

Information

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After years of fighting a terrible disease, Amelia finds herself transported into a mysterious world, right into the quarters of a demon captain! Free from her years of suffering, Amelia decides to face this new reality with optimism and cheerfulness!

Strangely, she seems to have a new body, retaining all the abilities of her game character she spent years levelling in the hospital! However, wasn't that character a demonic combat mage? Who's this pretty blond woman she's become!?

Well, never mind! Better not let the demons know of her titanic combat capabilities, instead maybe her modest healing abilities could be provided as a service? Hang on, I'm not a spy, or an assassin!

Chapter One: The Vengeance

The first thing Amelia noticed upon waking was the lack of pain. She had become so used to either the rotting ache of her disease or the sharp pain of needles that she had forgotten what it felt like to not be in some form of agony.

Her body felt floaty and warm and her mind, normally racked with exhaustion and headaches, felt clear and rested. Amelia set about trying to memorize these feelings she had long forgotten.

After a few moments, she decided to risk flexing a few toes and found with delight this didn't cause shooting pains. She moved a leg, and then an arm, and then deciding to risk it all, did something she hadn't been able to do in years.

"Mmmmmthh!"

She stretched like a cat, feeling the satisfaction rivet through her body.

Surely she had died and this was heaven!

Although, she was definitely lying on a hard wooden floor and that didn't seem very heaven-like at all. Not that she was complaining, compared to her years in the hospital a floor like this was welcome. Even so, she should probably open her eyes and see where she was.

A wooden ceiling looked back at her, striated with dark beams. Amelia sat up and found she was in some kind of office or study. The walls were covered with bookcases, cabinets, and tables and where there was spare wall there were paintings and even the mounted head of a moose. Centered in the room, in front of her, was an ornate desk and leather chair flanked by two large windows. Behind her was a pair of double doors.

Using the desk as a handhold Amelia slowly stood up, and found she still wasn't in pain! Her knees didn't feel like they would collapse under her own weight!

"I'm standing up!" She exclaimed to herself and the world.

She took a few steps back and forth and then a few more. The feeling of not being weak was intoxicating. She even did a few jumps, her blond hair rising and falling in waves.

Wait, her blond hair?

Amelia grabbed her hair and examined it. It was definitely blond, practically golden, and not dyed. Her hair was supposed to be mousy brown, not blond. Amelia looked over the rest of her body and found she was wearing a simple grey top and shorts that hung loosely, leaving her midriff and legs rather bare.

She looked at her feet, which were definitely not her feet. Amelia had spent countless hours looking at her toes at the end of the hospital bed and these were not her toes. These were not her fingers.

This was not her body.

Amelia looked around frantically for a mirror and found one hung by the stuffed moose head. She raced to it and stared at her reflection, not quite believing what she was looking at.

There was no doubt, this was the body of Amelia Thornheart, the character she had spent years leveling in the hospital! But why did she look like this pretty blond human? Amelia Thornheart was a demonic combat mage with horns and black wings!

Ah.

Amelia remembered the last time she logged in she had taken part in a guild social event where they all took polymorph potions to look like the opposite of their normal characters. To make things even more amusing they undertook roles that were equally different for that night's PVE events. So, Amelia Thornheart the demonic mage of destruction and terror was instead played as an innocent blond human divine healer!

Polymorph potion or not, why was she in the body of her game character? Was she still logged into the game world? No, this was not a neurolink-enhanced game experience, nor was it a dream. Amelia simply knew on an almost instinctive level that this was very much reality.

Does that mean some great power had recreated the world of the game in some pocket of the universe, or did this world always exist, and the game was made to replicate it for entertainment purposes?

"Status" she muttered.

Nothing. No floating game screen. Amelia tried a number of other phases as well as trying to simply will the character screen into this new reality but

nothing happened. She did however become aware of her vast reserves of aether dwelling inside her.

Aether. It was what the game called mana and was the main resource in most magic disciplines. As a combat mage Amelia had spent an enormous amount of time completing quests and hunting titles to maximize her aether capacity and regeneration.

Among her guildmates, her min-maxing had earned her the nickname of the “Aether Addict”.

Could she cast magic?

Canonically magic was cast by your in-game character speaking the incantation. As part of your build, you were able to select spells that your character would understand on an instinctive level and be able to cast without a verbal component. This led to a lot of strategy in PVP whereas in PVE all spells could be cast instantaneously as long as you reduced the cast time further enough.

Well, nothing ventured nothing gained.

First circle, Ward of Thew. She said in her mind, willing the magic to manifest. She felt her aether tremble as if it wanted to move but couldn't quite find the energy.

First circle, Ward of Thew. With a bit more force of will, her aether twisted and turned as the spell took effect. She immediately felt stronger and full of vigor, like she could stop a blade with her bare hands. Her skin took on a golden glow which matched what she remembered from the game.

The cabin was bathed in her subtle yellow light and Amelia found herself concerned someone might see it through the windows. She would need to do something about this.

Third circle, Cloak of Secrecy.

The cloaking spell activated, dulling the effects of the Ward of Thew to almost nothing. Amelia let out a sigh of relief. Thank goodness for that! Now that she had some defense Amelia felt confident to look around a bit more boldly. Approaching the window she peered out and was met with nothing but blue sky far above and below. Was this building on a mountaintop of some kind? Where in the game world was she?

She turned her attention to the desk. Upon it lay a large map that seemed to be of an archipelago. Numerous locations had been labeled and the owner of this office had pinned notes to different locations. Amelia peered closer to read some of them.

Yup, she couldn't read this!

It certainly wasn't English nor did it look like any of the common scripts found in the game.

"What language is this..." Amelia pondered.

"That would be High Imperial little one," a coarse masculine voice broke out.

Amelia jumped up, almost hitting her head on the ceiling, not quite used to the extra strength the now-cloaked Ward of Thew gave her.

"Whose there!? Show yourself, intruder! I have hands and I'm not afraid to use them!" Amelia held out her hands like a boxer, behind which her eyes frantically scanned the room.

"Ah... hahaha! The intruder accuses me of the crime she is guilty of! What a strange human you are. Yes yes... Over here, no no... to your right, by the mirror little one." Amelia followed the voice until her eyes settled on the source.

"A talking moose!"

"I am *not* a talking moose!" the talking moose exclaimed. "I am Anathor! The guardian of this ship and adviser to its captain. I-"

"We're on a *ship*!?" Amelia interrupted. She darted back to the window, peering through its dirty glass. "Then why can't I see the sea? Where's the water?"

"Hrmph... I said we're on a *ship* little one, the *Vengeance*, a mighty military vessel feared for leagues around! This is no mere watership for harvesting salt! What use would there be of putting a warship on water when we have the skies?"

"We're *flying*? I'm on a flying ship!?" Amelia bounced back to Anathor.

"Well, the proper term would be *sailing*. It is a ship after all, not a bird! But we forget ourselves! The topic of this conversation is you! Who are you, little human, and what are you doing in the captain's quarters?"

Anathor's glassy eyes took on a red tinge that Amelia supposed was meant to be threatening but surprisingly she found herself completely calm.

Despite being in a situation that should frighten her she found herself lacking any feelings of anxiety.

Furthermore, Amelia had a certain *feeling* that Anathor wouldn't harm her, and even if he tried, she was certain she wouldn't be harmed, owing to her high base stats boosted by the Ward of Thew she had applied to herself.

Canonically in the game the higher a character's perception stat was the

more capable they were of determining on an instinctive level what can and cannot harm them, as well as the nature of a person.

As a max-level end-game combat mage, Amelia Thornheart had tremendous base stats, including her perception which had further been boosted by months of achievement grinding.

So, she just *knew* that Anathor was someone of good character, and not dangerous.

At least, not dangerous to her.

“I’m Amelia, pleased to meet you Mr. Anathor.” She gave a polite bow, flashing the red-eyed moose what she hoped was a charismatic smile. Her mind was racing trying to think of how to approach the next question. “As for why I’m here... after a long battle with an affliction I was finally cured of it, but the cure has flung me through space to this location unknown! To be honest I don’t know what the future holds for me but after being bedridden for so long I want to experience many new things... I have some talent in healing, if this is a military vessel perhaps your captain would allow me to offer my services?”

Anathor was silent for a full minute.

“Hmmm.”

“Mr Anathor?”

“What a strange human you are. You may explain yourself to the captain.”

“The captain? Uh, sure. Where is he?”

“*She* is here now. Be warned... she can be a little... angry.”

As Amelia processed that last sentence, the double doors burst open and she found in front of her face there was a cutlass, a real *pirate cutlass*. Attached to this shining steel was a firm and steady hand, and attached to that hand was a towering figure in a neat black military uniform trimmed with gold. On the top of this figure, a *beautiful* demon face was snarling at her, with deep crimson eyes, black hair, and a set of magnificent horns.

Amelia found herself getting lost in such a pretty set of eyes. Yes, she could definitely work for such a captain...

“A demon! A demon captain!” She exclaimed, admiring the figure that looked like it belonged more in a storybook than reality.

“Port or starboard? Pick one.” The captain snarled at her.

“Uh.. Why?”

“I’ll let you choose which side of the ship we hang you after you spill everything you know, *human spy*.” The last two words were punctuated

with little jabs of the cutlass, now millimeters from Amelia's nose. Well, this job interview was going rather badly. She would need to fix this quickly.

"I like your horns!" Amelia said with a smile and tilt of her head.

The demon captain opened her mouth and then closed it, a moment of confusion flashing on her face.

"I mean, they're super intimidating of course, if that's what you're going for... but they're also really pretty you know? Can I touch them?"

A few moments of awkward silence passed. Amelia was sure she heard a faint chuckling from Anathor. Maybe the compliment was badly timed, but after feeling so good after so many years of feeling bad Amelia felt she wanted to be nice to everyone!

"You..." said the captain, "the Republic must be getting desperate to send a *mad* human to spy on me. Ran out of sane assassins did they?"

"I'm not a spy! Or an assassin!" Amelia protested. "I'm a healer, would you like to hire me... perhaps?" In response the cutlass poked her nose a little, her skin wouldn't be so easily pierced with the ward active but Amelia could sense this captain had some real ability behind her.

