shadows inside are bleeding out of the wings. Despite this, Nephala slowly levitates off the ground.

She stares straight at the sky, knowing that her path is far from over.

Not if she could help it.

The dark wings start flapping quickly and in sync. She ascends from the snowy pit. The rocky ledges are brushing past her. The feeling of freedom becomes too alluring for her to keep a steady pace. She indulges in it.

WHOOOOSH



Nephala overshoots the pit's edges. She is now flying several meters above the surface, the cold breeze passing her face. She grows excited with this height, as her wings begin to shake. Her descent starts as her eyes glance over a spot of the mountain where the inclined trail stops. The wings' shape starts to give way as Nephala slowly hovers towards the top.

Her hands open to control the magic behind her, twisting it into a wholly new shape. The mountain caught her by surprise before due to not having shadows ready in a pinch. So she hopes to rectify it with a new form; a dark cape that is attached to her collar.

She begins to slow down and make contact with the snow bank. There is no longer a crumbling ground as she lands. All that surrounds her now is the radiant darkness embracing her.

"This has to be the peak..." Nephala wonders as there is no more raised land in her peripheral view. Only the stars and a cloudy moon stare back at her. Despite it all, there isn't an entryway for her to go into, nor is there a greeter.

"I don't understand. Where is the...the....?" Her bafflement soon shrinks away when she looks below her. There are many tents occupying a long stretch of land, kept lit by fires and lamps. A small group appears to be entering the area and making conversation.

The shadow did not find the Terminal; she found herself looming over it.

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Nephala levitates down from the peak of the hill and hugs the wall. Her shadowy cape flows down with her, phasing through any jagged protrusions like water. It was a calm descent down until there was one more surprise the land gave her. A sharp, searing pain.

She screams and turns towards a cyan light built in the now smooth wall. While its dim light wouldn't cause her anything beyond mild discomfort, being so close to it is too much to handle, especially with its size.

The cape begins to lose its length, but eases the pain for her enough as a shield. She quickly dives into a shadow casted on the ground. From it, she takes a look of what was behind her. A uniquely crafted wall seemingly merged into the mountain. Where there were sharp stones and natural divots, there lay golden shapes and a statue holding a cyan light. If it were a different day, it would have felt like the statue has been holding a glowing star.

Below the display were two golden doors and a swarm of people staring at it. The shriek startled some, intrigued others, all wondering if the Terminal itself was the source of the noise. Nephala stays in the dark to take a glance at the crowd. They have some oddities to their appearances and behaviors. It doesn't put her in a confused state, but rather curious of why they arrived here as well. Riches? Answers? Passion of the task? It occupies her mind but she centers herself on an important observation; none of them appear to be the taskmaster of this operation.

The group starts to disperse and go on with their own agendas. Their parting makes Nephala see a tent that is slightly larger than the others. Inside appears to be the silhouette of a man and a creature, among several items and tools. Why did they stay inside? Are they busy?

Observe this world....

A cold whisper breezes by Nephala. She looked around her peripheral view to see if anyone spotted her and started speaking. The faint whisper still lingers and Nephala finally hears its origins. The gem is humming a small glow, slowly repeating the command;

Observe...

Nephala finds it odd that the gem echoes her own thoughts. Poking at it, the whispers soon start to be garbled up, illegible but quietly humming. She doesn't see it as a nuisance so she brushes it aside to pursue the larger tent, finding a closer look to discover the job leader. Its central glow gives her caution, but there will be some form of hiding within the covers.

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"I must say...your plan seems to be coming along well. This is the most people I've seen outside the Terminal since...ever."

The large dragon speaks to the pacing man with a sense of calm. He keeps peeking out of the tarp's opening to see the abundance of contractors who answered his call. He looks with elation, but also with equal amounts of worry.