If it came to it, she could always speak the First Word but that would certainly destroy the office, if not the ship itself and if they were really flying, no, *sailing* through the skies, then she would rather not condemn the crew to death.

Although, she did have the skills to protect them.

"Captain," Anathor piped up, interrupting Amelia's train of thought.

"Perhaps we should not be so hasty in judgment here. Confine this human below and let us have a discussion about how to proceed."

"Anathor," the captain said, not moving her eyes from Amelia. "The human is a spy or an assassin. There is no reason to keep her alive."

"Hmmm... the *Vengeance* has suggested otherwise."

The captain's eyes widened at that, even briefly snapping to the moose before settling back on Amelia.

"The ship spoke to you?"

"In a sense."

Not just a flying ship, but a talking one? What a strange place Amelia had found herself in. There were no flying or talking ships in the game. The captain kept glaring at her for a few more seconds, and Amelia met that gaze calmly with a smile.

“Take her below. Kill her if she resists.” Ordered the captain and suddenly she was flanked by several more demon soldiers, although these were male and their horns far less impressive.

Amelia allowed them to put her in chains and found herself lifted off the ground and carried away. It seemed they didn’t even trust her to walk.

Serena examined the office and her desk for any traps or missing documents. The desk drawers had not appeared to be opened and she could not see any telltale signs of lock-picking tools having been used.

Anathor had told her as much and had been notifying her of the spy’s activities the moment he had discovered her but she didn’t fully trust his recollection of events, especially as he could not tell her how the human had bypassed so many locked doors and guards to get into her quarters.

“I don’t understand, how can you, the guardian of this ship, not know how she got in here? You see *everything*.”

“Hmm...” the stuffed head mumbled. “The human was not here and then she was.”

“Did you see her arrive? The moment it happened?”

“No... and there was no change in the Aetherfield. Maybe if she was shifted here from another realm...but there are very few beings capable of hiding a realm-shift from my eyes, captain.”

Anathor was quiet for a few moments before continuing.

“And... even if I was fooled - there is no power that could fool the ship. If this human was a true threat to us then it would have expelled her.”

Serena raised an eyebrow. “A threat to us, or the ship? It has allowed assassins to board before.” Anathor didn’t seem to have a response to that - his connection to the ship was only slightly more reliable than her own. Serena waved a dismissive hand.

“Enough about the ship. Tell me again how she behaved when you first saw her.”

“She moved... as if she was unfamiliar with her body. She was hesitant in every motion, like your injured soldiers with grievous wounds. The human seemed delighted to find she could move. She did not behave like a spy or an assassin.”

Serena tilted her head to the side, tapping her horn with a finger in a rhythmic motion.

“And then?”

“She seemed surprised at her hair and body, and rushed to examine them in detail in the mirror.”

“Oh? First a realm-shifter and now a soul transfer? Come now Anathor, we are reaching fantastical levels of theory over a mere human. Tell me of the spells she cast.”

“A low-level defensive spell, silently cast so she should be at minimum a second circle mage. However, she canceled it not long after. Hmm... no it’s unlikely...”

“What? Speak your mind Anathor.”

“When the spell was canceled... the aether was unusual. There was no dissipation into the Aetherfield typical of a spell cut short. She could just be a talented second circle capable of reabsorbing the aether or...” Anathor trailed off.

“Or she could have cloaked it.” Serena finished the line of thought for him.

“Yes, and if she can cloak even a low-level spell, then there is a chance she knows the First Word.”

Serena pondered that for a moment. It was rare for a demon to be a Speaker of the Words, and even rarer for a human, and it was especially unlikely

such a young human could Speak but... it was not without precedent. Suddenly a memory of the encounter sprang into her mind.

“Anathor, what is she doing now?”

“She’s in the cell uh... stretching.”

“Stretching?”

“Yes, captain, and now... she’s doing push-ups.”

“Whatever, does she have a cut on her nose? Any blood?”

“Hmm... no captain.”

Serena felt her eye twitch. She was a master of the sword, and she had definitely given that smug-looking human a poke with her cutlass. If she wasn’t bleeding then the chance that the human had a cloaked defensive spell active was suddenly uncomfortably high. Serena communicated her thoughts to Anathor.

“Time for you two to have another conversation. Not many leagues till we’re at battle stations”

“Yes,” Serena found herself nodding. “A little interrogation to answer some questions.”

“Hmm... try less interrogation, more conversation if possible captain... best not to have any of the Words Spoken on the ship, from either that mystery human or *you*.”

Chapter Two: A Human Speaker!?

“Forty-nine... fifty!” Amelia finished her last set of push-ups and sat up. It felt so *good* to move her body! How many years had it been before she had done a push-up? A squat? Was exercise always this enjoyable? Those foolish demons, they thought these thick chains on her hands and legs would restrict her! Rather they had given her ample opportunity for some resistance training!

She was amazed at how her high base stats and ward had already translated into such strength and endurance. Amelia could tell the chains on her were *heavy*, no doubt designed to seriously slow down any fast movement or escape attempt, however, she found it remarkably *easy* to move around. Her cell was no more than a two-meter by two-meter box of iron bars that extended from the floor to the ceiling. It was one of a line of cells that were arranged in the center of this deck of the ship, but Amelia’s was the only one occupied. Hundreds of cargo crates and barrels lined the walls, with just enough space left for the demons to walk around and between the cells. And leaning on these very crates were the two demons that had manhandled her so aggressively! They had thrown her hard enough against the bars that she was sure she might have broken something if she had been a normal human being!

But, a normal human being was something she very much wasn’t! She was Amelia Thornheart, the top-ranked dreadmage of the Blacksteel Crusaders! What player had spent sleepless nights slaughtering thousands of archangels to be the first to finish that collection log? She did! What player had the most solo speed-run records for the abyssal dungeons? Her!

If anything, the iron bars were the ones in danger of being broken and she would definitely be complaining about her experience to the captain! She should start by giving these two a piece of her mind and, ah, what were they saying?

“Sorry, what was that?” Amelia bounced up to the iron bars.

The two male demons were ridiculously muscular. If her current body was accurate to the height she chose in character creation then these two, who stood more than a head over her, would be about seven foot! Their hulking figures were strapped with breastplates and leather. Holstered in their belts was a sword and some kind of firearm. They were both bald with deep orange eyes set under a thick brow and above a square jaw. Their skin was marbled with black, gray, and red in a similar pattern to the uniform of a modern military from her old world.

Each wore a set of horns, similar to the horns found on a ram.

The demons from the game world didn't quite look like this. Other than herself and her magic, most of the things she had already experienced seemed to indicate this world was very different from the game she played in the hospital.

"Cap'n gunna make toothpicks of your bones, human." One of them said to her with a grin consisting of chunky white teeth. "Ain't that right, Dagon?"

"Right you are, Tomes," said Dagon, flashing her his own grin. "'Member the last one she broke? Hung him up from the starboard sail."

"Used him for target practice we did, didn't we Dagon?"

Dagon nodded, smirking at her. "Screamed all night he did, didn't he Tomes?"

"That awful howling. Kept the entire crew up all night it did, didn't it Dagon?"

"Truer words never spoken. Cap'n kept his skull to drink her wine fr—"

"Wait a minute!" Amelia interrupted. "She tortured someone *all* night? Kept you *all* awake?"

Dagon spat on the ground, his forehead furrowing in annoyance. "Damn straight little human, exactly what's gonna happen to you."

"The captain really made her *entire* crew, which operates a *military ship*, go an *entire* night without sleep? Huh?" The demons paused at that and Amelia took that as a sign to go on the attack even more. "*Hrmmp*! Sounds like *someone's* a terrible captain! Or maybe... maybe you're just trying to scare me with your exaggerated and made-up tales, hmm!?"

Dagon looked stupefied, his mouth opening in response but nothing came out. It was Tomes who spoke next, his eyes darkening.

"Exaggeration or not, little human, the captain really does torture and hang those that endanger her or her crew, and *you*," he punctuated with a finger jab, "are a threat. If you tell her everything you know, she'll give you a

quick death. Seven hells, if you're extra cooperative, she might even dump you on an island somewhere. She-"

"Tomes. Dagon," a cool voice intoned from the shadows.

The captain stepped forward. By head height, she was shorter than the other two, although her horns just about made up the difference. The captain's eyes were fixed on her, and her arm rested on her sheathed sword.

Amelia raised her chained hands and gave her a little wave.

"Hello," she whispered.

"Any troubles?" The captain asked her two subordinates.

"No, cap'n!" they both exclaimed in unison.

"Just recounting to our little spy here 'bout that cutthroat that snuck on-board last moon," Dagon explained. "Don't think she quite realizes what situation she's in. Want me to smack her around a bit?"

The captain didn't reply immediately and kept her eyes locked with Amelia's. What was she thinking? She did seem a little... calmer. Maybe she had had second thoughts about her employment!

"Tomes. A word."

"Yes, cap'n!"

The demon stood up and followed the captain away down the line of cells and Amelia then realized that not once, from the moment she was thrown into this cell, and even now with Tomes and the captain walking away, and even now with Dagon watching her...

Did any of them ever remove a hand from one of their weapons.

Serena walked Tomes to the end of the cells, as far away from the human as she could be while still keeping her in sight.

"How did it go?" She said in hushed tones. Tomes took out a pair of neat spectacles and slid them up his nose, responding in an equally low voice.

"Something's not right here captain. I've been at war long enough to know how humans react to us, and I know what a frightened human looks like, and captain, *she ain't frightened*. She might have twigged me and Dagon are playing dumb."

"Anathor and I think she might be a Speaker."

“Captain!” Tomes blurted out, starting to move back, pulling out his firearm but stopped when Serena grabbed him by the arm.

“*Wait!*” she hissed. Tomes was one of the smartest soldiers she had ever had the privilege of commanding, but he always had a blind spot in rationality when it came to his sworn battle-brother, Dagon. “She hasn’t done anything yet, right?”

Tomes caught himself, but didn’t look back at her, instead keeping his focus on the other end of the cells. “Not yet. Captain, if she can *Speak* then those chains and those bars aren’t going to stop her. Seven hells captain, *the munitions!*”

Below this deck was the munitions hold, where several thousand four-inch shells lay sitting, patiently waiting to greet the Republic. They were sailing heavy, in anticipation of the upcoming bombardment, but this preparation was a double-edged sword, and an unknown human Speaker added a domain of risk Serena never thought she would deal with on the *Vengeance*.

“I have Anathor moving them as we speak, the rest of the crew are helping. The deck armor is *strong* Tomes, and she indicated she’s from a healing branch. If she only knows the First Word from one of those branches, we’ll be fine.”

Tomes was silent for a moment. “Anathor told you she could cast a defensive spell, right?”

“Yes. A ward-spell. She probably cloaked it so...”

“So we can’t just shoot her in the head when she’s distracted?”

“Afraid not, and believe me Tomes if she’s a danger I’ll do what needs to be done to protect this crew but...” she trailed off, causing Tomes to turn and look at her with a quizzical expression forming on his face, “...remember the ship spoke to Anathor, it doesn’t consider her a threat.”

“Is he sure he understood the ship correctly? It’s not exactly speaking modern Imperial to us, is it?”

“He seems confident.”

“Well then, ship hasn’t done us dirty yet, has it?” Tomes took his spectacles off, cleaning them with a bit of cloth before putting them away. He shrugged his shoulders and sighed. “We about to get friendly with a human Speaker then, captain?”

Serena felt herself grimace. “I’d rather not, although I have a gut feeling.”

“A gut feeling.”

“That she might be... alright.”

“Korvus will never accept that. He’ll try to kill her.”

“Anathor is keeping Korvus distracted. I don’t want him knowing of her existence until the battle is over.” Korvus was definitely going to be a problem. If she wasn’t a Speaker herself then controlling her best storm-trooper would be impossible.

“How are we approaching this? We got a plan to find out if she’s a Speaker or not?”

“*I*, not *we*. You and Dagon will go help move the rest of the munitions. As for the method... I’ll just ask her.”

“If she says no?”

“I’ll stab her proportionally to how smug she’s being. Find out if she’s really a healer.”

“If she says yes?”

“Might just stab her anyway. Let’s go.”

Serena walked back to Dagon who seemed to be recounting the tale of when she’d hung some thieves that were selling off cargo behind her back. Those thieves, who had been demon mercenaries she hired, seemed to have been replaced in Dagon’s retelling as a band of human women.

“... and then, the cap’n took a fire poker, as hot as the sun and - ah cap’n, you’re back!”

“Your brother has a job for you. Go to him.”

“Yes, cap’n!” Dagon hurried past her, and as he did so he fixed his eyes to hers.

Careful, he mouthed. She gave him a subtle nod in return.

Serena looked at her captive. This one was tall for a human, her blond hair was more golden than any she had seen before, and her bright blue eyes seemed to almost sparkle. Her button nose wrinkled as she scratched it.

Gods, this human really pissed her off.

“Enjoying Dagon’s stories?” She asked, keeping her expression and voice neutral.

“According to him, you hang and or torture everyone who looks at you funny! Ever thought you’d catch more flies with honey?”

Serena watched the human closely. The psychological battle had already begun. However, was the human even playing?

“What does that mean? That expression?” She asked, pulling a crate and then a barrel in front of the cell as an impromptu table and chair. Barrels in her experience made excellent seats from which you could leap from quickly when attacked.

“Hmm? Oh, you don’t... It means you can get more people to your side by being nice and offering something, rather than being forceful.”

Serena had already figured out the meaning behind the previously unheard expression, she was just trying to keep the human talking. The earliest stages of an interrogation were the most risky, where the captive was most likely to clam up.

“And if you’re the fly on my ship, what honey are you looking for?”

“Uh, yeah. I’m sorry about this, you know?” The human rubbed the back of her head, looking to the side, taking her eyes off Serena and her sword arm.

Ignorant, or fearless. Serena thought.

“Sorry about what?”

“Turning up like this, on your ship. It really wasn’t my intention.”

“A moment.” Serena put a hand up then fished out a small box from about her person and placed it on the crate between them. She opened the box, revealing a rotating blue crystal, shining lightly.

“This is an Axiom Crystal. It will record our conversation.” Serena did not mention the other, smaller crystal embedded in the side of the box which was positioned so that only she could see it. “Now, if we start again, did you intentionally board my ship?”

“No!”

Serena kept her eyes on the human, but she was paying equal attention with her peripheral vision to the color of the crystal that faced only her.

Green.

“Through what method did you board my ship?”

“I... don’t know.”

Green.

What was she supposed to make of this? A human, unknowingly and unintentionally was placed into her quarters? Is one of the fell gods playing a joke on her? She would have to approach this another way.

“What is your name?”

“Amelia Thornheart! Pleased to meet you!”

Green.

“Where did you come from, Amelia?”

“... the hospital.” A fleeting moment of sadness flashed across Amelia’s face. Serena remembered everything Anathor had said about the girl. She would watch and remember every word now, looking for the smallest inconsistency.

“Why were you in the hospital?”

“I was dying... I was getting better but... it takes many years to cure what I had and not everyone survives... but I’m better now! And if it comes back I can just heal it again with my magic!”

Serena paused. She would always tactfully pause and let silences linger a little too long. It was an interrogation tactic to extract more information, as well as maintain a perception of control. With that said, every time this human, Amelia, opened her mouth she felt she was the one losing control.

“What... affliction did you have?”

“Chronic Endothelial Collapse Syndrome.” Amelia spat these words out, and for the first time, Serena saw an emotion that she found familiar on the faces of humans looking at her.

Hatred.

“What are the symptoms, and the cause?”

“A spontaneous disease marked by rapid deterioration of the endothelial cells lining the blood vessels, resulting in systemic circulatory failure. That’s the textbook definition. Heard it a thousand times. No one knows where it comes from.”

She’s educated. Serena took a mental note. A noble? But Anathor said she couldn’t read.

“Is it contagious?”

“No.”

“Why did you not use magic to cure it?”

“It... wasn’t an option.”

Questions upon questions. The green light informed Serena she wasn't being told lies, at least not knowingly. Then again, if you were careful with your answers you could give half-truths that would be reported as truths, although this human didn’t seem to be trying such deception.

“Yet you were cured, by non-magical means?”

“I... maybe?” Amelia gave a little shrug.

“Your body is healthy. You do not have the appearance of someone who has spent a long period fighting an affliction, what-“

Serena closed her mouth. A healthy person not knowing how they were cured. It didn't add up. Something Anathor had suggested suddenly flashed in her mind. A question formed that needed to be asked, one she really didn’t want to know the answer to.

“Amelia, is the body you are in now, the same one that suffered this affliction?”

Amelia’s eyes locked with hers, a solitary tear running down her cheek.

“... No.”

Green.

A darkblade! A lifecheater! A heretic! Serena leaped up, drawing her cutlass, and started twisting the aether inside her, letting it froth and layer upon itself, the pressure and heat building up, as she felt the First Word forming, felt it *want* to be Spoken. Anathor would see what she was doing and warn the rest of the crew but first, she would seek confirmation!

“Did you knowingly transfer your soul into another body? *Answer me!*”

“N-no! I didn’t know that was possible!”

“Are you a darkblade!?”

“I don’t know what that is!”

“Do you follow the Anathema scripture!? Are you a heretic!?”

“No!” The human threw up her hands, an action that almost made Serena attack on reflex. “I’m not even religious! Will you *calm down!* Stop being so *hot-headed!* You’ll blow us out the sky if you *Speak!*” Amelia was glaring at *her* now.

They stared at each other for a few seconds. Damn this entire situation! What was this human? Why did she look upon her as if she was... a friend admonishing another friend?

“Amelia, do you plan any harm upon me, the crew, or the ship?”

“I don’t!”

“Even though we are of demonkind? Waging war against the human Republic?”

“I like demons!”

Serena felt herself blink at that. She slowly sheathed her cutlass, sitting back down on the barrel. She took a slow breath, cooling her aether down but keeping it simmering, just in case.

Time for another difficult question.

“Are you... a Speaker of the Words?” She saw the human visibly gulp at this and knew the answer before it came.

“... Yeah. I can speak the First Word of a healing branch.”

This was definitely going to be a headache. A human Speaker on her ship, right before battle!

“How many years have you lived, across any and all bodies your soul has inhabited?”

“... Twenty-five.”

“Tsk!” She wasn’t lying. Twenty-five and a Speaker! What awful talent had she stumbled upon! She had to make sure. “Could you prepare to Speak now, without Speaking? As proof of this claim?”

“Uh, sure. But I’ve never Spoken in this body. Give me a moment.” Amelia’s eyes became unfocused and then started to shine. Light started to flow from her body, brightening up the dark deck, hues of aetheric blue and gold danced from her skin, and Serena saw, in the eyes of that human, the depth and breadth of the ancient power waiting, wanting to be released.

It was beautiful.

“Stop.” She commanded, and Amelia obliged, her radiant body dimming and her eyes becoming focused again. Serena took out a key. “Come here.” She said. Amelia came closer, pressing her cheeks between the bars. Serena unlocked the chains on her and they fell to the deck floor with a *thud*.

“I have never had a human Speaker on this ship.” She said, watching the Amelia closely. “And I have never had a human Speaker be *non-hostile*. I can only request you forgive me for the way you have been treated. As a Speaker of the Words, you are entitled to a level of dignity you will now be afforded.”

With another click of a lock the cell door opened with a whine. The human looked up at her, only stepping out when Serena gestured.

“However,” she continued. “Keep the matter of your... new body a secret. You seem wholly ignorant of too many things, and that’s dangerous.” She jabbed at Amelia with her finger. “In fact, don’t talk to anyone but me, Anathor, and my Trusted: Dagon and Tomes - the latter is our bookkeeper and quartermaster and is the one you’ll need to have a conversation with. I’ll take you to his office now.”

“Sure! Why do I need to have a conversation with him?”

“Well...” Serena said, peering down at Amelia.

“For salary negotiations, of course.”

Chapter Three: Battlestations

“Captain on deck!” a voice rang out and everyone in the bridge scrambled to stand at attention. Serena took her position overlooking her loyal officers.

The bridge was a cone-shaped room poking out the top of the *Vengeance*’s rear structure. It was ringed with thick reinforced windows for observation, through which Serena could see the three twin-barrel cannons lining the deck of the ship. Each cannon could fire a set of four-inch flak, explosive, or penetrator shells every three seconds. These were supplemented with another four sets of one-inch repeater anti-air cannons installed lower down on the sides of the ship. Two port side and two starboard.