"Yeah, Kazuya. I'll be honest; extra hands for help is appreciated...I just pray that the reward is enough for them." He closes the tarp's blind and sits down to recount his supplies, biding his time. "TITAN already taught me how 'compensation' could be hard to negotiate."



Kazuya cuts straight to the point of the man's doubts. "Cain, these people barely even KNOW you. They have their reasons for being here and I'm sure your downfall isn't a priority."

Cain rubs his hands on his face to relax and sits back. "I know...I know." He speaks with a low tone to the dragon. "This job just has so much riding upon it...so forgive me if I start jumping at my own sha-AAAAHHH!"

His head tilting back spots a figure standing behind him. He didn't hear anyone step in nor make a noise. As he falls from the chair, the figure swiftly moves to not be exposed to the lamp keeping the tent bright and warm. "Did one of the spirits get out?" Kazuya asks Cain, who is trying to process what is in front of him.

The figure stares with a perplexed gaze. "Spirit?"

Cain grabs one of his spiritual tools from the bag. It emits a small radiance that stings Nephala, making her retreat deeper into the dark. "No!..It's...it's different from the ones I've seen in there. What are you?!" he asks with a slightly panicked, but demanding tone.

Nephala was confused about the question. Not about what it asked her, but rather how to answer. Those who have seen her before gave her many different answers of what to call her;

Wraith, Shade, Monster, Ghost, Demon

And now; *Spirit*. None of them feel accurate to her. "Well...I am here to understand that too..." She responds sheepishly.

The answer doesn't give Cain anything to work with. "What are you talking-"

"Ohhh, one second...this might be familiar to you..." Nephala pulls out the crumpled flyer from the tavern. Cain lowers the tool and picks up the paper.

This raises more confusion to Cain's chagrin. "The job?....okay, can you tell me WHO are you at least?"

Nephala steps out of the dark to be more visible. "My name is Nephala. I wished to see the leader of this work. Would that be you?"

Cain starts to ease up in front of the shadow. At least he knows if she tries to pull a fast one on him, he can ward her off easier than the Terminal's spirits. He puts on the charming mask and acquaints himself to the shade, now speaking with confidence. "Yes...I am Cain. I wouldn't expect someone like...you to be invested in the spiritual cleanse of this place."

Nephala starts to speak more candidly, as it's for the first time in a long time someone didn't run away when seeing her. "The people I have seen told of this task as a laughable fantasy, a scam as they would say. But it all seems so large and...I'm interested in what is inside there, personally."

Attempting to brush off the stinging comments, Cain pivots the focus. "So you're an explorer?"

"Yes!" she says joyfully. "I hope I can be of use to this excursion."

"Excursion...so you really don't know..." Cain says under his breath. Aside from looks, nothing from her shows a threat to be concerned about. "The more accurate term is exorcism."

Cain thinks about it and grins, having a way to diffuse the conversation. "With the way you got in here to begin with, more magic is better than none."

"Of course...what exactly does this place entail?" The shade asks.

"It's a spiritual hotspot. That place stood here for many years, more time abandoned than active. I tried to clean it out for...my employers." Cain stutters when mentioning TITAN but remains composed immediately. "The more...traditional methods of exorcising didn't go well there, so I'm open to other options to get rid of these spirits by any means necessary."

The mysterious circumstances do not intimidate Nephala, who seems to be more interested in his positive showmanship. "That's why you and everybody else is here. Feel free to make yourself welcome before we go. In a job like this, it's best to know who and where your friends are."

Nephala appears to be elated with the approval. "Welcome aboard, Nephala!" Cain stands proudly and presents his hand open as a warm gesture. She reciprocates with a handshake and vanishes into the night.

She leaves with a wispy remark "Thank you~"

As she leaves, Cain's smile soon fades. Kazuya chimes in to ease the tension. "If it makes you feel better, she doesn't seem to be interested in a money reward." Cain nods and touches the hand that gave her a farewell. "Is there something wrong?" Kazuya checks in on his confused expression.