The *Vengeance* was classed as a light cruiser, but under Serena’s command, making use of the... unique aspects of the ship she was able to make it punch well above its weight.

To her left and right were the port and starboard observation posts. These small rooms jettied out over the ship's structure and allowed direct observation of the sides of the ship. There were two more under-hull observation pods at the front and rear whose occupants would pass information through speaking pipes to the officer on duty.

The bridge had three elevations. At the highest was her station, the helmsman’s wheel and the first officer’s position who, along with her quartermaster, were currently preoccupied with a certain bundle of blond hair and irritating bouncy energy.

The middle elevation was a larger space, ringed with desks manned by her most important staff. Here, the navigator, communications officer, sensors officer, weapons officer, and chief engineer all worked as a well-oiled machine. Centered on this elevation was a large table on which a small

model of the *Vengeance* lay propped up as well as maps of Port Highwind, their target. Leaning over this table, moving pieces from here to there, were her air and ground tacticians, doing what they did best - planning and arguing with each other.

During combat, these tacticians would, as best they could, keep this representation of the air space updated with the locations of enemy ships, and the maps updated with the movements of her stormtroopers.

At the lowest level were the lesser officers and subordinates of her key staff. They manned a semicircle of two dozen desks from which they could communicate with areas around the ship, prioritizing and passing information to their superior officers, who would either handle it themselves or pass it onto her or her first officer.

“At ease.” The demon crew resumed their work, while Serena took a moment for herself. She wanted some time with her thoughts before the upcoming engagement between the *Vengeance* and Port Highwind’s defenses.

Amelia had been left in the capable hands of Tomes and Dagon, who seemed reluctant to let his brother be alone with her. Serena had given Tomes a rundown of where she and the human Speaker currently stood with regards to potential employment. Incorporating her into the crew formally was out of the question, Tomes had reminded her as much, stating it could even be considered an act of treason. Hiring her as a mercenary was equally dubious, and despite her station giving her far more freedom than other captains, Serena still had her superiors to obey and regulations to follow.

The best solution Tomes had come up with would be to contract Amelia as part of her *personal* retinue, as an adviser and, well, as a maid. Serena did have the right and *technically* it did not conflict with her military obligations, but it was pushing the boundaries right to the edge.

Regardless, she would still risk it despite the future problems that would inevitably arise. Demonkind had no gods of healing to learn from so it was especially rare for a talented healer to arise in their number, rare enough

that the military was starved of them and they were practically non-existent in civilian life.

To find then, a *human* that was not only a Speaker of a healing branch, but also for whom seemingly lacked the knowledge of the centuries of racial conflict between their two species was something she previously thought impossible. To then stretch those odds even further and discover that this human appeared to have a *positive* opinion of demonkind was almost beyond belief.

The force multiplier Amelia would bring could not be understated. The average non-recoverable casualty rate of her stormtroopers on a given mission was twenty percent. Five percent would die during the assault, while the remaining fifteen percent were a mix of missing in action, those who would die on the operating table, or those who recovered but were unable to return to combat.

Even if the human could bring that twenty percent to only ten percent then the combat effectiveness of her command would skyrocket. The savings on recruitment, training, and logistics would not only help their purse strings but allow them to focus more on training specialized soldiers and build stronger cohesion in the ranks.

That was, *if* she could employ Amelia. Serena had to be thorough and there were many things left unchecked. She hadn't had nearly enough time to cover all the topics of discussion she'd wanted; where was she born? Who was her family? How could she speak Imperial but not write it? What other spells could she cast? How did she get so strong?

With any luck, the answer to these questions would be getting teased out of the human by Tomes and Dagon at this very moment. This time, with honey and sugar, as opposed to chains and dark cells.

"Captain?" A gruff voice piped up, breaking Serena from her thoughts. It was Anathor, this time speaking through a mounted stuffed windlizard. Anathor didn't *need* a mounted head to speak from, he could do it from almost any part of the ship's structure, he simply preferred to talk through

them as apparently, it felt more *natural*. "We're at the pre-appointed time," he said.

"Navigation! Status!" Serena pushed Amelia out of her mind. It was time to focus.

"Thirty-two knots! Bearing twenty degrees from north! Two thousand three hundred meters!" The navigation officer yelled out, reading the values of the pitot-static instrument in front of him. "Five leagues till we're within aetherscope range captain! Ten leagues till were horizon-visible!"

They were sailing low, just over two clicks above the lumina boundary. Port Highwind sat on an island almost as low, allowing them to get far closer than normal before they were within visible range of the port's watchtowers.

"Sensors! Report!"

"No blips! Low-level lumina noise! Aetherfield clear!" The sensors officer shouted. Even with being over two clicks away, the lumina caused interference with the aetherscopes that ringed the *Vengeance*. It was these devices that detected the aetheric combustion of a ship's lift engine and served as an early warning system where and when their observer's eyes failed.

The interference was why ships, military and civilian alike, avoided sailing low, instead, most battles and travel occurred in mid and high-sky. Get too close to the lumina boundary, and the noise would render your ship's instruments useless. Sail *into* the lumina, and the aetheric combustion would catastrophically chain-react and destroy the ship.

That is, if the ship wasn't the *Vengeance*.

"Communications! What do our eyes see?"

"Sky clear! Visibility good captain!"

"Alright... let's go swimming!" Serena cleared her throat before giving the command. "Pitch down! Ten degrees!"

“Pitch down! Ten degrees!” The helmsman responded, adjusting one of the many levers of his station.

“Pitch down! Ten degrees!” The chief engineer shouted into a speaking tube, reporting her command to the engine room. This was a practice of redundancy and clarification of her orders. The helmsman equipment was connected to the engine, whose workers would see the changes and adjustments made to their course, but those engines could be loud so every command was repeated through the speaking tube.

A few moments passed and Serena felt the *Vengeance* respond, its bow dipping slightly below the horizon. The simmering expanse of the lumina and its gentle glow were now visible, an orange blanket that formed the foundation of their world.

Thankfully, it was calm today. Even commanding the *Vengeance*, Serena knew to avoid a lumina storm.

She did the rough maths in her head but decided to have the navigation officer report it for the benefit of the room.

“Navigation! Time till impact?”

“Thirteen minutes!”

There was little left to do. Communications would report anything that needed reporting and the sensors department would soon be mostly blind. She double-checked with the weapons officer and got the green light on all barrels. The ground tactician also reported all green for the stormtroopers, who were prepping the transport ships which were attached to the sides of the *Vengeance* along with several support craft which according to the air tactician were also green.

She considered asking Anathor what Amelia was doing but decided against it. It was frustrating how that smug face kept appearing in her mind. Maybe if she found an excuse to stab her a little, it would stop happening. Perhaps the human would like a friendly spar between Speakers?

“Anathor, how’s the ship doing?” She asked the stuffed head.

“Hmm...” The windlizard paused for a moment, “It’s... excited. Looking forward to the lumina.”

Where other ships face certain destruction, the *Vengeance* liked the lumina. The ship had a supernatural ability to maintain aetheric combustion while sailing within the boundary, an ability that she, before and again now, would make great tactical use of. Serena had once asked Anathor if the ship could go even further, to *break through* the boundary itself, to reach the fabled *under-sky*, but he had only responded with; “She’s not ready yet, captain...”

“Thirty seconds till impact!” Navigation called out.

“Aetherscopes blind!” The sensors officer yelled.

“Pitch up! Five degrees!”

“Pitch up! Five degrees!” The helmsman and chief engineer responded in unison.

“Rig for silent running!”

“Rig for silent running!” The chief engineer passed the order to the engine room, and soon she felt the ship slow, as air resistance brought it down to a slower twenty knots, just as the under-hull of the ship entered the lumina.

“Rigged for silent running!” Reported the chief engineer.

“Under-hull, one point five!” The sensor officer shouted. There was a density gauge attached below and on top of the ship. Normally used to check the density of clouds they sailed through, they could also be used to estimate the density of the lumina.

“Under-hull, one point eight!”

“Maintain course!” Serena commanded. The lumina was calm today, not very dense in its upper layers. They would have to go deep to ensure they

were properly camouflaged.

The deck of the ship was swallowed by the ethereal fog, and then the cannons, and finally the windows themselves. Being in the upper layer of the lumina the blue of the mid-sky could still be seen shining through.

“Visibility one hundred meters! Under-hull, two point two! Mast, one point five!”

Serena felt a moment of pride at how well her staff worked now. When they did this originally, after much convincing from Anathor who claimed the ship *needed it*, the tension had crippled their cohesion. Now, they were almost relaxed.

Almost.

“Visibility eighty meters! Under-hull three point six! Mast, two point eight!”

Once again, a certain pair of blue eyes entered her thoughts. Damn it all.

“Anathor,” she whispered, “how goes it with Tomes and Dagon?”

“Hmm... they are playing poker, captain.”

They were doing, *what!?* She thought.

“They’re doing, *what!?*” she hissed, keeping her voice as low as possible.

“She’s winning. Dagon thinks she’s cheating and won’t let her deal anymore.”

Serena resisted the urge to grasp her horns in frustration. “Damn it Anathor, unless it’s something serious I don’t need to know everything she’s doing.”

“Hmm... you asked.”

“Shut up.”

“Visibility thirty meters! Under-hull, five point five! Mast, five point zero! Captain!”

“Level out!” She commanded. Her helmsman and engineer quickly repeated the command. Moments later she felt the ship’s bow align. “Navigation! Status!”

“Eighteen knots! Bearing twenty degrees from north! Minus one hundred twenty meters! Sailing level!”

“Captain!” The communications officer cried out. “We got cavitation!”

“Slow us down! Fifteen knots!” The orders were quickly relayed down the chain of command, and the ship soon slowed.

Cavitation could occur when sailing through thick clouds. The propeller of the ship created a region of low pressure behind it that could form bubbles that would collapse, creating noise and stressing the propeller and hull.

Communications and the chief engineer gave her the all-clear. She resisted a sigh of relief. More than a few ships had fallen from the sky due to damage sustained through cloud-borne cavitation, and the lumina was *far* thicker.

“Maintain course, two hours.” She instructed the helmsman, who nodded.

“Aye, captain!”

“Air tactician,” she said, causing the demon in question to turn away from the maps and look at her. She knew his name of course, she knew all their names, but you didn’t use names on the bridge. You used titles.

“In your command.” She said to him, turning to leave. With Dagon, her first officer occupied, the third in command was her air tactician, who would keep an eye on everything while she was gone.

“Yes, captain! Captain leaving deck!”

Serena left the bridge, deciding to head to her quarters to find something to busy her mind with. There was always bookkeeping to do, reports to write or double check. Barring any emergencies she would return on deck in an hour and a half, giving time for last-minute checks and clarification of strategies and-

How had she gotten here?

The door of the quartermaster's quarters stood before her and beyond it the sounds of conversation and... was that laughter reaching her ears? Serena reached out to open the door, stopping herself short.

What was she doing? She didn't need to babysit. Tomes and Dagon were more than capable of their tasks. It would be patronizing to constantly check in on them. She trusted them to report to her as and when needed. Micromanaging was not how she commanded.

She looked at the doorknob for a few more seconds before turning away, walking with determination until she was back in her quarters. Thankfully Anathor, who no doubt saw what happened, didn't say anything.

Sitting in her familiar level chair she felt a sense of normalcy and took a moment to appreciate the quiet. The lumina cast a gentle glow through her windows, similar to the morning sun. It would be relaxing, if they weren't a few hundred meters from certain destruction.

Serena fished around and found some reports that needed doing and set about completing them. For a few minutes nothing but the scratch of a fountain pen filled the quarters. Just as she was getting lost in her work, a familiar voice interrupted the flow.

"Captain, quartermaster on his way." The moose's head informed her.

"And Dagon?"

"With the girl, they're playing drunk demon's hand."

“Tsk!” Serena couldn’t stop her annoyance from coming out. “They’re not *drinking*, are they?”

“No captain. Quartermaster outside.”

A second later a few knocks sounded.

“Come in.” The door opened and Tomes stepped in, closing it behind her, paper in hand, spectacles on nose.

“Hello captain, Anathor said you were here. All good on bridge?”

“Had some cavitation, had to bring her down to fifteen knots.”

“Hmm,” Tomes scratched his stubble. “I remember speaking to some Ainese merchants a while back. They said some Aindo builders had come up with some new propeller designs. They curved the blades in a way that was supposed to prevent or minimize cavitation. Could be an upgrade worth considering what we do,” he finished, gesturing to the lumina outside.

“Send some feelers out, next time we make land.”

“Aye, captain.”

An awkward silence lingered, and Serena felt a headache coming on.

“Alright Tomes. What do we have?”

Her quartermaster shook the paper in his hand with a grin. “I got a few answers, but hope you’re ready for all the other questions and impossible things that arise from them.”

“Of course, why would I expect anything less? Why do *human women* have to be so damn complicated?”

“Ha! That’s all women, captain! Ah, sorry captain...” Tomes dipped his head, touching his horns as an apology. “Got carried away there... with how friendly that human is, you sort of find you let down your guard.”

“What’s that?” She asked, ignoring him and nodding to the paper in the quartermaster’s hand.

“Remember Anathor said she couldn’t read High Imperial? Well, look at this.” Tomes placed the paper down in front of her. “Dagon had a bright idea, pretended we didn’t have chips to play poker with. Gave her a pen and paper, got her to keep track of it all, and she did. That’s what she wrote.”

Serena peered down at the paper, which contained neat and organized letters of a foreign script.

“First,” Tomes said, “given the quality of the writing, that human has to either be highborn or born into wealth. She’s definitely educated. The words she uses, and her lack of slang. She ain’t some alley-rat.”

“These letters... and numbers... I feel like I’ve seen them before.” Saying that, she became certain. She had *definitely* seen this before. She raised an eyebrow at Tomes, who walked to one of her many bookcases and brought back a small black book, embossed with a golden upside-down cross.

“The Bible?” she asked. “That’s in High Imperial though.”

Tomes placed the holy book on the desk, opening it. Its many thin pages fluttered until the front of the book was reached. “Here,” he said, pointing to the page. “Read this.”

“In the year of divinity, eight hundred and twenty-six, we, the Imperial Printing Press, are honored to produce this printing of the Holy Demon Bible, translated in whole by the Imperial Cathedral, with assistance from the Centralis University, from its original *Anglish*...!” Serena felt her eyes go wide. Anglish! She knew she had seen it before, embossed and etched into the stone tablets at the Cathedral of Bone!

A holy language.

A *dead* language.

“Tomes,” she said, this time not being able to resist grabbing her horns in frustration. A habit from her childhood. “What does this even mean!? Is she a member of the church? A human saint?”

“You told me she said she wasn’t religious, right?” The quartermaster looked at her with a sympathetic look. “Don’t worry captain, it gets worse. Anathor?”

“Hmm...” came the rough voice from the moose. “It’s not quite English captain. It’s *Old English*, the proto-language the original human bible was written in, telling of the great demon of Good, Speaker of a thousand Words... Christ himself.”

“Damn right,” said Tomes, “when I twigged it was English I asked her why she wrote in that language, and get this captain; she looked at me like I asked something dumb and said *it’s what everyone wrote in and spoke, where she’s from.*”

Serena put her head in her hands, letting out a muffled groan, which didn’t stop Tomes from continuing.

“Which means captain, if she’s telling the truth, she’s either from some secret sect, some nation from one of the distant continents, or she’s from another realm.”

“She’s certainly not a native of Cascadia...” Anathor chimed in.

“Then why can she speak Imperial!? She speaks it perfectly!” Serena was able to *just* resist throwing her hands up in frustration, having regained a little bit of control. “Could it be... a blessing?”

“Aye, a blessing.” Tomes nodded.

The fell gods, and even some of their more powerful servants, could bequeath blessings upon those worthy. Blessings took many forms, but generally either enhanced or gave an ability to an individual. A language was certainly possible.

“Alright. Alright,” Serena said, “theory time. One of the fell gods, or some powerful entity from the mists, gave this human, from a land far away, the blessing to speak Imperial. They then either realm-shifted or otherwise transported her into my quarters... *for what purpose?*” Serena intentionally left out the tidbit that Amelia had changed bodies. That was the type of secret she wanted to keep close to her chest.

Tomes shrugged. “It could be that, but then again, it just raises further questions... Why her? Why *you*?”

“Let’s put this to the side for now. My head’s going to fucking explode if we keep going down this line of reasoning. Hopefully, I’ll wake up tomorrow and it’ll have all been a bad dream.” She eyed her quartermaster. “What else is there? Did you find out about how she became a Speaker?”

“I asked. She said she *trained*. I asked what kind of training and she said she wouldn’t say, not that she didn’t want to, but she didn’t know how to explain it without giving an inaccurate picture of events. I poked further but she clammed up.”

“The human claims she spent most of her life in a hospital bed,” Anathor said, “I’d be *very interested* in knowing what kind of bed-bound training can produce a Speaker. Could it be a blessing?”

“No blessing in history has ever made anyone a Speaker.” Tomes said, shaking his head.

“We could find out,” Serena said. “The human church would be able to tell the nature of the blessing if they examined her, wouldn’t they?”

Tomes took his spectacles off, steaming them up with some hot breath then setting about cleaning them on his shirt. “How are we going to get a *human priest* to do that? We could kidnap one, but then we’ll have the Inquisitor Navy after us, and that’ll be the end of us, *Vengeance* or no *Vengeance*.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that...” Athanor said softly, almost too quiet to hear.

Serena shrugged, “Guess we’ll wait and see if the opportunity arrives. We’ve already got one human friendly toward demonkind, why not another?” Tomes chuckled at that. “Did you find out anything else about her powers? She can speak the First Word but is she a fourth circle mage?”

“She said she was not sure and would need to experiment. Not sure what that means, but then I thought if she had a blessing that helped her become a Speaker, she could be quite new to it, and not know her limits.”

Serena found herself nodding at that. Unlike Tomes, she and Anathor knew Amelia was in a new body. Perhaps the soul transfer meant she wasn’t yet sure what she was capable of. Amelia had said she hadn’t Spoken in her new body yet.

“As for first, second, and third circle...” Tomes continued, “She said she knows a range of healing spells, ward spells, and what she called support spells.” He took a breath. “And for all of these, she claimed she could cast them as a *field* spell.”

Serena narrowed her eyes at that. It was more than she hoped. “How many spells can a typical human healer cast?”

“Somewhere between four to six as a third circle healer. Maybe ten as a Speaker of the Words. But the way she was talking it implied she knew *a lot* more.”

“And her aether capacity? Did she go into detail on that?”

“I er... didn’t get around to it. To be honest, at this point it was hard for me and Dagon to keep a straight face. You would have had to be there, captain. She was talking about all of this so *casually*. I don’t think she realizes how taboo it normally is for a Speaker to discuss their abilities.”

“Yeah, that’s in line with how she’s behaved with me.” Serena leaned back in her chair, allowing a few deep breaths to calm her mind. “Family? Friends?”

“No family, she claims. Didn’t ask about friends.”

“And about her employment?”

“Yeah...” Tomes looked awkward suddenly, “about that.”

“Just tell me, Tomes, I can’t get any more surprised.”

“Well, she seemed *especially* delighted about being your *maid*. Even when I used the term adviser she kept referring to herself as a maid. Talked about wanting a proper uniform and everything.”

Serena felt her eyebrow twitch. Speaker or not, she was definitely going to find an excuse to stab her. Maybe she’ll say it’s practice for her to get used to the new body and its abilities.

“Compensation?” She asked.

“Offered her twelve hundred Denarii a month. Fair wage for a Speaker and to be honest she’s probably worth more, especially considering how lacking our side is with healers. She’s ignorant enough that we could short-change her, but why risk losing her when she finds out her value? Not like we could stop her leaving.”

“Agreed. Anything else?”

“She wants me to teach her how to write, High Imperial that is. Figured that’ll be fine, and gives a good excuse for me to find some more answers. And...” Tomes put his hands behind his back, shuffling awkwardly.

Could headaches get headaches? Serena was sure that was about to happen.

“... she wants you to teach her the sword. Said she’s got no need to get better at magic, said she’s never held a sword in her life.” As Tomes said this he tensed, as if expecting an outburst from her. Instead, she found herself smiling.