"She definitely isn't a spirit..." Cain says as he closes his hand. "But I sure didn't feel anything alive in there..."

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Finally given the freedom to explore the base camp, Nephala takes her time stretching her legs. If Cain harbours no ill feelings with her presence, it gives her some understanding of perspective. The crowd must be people beyond normalcy if someone like her is welcomed to work.

She walks past several adventurers who arrived shortly before or after her. Many eyes glanced at her, some didn't notice her presence shrouded in magic. She mostly observes the uniqueness of her fellow explorers in the downtime.

The man with the red face looks at the surrounding architecture with intrigue. He does not react to Nephala trying to find the appeal to it in a shared study. She moves on.

A young girl is writing in a journal in solitary. Nephala tries to take a look at the journal herself. The girl stares at her and shows her some pages, aware of her visible curiosity. The contents are not grand in scale, but the shadow enjoys reading new things regardless. She moves on.

A man made of stone spots Nephala walking around. He greets himself and doesn't appear to be dissuaded by her odd appearance. Rather, he asks about the bright gem on her neck. Something tells Nephala she shouldn't remove it for a closer examination. She moves on.

There lies an elf sitting solemnly, awaiting the start of his duties here. Nephala tries to get closer, but a holy artifact on the person emits a bright aura. As she got closer, a slight stinging feeling grew stronger. The elf senses something spying on him and turns around. Nothing. She moved on.

Large creatures, magical users, monsters and mortals.

Another soul. Observe. None grants her any ire, but none also doesn't make her feel 'known'. It only makes her more curious as if these kinds of people exist, then what does it make her?

Her encounters continued for a few until there was a loud yell by the doors of the Terminal. "ALRIGHT EVERYONE!" It was Cain, waiting by the entryway. He looks at the small crowd forming and clears his throat to formally prepare his contractors. He presents the mission as if he was a showman at a theater.

"We'll be going in a few minutes. Make sure all of your supplies are ready. There's a lot of spirits in there, so the sooner we get this done, the faster you all will be rewarded!"

The band of emergency exorcists look over their items and surroundings one last time before heading forward. Cain gives a parting glance at the base camp and Kazuya as he places his hands on the door. The gates are pushed open, almost like a large beast preparing its jaw for consumption.

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A sensation of chills and worry flooded the room when they noticed the scale of the Terminal. Cain's descriptions, the word of mouth from the towns' citizens; it does it no justice.

The cold air from the outdoors halted as the dust filled the air. The floors, walls and statue inside matches what was in the front. Its sophisticated arrangement feels almost unnatural with how old the area is supposed to be. The only sources of light come from the beams emitting from the open door and the softly lit orbs that adorned the walls. Beyond a few meters of the entrance, an ocean of darkness awaits them. Even the ceiling hanging above them felt as infinite as the skies themselves.

Nephala stands in the middle of the entering crowd in awe. She has roamed this plane for years, decades. Beyond that. And yet, this place was nothing she has ever seen before or since. It plagues her with a sense of wonder and nostalgia for something unfamiliar.

She skims around the lobby room. The multiple figures nearby are focused on spotting anything extraordinary or spiritual contact. Nephala's gaze, however, was fixed on the ceiling bathed in darkness.

Something about it feels...alluring...

Cain hangs at the back of the group. He can still remember his first encounter at the Terminal. How the spirits there felt numerous. How it was so different from standard hauntings. How small the entity within made his efforts feel. He hoped with the larger crowd, they could find something he couldn't do alone. The silent reflection is halted when his eyes spotted something unusual.

Nephala begins hovering up. The lack of light in the lobby along with her cloak made it hard for those around her to notice. Whether they are occupied with their own investigations or the shadows hide her ever so briefly, she reaches out to the darkness above. It slowly spirals down, forming an almost hazy descent to her palm. Cain vaguely sees this oddity from the other side of the room.