“Captain?”

“Oh, I think we can do that. I think that would work *very well*.”

“Hmm...” Anathor piped up. “You have that look in your eye again, captain.”

“What look!?” she snapped.

“Nothing. Nothing...”

“Prepare the contract, Tomes. Dismissed.”

“Yes, captain.” The quartermaster turned and opened the door, but before leaving, his eyes met with hers. “You know captain... with her being a Speaker... with everything that’s happened, everything we’ve seen... do you think... with her... there’s a chance?”

“A chance for what?”

“That... never mind. This old man is thinking stupid things again.”

“Get some rest, Tomes. Dismissed.”

“Yes, captain.”

The door closed and Serena let herself stare off into blank space. She had known Tomes for many years, they barely needed to talk to communicate with each other. She knew what he was going to ask, and she was thankful he didn’t. Given their situation, there were some questions that really, *really* should not be asked.

For the wrong answer would condemn her and her crew to certain death.

Chapter Four: The Battle of Port Highwind

“Pitch up! Twenty degrees!”

Returning to the bridge, Serena had been greeted by the familiar air of pre-battle tension. There was no changing plans now, no more debating and theory-crafting over maps of defenses. They were locked in, their hand having been dealt and the dice thrown.

Port Highwind was an important logistic hub for the Republic, through which demonkind had long suspected aid was funneled in from the other human nations. It was the largest island of the archipelago, floating three clicks above the lumina. Despite its importance, due to its ability to act as a supply hub for the front line, the port only kept a squadron of frigates and interceptors.

Even that was somewhat impressive, considering the state of the war. It wasn't the frigates that were the port's primary protection, those scouts and light-ships were mostly there to send early warning to the Republic's reserve fleets, which would scramble from the air-staging bases in the north, thirty clicks out. No, it was the static defenses that secured the low-lying port's security.

If their information was correct, they could expect the battlements of Port Highwind to be laden with no less than forty-two six-and-a-half-inch artillery systems, paired with several dozen lighter anti-air turrets. That heavy artillery could fire a shell over thirty kilometers and given Port Highwind's open sky, it was easy shooting at any imperial ships that came close. Battleships would be hammered before their own guns got in range, and lighter craft would be shredded by the flak rounds.

However, the port had a weakness that only the *Vengeance* could take advantage of; its low-sky position. Any other ship would be unable to get close to the supply hub, either spotted by the screen of scouts, detected by the port's aetherscopes, or simply seen from their watchtowers.

But a ship that could travel into the lumina? It was something that wasn't supposed to be possible, yet the *Vengeance* did it anyway, and now the ship was a half-klick from the port, making its final moves before the battle would begin. The stormtroopers were loaded and her escort frigates reporting the all-clear.

It was time.

The moment the propellers were clear of the thicker lumina fog, Serena gave the order.

"Flank speed!"

"Flank speed!" yelled the helmsman, pushing the lever that controlled the ship's speed all the way to the red zone, where someone had written 'Danger!' along with a skull and crossbones.

"Flank speed!" roared the chief engineer, screaming down the speaking tube. The ship shuddered and its hull creaked as new forces took hold, and the deep hum of the lift and propulsion engine could be heard, even here in the bridge, as every knot of speed was forced out of them. The noise would be deafening in the engine room, but alas, the engineers didn't need to hear, they just needed to keep the engines from blowing.

They broke out of the lumina like a great arcwhale breaching a cloud. The ship's bow pointed steeply up and through the port side bridge windows Serena could see the reinforced wall of the defenses looming, artillery barrels poking out, appearing like shadows from this angle beneath the sun.

Communications worked quickly.

"Abyss one, three, and four confirmed! Abyss five... six, confirmed!" Her tacticians placed magnetic icons representing the defenses on the map of the

port, their position having been verified visually. Looked like their information was good.

“Armed tower at chalice one! Armed tower at jinx three!” Information flooded in from communications to the tacticians and weapons officer, who would prioritize and delegate targeting of the ship's cannons.

“Weapons free!” Serena gave the order.

“Weapons free! Hit the towers!” repeated the weapons officer.

“Launch escorts!”

“Escorts away!”

As she saw the six barrels turn, selecting their targets, the squadron of escort fighters, painted a deep red, screamed past. A moment later the guns roared to life in a thunderous symphony of destruction, as if the ship itself was breathing fire and fury. The bridge was heavily armored but the vibrations could be still be felt throughout the steel and wood structure.

A moment of silence, the briefest period of violent calm as the sound of the guns died, and then came the telltale sounds of destruction as their explosive shells found the isolated watch towers, blasting huge holes in and through them, causing their collapse.

The *Vengeance's* engines hummed as it tore towards mid-sky. Just as the ship was about to come level with the defenses, Serena shouted out the next stage of their attack plan.

“Release gliders!”

“Releasing gliders!”

Their stormtroopers, nearly two hundred of them, were crammed like coals in a furnace in the dozen gliders they had attached to the *Vengeance*. These heavily armored gliders, as the name suggested, had no propulsion of their own and served merely to keep the demons inside alive as they transited to

their targets. Luckily demons were made of sterner stuff than most squishy humans, for these gliders less *glided* and more *crash-landed*.

A shout rang out, “Gliders released!” Each squad of troops would aim to guide their transport as close as possible to their prearranged destinations. Their velocity would carry the gliders, and the troops within them, in an arc over the walls and into the port.

In reality, many of them would fall short or overshoot their targets and the soldiers would need to improvise, the ability to do so determined who was picked as a squad commander or not.

Just as the last shout faded, the *Vengeance* cleared the defenses. The ship, being pitched up twenty degrees, meant the port wasn’t yet visible through the bridge windows.

“Level out!”

The side observation rooms, as well as the under-hull observation pods, would be able to see clearly, and soon information came streaming into the bridge.

“Abyss seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven and thirteen, verified! Armed watchtower at chalice seven, chalice nine!” The weapons officer and his subordinates hurried to coordinate the under-hull guns, while the tacticians hurried to add and remove models from the map.

“Communications! Find their staging! Navigation! Get us turning! Roll thirty degrees!”

“Yes, captain!” The two officers responded and a flurry of commands was given out. She intended to put the *Vengeance* in a circular turn, low and within the boundaries of the port's ringed defenses, relying on surprise and firepower to destroy the fleet-endangering static artillery. The ship groaned as it rolled and every demon in the room had to adjust their limbs so the thirty-degree tilt wouldn’t throw them to the floor.

“Staging found! Three... belay that! Four light craft identified! Grid six by eleven!” Communications shouted out, causing Serena to cast a look at the map on the table below her, identifying the location. They had found the air staging platforms for the port's fighter squadron. Some would be out forming a scout screen, no doubt hurrying to return as their aetherscopes picked up the *Vengeance's* engines. The rest, however, were landed at the staging towers, idle.

“Weapons! Prioritize the staging! Grid six by eleven!”

“Aye, captain! Grid six by eleven!” The weapons officer shouted into a speaker tube. A few painful seconds later the guns re-aligned, the roll of the ship allowing them a straight shot to the other side of the port. All was still for a moment and then the shuddering crescendo of the guns sounded as a broadside, followed by another and then another, launched explosive shells into the grid square containing the staging towers, bringing them down like they were made of matchsticks.

“Good work! Weapons! Focus the battlements! We'll do a full circle!” There were at least forty-two static defenses on the walls, and it was *required* for these to be non-functional or captured for the final part of the plan. Another explosion flashed across the bridge windows as one of her fighters hit the stored munitions in one of the watchtowers, blowing it into oblivion.

An air siren finally started to ring out, the element of surprise now lost. It was faint on the bridge but would be impossible to ignore in the port. Every republican soldier and sailor would be rushing to battle stations. It was a race against the clock, to disable those guns before they could finish the laborious task of turning them inwards.

“Captain! Aetherfield! Three signatures! Bearing one-ninty! Two'o'clock! Eight clicks!” Sensors shouted out. The scouts they had stealthed past were returning, now in range of the *Vengeance's* aetherscopes.

“Notify the fighters!”

“Yes, captain!”

“Turret one jammed!” The weapons officer exclaimed, the turret in question falling silent while its brothers and sisters kept up the staccato of shell fire.

“Turret one!” screamed the chief engineer down one of the many speaking tubes in front of him. “Make haste!”

“Abyss twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-eight confirmed destroyed!”

A bead of sweat fell into Serena’s eye, but she refused to blink. She couldn’t miss a thing. A battle as risky as this meant seconds could make the difference between success and failure.

“Taking fire! Starboard under-hull!” A voice shouted. Something from inside the port was hitting them.

“Anathor!” yelled Serena.

“Holding, captain!” The stuffed windlizard yelled back, “It’s only flak! They haven’t time to load anything else!”

“Weapons! Get the under-hull guns on it!”

“Aye, captain!”

Thankfully they weren’t being hit by armor-piercing rounds, all thanks to their point-blank surprise attack. A fortress like Port Highwind would have its defense strategy centered around a flak screen first, expecting to engage an attacker at range before needing to switch to something more solid.

“Abyss thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three, destroyed!”

“Watchtowers destroyed!”

“Captain!” Announced the ground tactician, “We’ve secured the gatehouses!” Port Highwind’s walls could only be accessed through a gatehouse, one in each cardinal direction. These were the primary objectives of the stormtroopers, whose landings would have only added to the confusion and chaos.

Now, with the gatehouses secured, they would own the walls, and with it, the port.

“Deck cannons! Ceasefire! Tell the troops to take the walls!” She gave the order. No need to destroy the remaining artillery if they could capture it. It was a better result than she had dared hope for.

“Yes, captain!” came the chorus of replies.

“Turret one back up!” yelled the chief engineer.

“Hmm... we’re not getting hit by flak anymore, captain!” Anathor declared, “Looks like we got them!”

“Captain!” The ground tactician shouted, “We failed to take the citadel! Squad six and seven took heavy casualties!”

“Pull them back!” Serena ordered, “What are we looking at!?”

“Somewhere between fifty and a hundred republicans holding up in there. We’ve destroyed the rooftop guns but storming it will be costly, and...” the tactician paused for a moment, “it’s where they funneled all the civilians!”