"What in the world is she do-" Before he could act, a sudden rush of wind passed by him. He quickly turns around and sees the large golden doors slam shut, pushed as if they were weightless. The large BOOM! gives shock to the company trapped within. They try

to pull the door open, pry it off or seek what could have caused its shutdown. All but Nephala...

Nephala was locked in a trance to understand this darkness. It was...new. It has this chilling vibration. It holds a different consistency compared to shades made by the sun or the night. It almost feels like it is...

...alive...

Before she could press more, a bright cyan light emerged from it, snapping her from the trance. A strong wind pushes her down back onto the floor. The cape eased her fall by shifting to a shield. The wind roars on, making Nephala think back to the blizzard that greeted her on the mountain. The wind soon grows to a tempest, then a hurricane, swirling with bright cyan lights. All stood in the lobby with a sense of confusion.

Cain, however, stood with dread. He knows what this strong wind harbors...

In the vortex, the magical streaks begin to center in an orbit. Two cyan eyes pierce through the darkness and through the souls of the living. A disfigured voice projects in the air that surrounds them.

"The powers that be finally deigned to do something about us, huh? I should've figured when that idiot came in here whimpering about being here to help." The entity formed a wisp of magic that points directly at Cain in the crowd before dispersing. Despite being formless, all could sense the venom in its tone.

"Let me guess, they told you to get rid of us by any means necessary? That they would pay a king's ransom for your service. Hmph, typical. Now you're trapped in here with me. I'll tell you now: in the Bifrost Terminal, I am the creator, judge, and jury. Nothing happens without me knowing."

Knowing. That made Nephala focus on the figure's words. A figure that only lives and shines in the dark.

A figure that...appears to be like her? She would want to know, too. To be like...this entity.

She tries to approach it, but the gleaming lights make her halt. All she can do is listen.

"You are all still in one piece because I decided you should be. So, explore the terminal, ask questions. You are all here for a job, aren't you? Well then, allow me to assign you your work task: figure out how to free the souls trapped in this godsforsaken facility.

And as incentive, the first among you to succeed in freeing all of the spirits here shall be allowed to leave The Bifrost Terminal. As for the rest of you... If you don't finish first? If you slack off or annoy me and your fellows instead of putting your nose to the grindstone?"

The halls begin to loudly shriek with pained screams. Demands for peace. Cries of freedom. Prayers of oblivion, to end. All echoing in the ears of those trapped, only to be drowned by the heavy winds and atmosphere of the entity's final words.

"Well... I'll leave that to your imagination."

It smiles its figurative grin and vanishes into a raging hurricane.

"Wait!" Nephala reaches out to the glowing void, pleading. "Are we...alike?..." Before she could make her question, the tempest roared again.

Nephala's hood sways in the current, covering her vision until the entity is fully gone, untraceable in its escape. Usually, she was the one who vanished into the dark. Now, she is out of her element.

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She observed. She did what she always has done. And now, she is lost.

Thoughts raced into her mind. What exactly was the judge of this place? How many are truly lost within these walls? Why does the shadows and entity itself strike her as something curious rather than fear? All of these, at any other time, would have been embraced with action.

"I can't pull the door open!"

She turns around and sees Cain among the group of travelers she arrived with huddled by the entrance. Some of the more physically stronger individuals try to brute force it open; nothing budges. Some magic is used on the door, incantations and spells; no progress.

Nephala walks towards it, reaching out to the shadows casted upon the door. She feels around it for any kind of opening. All she senses is just a wall. None of the shadows from inside are seeping outdoors, so she can't dive and leave.

"Impossible..." Nephala sees that there is no way out. She turns back to the terminal's halls and only sees nothing. Nothing for her, for Cain, for anyone. Not until they achieve what the Entity desires of them. What she desires...

Ask questions. Rid the spirits. Observe. Freedom.

That is what this new domain demands of Nephala, and she is determined to see it through for her freedom.