Serena couldn’t help biting her tongue. She could order them to bring the citadel down, killing everyone inside, soldiers and civilians alike. Part of her *wanted* to do it, and some captains would have already given the order.

But, that would make her no better than the *humans*.

An image from her childhood threatened to surface in her mind, but she squashed it down. Now was not the time.

“Finish securing the walls! Keep one of the under-hull guns shooting sporadically at the citadel. Keep them panicking and from having any bright ideas!”

Several more large explosions hit the port, as stores of munitions were detonated by stray shells or sabotage from the ground squads. There was no

point in trying to secure the munitions for themselves, human calibers were not compatible with demon guns.

A minute passed and reports came in of mass surrendering of the unlucky soldiers that were on the walls when the attack started. Those that weren't cut down in the shell fire would quickly find any further resistance useless, surrounded by the ground forces and the *Vengeance* circling above them.

Other than the citadel, a few pockets of resistance sprang up, stubbornly holding on to the false hope of a reprieve. These locations were identified and a few rounds of the ship's deck guns were more than enough to quench them.

"What about the scouts?" She asked the sensors officer. Having seen how the battle was going it was possible they would flee, to inform republican headquarters of the attack. It was likely one or two of them had already broken off out of aetherscope range, and there was nothing to be done about that.

"Three signatures! Bearing one-eighty! One klick! Three'o'clock! Wait, they're breaking off... Captain! Torpedoes! Incoming!"

She swore. "Pitch down! Level out!" She commanded, trying to get the ship out of its roll so it could face as much of its thicker side armor towards the threat. Torpedoes! Damn the seven hells! When had the humans put a torpedo on *light-craft*!?

Serena did the mental math, a torpedo launch at half a klick away, that gave them...

No time at all.

She saw, eyes widening, as the first torpedo flew past the front deck, and a moment later the left side of the deck was engulfed in a tremendous explosion as another one slammed into the ship's armor, ripping through it like paper, throwing out blue flame and light that, for a moment, blinded her vision.

Serena was thrown to the ground, the shock wave too much, her ears ringing from the deafening sounds. It didn't end though, as the explosions kept coming.

"Secondaries!" a voice cried out from somewhere in the bridge, almost too faint to hear, as another huge explosion ripped turret three from the ship's structure, flipping it through the air like a coin, its munitions detonating catastrophically.

An alarm rang out. Anathor was saying something but she couldn't hear him.

The helmsman was on the floor, in a daze. Seven hells! Serena gritted her teeth, forcing herself to her feet, and grabbed the helmsman's station. She turned the ship, trying to rotate it so the damaged armor wasn't vulnerable to another hit.

If the *Vengeance* was a battleship, it would be too slow to respond, but it was a light cruiser with its engines running hot, and thankfully the torpedo had hit near the bow of the ship and not the engines. It responded quickly, and as Serena turned the ship she saw, through the smoke and fire on deck, two of the enemy fighters had been shot down with the third being chased by the escorts.

"Damage report! Anathor!" Her hearing was slowly returning.

"Captain!" The guardian of the ship cried out. "*We* closed the bulkheads! *We* stopped it chain-reacting to the other turrets! *We* have fires to put out! Decks one, two, three, and five! It's a big hole! What the hell was that torpedo!?"

During times of crisis, Anathor would speak like this, using the term *we* to refer to himself and the ship. Serena didn't quite know if she should treat the ship as a person or... something else.

"Well done!" She shouted, "...casualties!?"

“Dead gunners, dead engineers, captain! We have wounded! Two dozen sailors, maybe more!”

“Tomes and Dagon? The girl?”

“They’re fine! Took a knock on the head! She’s healing them up... oh... what kind of *magic* is that...”

“Get Dagon here! Keep Tomes and the girl there! I won’t risk her till we have the all clear!”

“Yes, captain!”

A flash in the distance and Serena saw the final enemy fighter go down. *What the hell was that torpedo?* They should have only been small torpedoes carrying a small amount of explosives, something the side armor should be able to handle. But that hit like it was a battleship weapon!

“Anathor! Call medical in here!” She shouted out, seeing that a few of the officers and subordinates were groaning. The helmsman also seemed to have a concussion of sorts. “Only a few, send most of them to the impact area! Get the wounded to the med-bay!”

She brought the ship's speed down to half, giving the engines a chance to cool. Running at flank speed, a full sixty knots would eventually blow the engines, as well as burn through inordinate amounts of moon-crystal fueling the aethric combustion.

“Sensors! Anything!”

“Negative!”

“Do we still have fires?”

“Last of them being dealt with, captain!” They had procedures in place for fire-fighting. Buckets and stockpiles of sand were spread across the ship, and the few sailors who had a talent for the rare art of air magic would do their best to snuff the flames.

“Captain!” A new voice rang out, and a familiar set of rams horns on a bald head appeared. “What the hell happened!”

“Dagon! Some type of new torpedo hit us! Never seen anything like it!” She spat on the floor. “Fired from a light-craft! What have the republicans come up with now!?”

“Captain, you’re bleeding!” Behind Dagon a wave of medical staff descended on the bridge, tending to injuries and wounds. One of them tried to approach her but she waved them off. As a Speaker she was inherently more resistant to physical damage.

“I’m fine! I want you to take command, I need-“

“The citadel!” Someone yelled out. Serena didn’t bother waiting for a report, instead moving to the starboard observation room and looking herself, leaving the helmsman station for Dagon to handle.

The view took her by surprise. The first torpedo had gone over the deck, the second had hit the ship and she now knew where the third went. One side of the citadel lay in ruins, its bulky walls having collapsed unto itself and an enormous crater signaled where the torpedo had struck. She could just about make out her stormtroopers moving into the building, taking advantage of the chaos to secure the final objective.

She returned to the bridge. With the enemy craft destroyed, walls secured and the citadel falling. The battle was essentially over.

“Bring us outside the wall Dagon. South side. We’ll dock up, bring the injured troops on board, and the bodies of the fallen. See what repairs we need.” Serene didn’t want to land the ship inside the port, as it would be vulnerable to sabotage or a surprise attack. Instead, she’d dock against the outside wall, from the direction they attacked from, using the wall as impromptu armor for their weak side.

“In your command.” She ordered Dagon, who saluted.

“Yes, captain!” He gave her a quizzical look, seeing she hadn’t left the bridge yet. “What else?”

“Send word to the fleet. Tell them the port is captured. Assuming the republicans got a message out, we’ll have no more than four hours before the response fleet arrives. Our battleships need to be here before that.” She waited for Dagon to affirm before continuing. “I’ll get the human, see if she’s worth what we’re going to pay her,” she quietly finished. The fact she was going to be *paying* a human had not yet spread amongst the crew.

“Yes, captain! Captain leaving deck!”

Serena left the bridge and while heading towards her destination she felt the ship’s inertia adjust, as Dagon maneuvered it against the port’s walls. Sailors, some injured and some being carried, passed her in a rush. Serena did the best she could to keep her back straight and chin up. A captain always needed to portray strength and control.

Finding herself at Tome’s quarters she opened the door without knocking.

“Hello!” Amelia bounced up to her like an excited wolfhound. “You’re bleeding! Let me get that for you!” The human reached to touch her head, and Serena grabbed the wrist on reflex.

They stood there, frozen for a moment. Looking at each other. One set of red, crimson eyes narrowed, while another a set of blue orbs, wide.

“Oh?” Amelia said, “Don’t you want me to heal you?”

“... save your aether. We have many injured.” In response to this, the human made a noise of dissatisfaction, putting her remaining hand on her hip.

“Believe *me*, I have more than enough aether for you, and everyone else! *Now let me heal you.*” They glared at each other until Selena relented. Her head had started to ache. Even so, she couldn’t help but keep one hand on her sword as Amelia reached for her.

Then, a golden light started flowing from Amelia's skin. It danced like rays of sun through clouds, and within it, Selena could see hues of royal blue. The spell traveled through Amelia's arm and suddenly Selena felt *comforted*, the pain entirely vanishing as warmth spread through her. Unbidden, a memory of being hugged by her mother came to mind, and she felt a tear roll down her cheek.

It quickly faded and in its place, Selena found herself reinvigorated and clear-minded. Amazingly, even the aches of old injuries, her shoulder that liked to twinge, all felt like they were completely cured!

Serena made a few motions, teasing her limbs in ways that would normally trigger a painful response, but finding none came. So, this was the power of a human healer.

"That's... amazing." She said softly.

"Mmm!" Amelia nodded enthusiastically. "Glad you liked it!"

A few moments passed in silence, and Serena looked at Amelia in a way she never thought she could ever look at a human. A look of *gratitude*.

"Captain," said Tomes, interrupting the moment. "Anathor kept us updated. A torpedo?"

"Yes." Serena forced herself back into captain mode. "Something new."

"I fell over when it happened!" Amelia said, "And it was so loud! All the books came off the shelves! Did... a lot of people die?" Serena opened her mouth to chastise the girl, for speaking so casually about her crew, but stopped when she saw, in those blue eyes, a spark of maturity and determination that was not normally present.

"Yes..." Serena said, "and, plenty to heal. Have you signed the contract?"

"Ah, about that, captain..." Tomes trailed off.

"I can't read it!" Amelia piped up. "How can I sign something I can't read?"

“I will read it out to you,” Serena said, “and on the dignity of my name I will not deceive you.” Amelia bit her thumb, seemingly thinking it over.

“Okay!”

“We don’t have time right now. Would you be willing to assist the injured before the contract is signed? We will back-date it to this morning.”

“Sure!” the girl nodded.

“Before that, we need to find you a set of clothes. Tomes?” Amelia was still wearing the simple undergarments she arrived in. It would not do to let a woman walk around the ship showing so much of their body!

Especially one looking like *that*!

“Aye, captain,” said Tomes, moving to a wardrobe. “We can’t put her in a proper uniform, her not being part of the crew and all, so I found this.” Tomes fished out a set of clothes. “Republican officer. Only one in her size.” The white and blue clothes were a stark contrast to their dark uniforms. They kept examples of the enemy’s uniforms, so soldiers could learn to identify enemy officers in the field. This was one such set.

“I ripped off the military markings and figured we’d get it to a tailor, but it should do for now,” Tomes explained.

“Better than nothing,” Serena said, pointing to the human. “You. Clothes.” She pointed to the washroom. “Quickly.”

“Yes, captain!” Amelia grabbed the clothes, hugging them tight before disappearing into the side room. As the door closed, Serena turned back to her quartermaster.

“Sent the message to the fleet. They should get here in time if everything is alright on their end. If not... some of the static defenses survived, we’ll have to see if we can scare them off with it.”

Tomes nodded. “With the port ours... their entire flank is vulnerable. They can’t have ever expected they’ll lose it.”

Serena shrugged. “Who knows... This damn proxy war might be over by next year.”

“An end of the war? That would be nice. Depends on what the other human nations do. You’ve heard the rumors, captain? About the coalition they’re talking about.”

“Tsk! It’s just saber-rattling! They won’t commit, not over a rebelling republic.”

“I hope so, captain. I hope so.” Tomes cleaned his spectacles, and a moment later the washroom door opened.

“Couldn’t figure out how to tighten the bloody belt!” Amelia said. “How do I look?” She gave a twirl, the neat uniform fitting her form surprisingly well. Its white and blue colors complimenting her golden hair and blue yes.

She looked... looked...

Serena found herself biting her tongue.

“Let’s go,” she said. “Tomes, head to the bridge. I’ll be there after visiting the med-bay.” She looked at Amelia. “Don’t talk to anyone but me. Keep your head down. Don’t look at any crew members in the eyes. So far they only know of you as a captive healer. And for the sake of the fell gods, don’t let anyone know you’re a Speaker!”

“Aye, aye captain!” Amelia said, straightening her back and saluting, her face serious yet cheerful.

“And don’t salute me! You’re not part of the crew!”

“Nope! I’m your *maid*!”

“... Shut up.”

They left, Tomes heading off in one direction while she and Amelia went in another.

“Walk in front of me, like a captive would. I’m going to hold your hair. It will make it look convincing. Try not to look so... happy!” Serena positioned Amelia in front, and pushed her fingers through Amelia’s hair, grabbing it.

She decided to ignore the strange sound that came out of the human.

They walked like that, through the wooden and steel corridors, down towards the med-bay. They didn’t see many sailors, and those they did see would look surprised and some eyes would narrow in disgust but otherwise, no-one said anything to Amelia.

As they approached the med-bay things got more busy. Medical rushed back and forth, carrying water, bandages, and more of the injured. The med-bay was a section of the ship’s third deck, four rooms had been allocated and filled with beds and sanitation equipment. These four rooms were now full of crying, swearing, screaming, and unconscious demons, their injuries the result of that torpedo as well as the ground operations.

“Medical officer!” Serena called, and soon a demon appeared, covered in the blood of a dozen patients. Shorter than her, with stubby horns was Hillbrand, her medical officer and one of the few women on the ship.

“Captain! I... *who’s this!?*” Hillbrand hissed, glaring at Amelia.

“This brat is the human healer I caught. Figured she could help us out, isn’t that right, *human?*” She punctuated the end of her sentence by tightening the grip on Amelia’s hair.

Again, she decided to ignore the weird noise she made.

“Hillbrand, where are the most critical casualties?”

“Over here captain, but captain, are you sure? *A human mage!?*”

“Rather do this than have more dead, officer. Don’t worry, she’s nice and docile.”

And really annoying. She thought to herself.

“Aye captain... over here.” Hillbrand led them to a line of beds whose occupants were breathing their last. “These haven’t got much life left in them. I gave them something for the pain. Not much else to do, unless this human healer has the aether for it.”

Serena looked at Amelia, who was looking at the dying demons with an expression of shock.

“Well,” she asked, “can you do it?”

“Uh, sorry,” Amelia looked at her, a picture of sadness painted on her face. “I’m not used... it’s okay... I’ll do it. Can you let go, please?”

Serena obliged, releasing her hand, and letting the silky hair leave her fingers. She wasn’t exactly sure about the capability of healers, and how many Amelia, who seemed more capable than most, would be able to heal. If she could mend the worst dozen or two, then they could take it from there.

The human stood quiet, eyes closed.

A moment passed.

“You-!” exclaimed Hillbrand, but Serena put a stop to it with a glare.

“Let her work.” She ordered. She could sense something in Amelia, something building. A spell being prepared. “Say it out loud,” she commanded the human. At first, she thought Amelia hadn’t heard her, but then the human’s eyes opened and she looked at her, a small smile forming.

“*Third circle*,” she said, her mouth closing, before opening once again.

“***Divine healing of Aseco.***”

And the room exploded with light.

Chapter Five: The Contract

Amelia smiled at her demon captain, feeling the aether inside her begging to be expressed, to be *spoken*. The pressure was unusual, reminding her of the few times she had flown on an airplane and how her ears would pop. Although, this pressure was across her entire body and felt... nice.

“Divine healing of Aseco.”

Warmth, love, and light exploded from her body, filling the space with waves of gold and blue. Amelia felt the aether pour out of her, and the atmosphere seemed to *hum* in satisfaction as it was saturated with energy. She could sense the spell seeking out the injured demons, wanting to fix them, to make them whole again.

Inside her, Amelia could faintly feel her aether reserves slightly reduce. It was of little concern though, the ridiculous base stats she’d inherited gave her a titanic amount of aether regeneration.

The last wisps of golden light dissipated, and silence filled the air. Two crimson eyes, situated under two very pretty horns were wide with shock, looking at her with an expression Amelia had come rather to enjoy. Her capable captain, being so tremendously capable and cool, quickly recovered.

“Put it down,” the captain's eyes flickered from her to her side, “Hillbrand,” she said softly, raising an arm.

Amelia turned her head and couldn’t stop herself from twitching. Pointing at her forehead was the barrel of a firearm, held in the hand of the medical officer who had previously been glaring at her.

“What did you *do!*?” The demon hissed at her, eyes full of suspicion.

Amelia shrugged. “What I was told. Healed them,” she said. “Mind putting that down? You could hurt someone...” She was running more than just the *Ward of Thew*, having stacked multiple defensive spells and cloaking them in turn. Keeping them up was only slightly slowing her aether regeneration. Amelia knew instinctively that it would take far more than a mere firearm to kill her. As she was now, she suspected it was a coin flip whether she

could take one of the ship's explosive shells straight on. When she was in her cell, her high perception had overheard Tomes talking about shooting her, in the head no less!

It was very rude of him! Centuries of racial conflict or not, didn't they see how awfully cute she was!? Nevertheless, it had only caused her to double her resolve, she was determined to have the captain, Tomes, Dagon and the rest of the crew view her in a positive light! She loved demons! It was frustrating, if only she was in her game character's original body, she was sure it would be much easier.

Or... maybe not. Amelia Thornheart the demonic dreadmage was more or less a demigod. Worship was something she definitely didn't want!

The captain, *her captain*, put a palm against the firearm, pushing it gently to the side, and as she did, faint cries started to fill the room.

"I'm... I'm healed!"

"Praise the fell gods!"

"It doesn't hurt anymore!"

"My horn... it grew back!"

"Captain," said Hillbrand, still glaring at Amelia, "that was *third circle* magic, like nothing I've ever seen. You can't hope to keep a mage like that captive, even if it's *you*." She emphasized the last word, no doubt hinting towards the captain's ability as a Speaker.

"That's because she isn't a captive, not anymore. I'm hiring her, and having her work under me. This human... is sympathetic to the cause."

"Mmm, mm!" Amelia nodded furiously. "Demons are awesome! I like your horns!"

"Captain!" The medical officer protested, ignoring her comment, "There's no such thing! She must be a church mage! A republican spy!"

"She is not. I've verified it with a truth-finder. The uniform is something we gave her, it was all we had."

"Furthermore..." came the now familiar voice of Anathor, speaking through the mounted head of some kind of stuffed bear, with boar-like tusks. "The ship believes in her... even likes her. She isn't a threat, Hillbrand."

"Captain..."

"Holster your weapon, officer." A sharp edge took form in the captain's voice. A moment of hesitation passed, and the medical demon finally obeyed her superior.

"The crew won't like this..." the demon said.

“Look around, Hillbrand,” the captain said, gesturing, “they’re damn *healed!* They might not trust *her*, I don’t need them to. I need them to trust *me*, and tolerate *her*. Nothing more. Can you do that?”

Hillbrand cast a look around the room. The demons that were previously minutes from dying were now moving their limbs, expressions of amazement and confusion on their faces. One demon was clenching their hand, their arm having regrown after just being amputated.

“... aye, captain. I can do that.”

“Excellent work, soldier. Now, you.” The captain faced her with a stern, but thankfully not an angry, expression. “How’s your reserves? Are you able to do... that again? There are three more treatment rooms.”

“Yes! But, no need!” Amelia piped up, flashing a smile. She was feeling a sense of euphoria, an after-effect of not just the movement of her aether, but also the feeling of being able to heal so many! The feeling of doing *good*.

“No need?” The crimson eyes looked confused.

“H-Hillbrand!” A group of demons, dressed similarly to the medical officer, came pouring through the doorway.

“What was that light!? The others...”

“No need!” Amelia said again, not being able to stop herself from sounding a little smug.

“I did them all!”

The captain blinked at her.

“I did the whole ship!”

“... Oh, dear...” Anathor quietly said in the background.

They returned to the captain’s quarters, Serena having hurried her back after Amelia had turned into a miniature sun. The captain had told Anathor to instruct Tomes that she would be late, explaining to Amelia that it was time to *lock her down*.

Serena sat in the captain's chair, while Amelia awkwardly stood to the side. She had suspected her little act of healing had somewhat impressed the captain more than she had planned, giving Amelia pause as to what level a typical human healer was supposed to be working at.

The healing branch of *Aseco* was one of the more powerful paths, boasting excellent healing spells, moderate defensive capabilities, and even a few holy lightning attacks. While she *could* attack, Amelia had decided to avoid

that if possible. She would be a healer, not a soldier. Besides, if it really came down to it, she had far more powerful Words from the combat branches of the demonic gods that she could Speak.

The captain was reading over Amelia's contract and the room was quiet barring the occasional shuffling of paper. Eventually, Serena put the paper down, before writing something on a note and showing her.

"Do you know what this is?" She asked Amelia.

It wasn't English, nor was it the Imperial script she wanted to learn. Its lettering was sharp, with many jagged and vertical lines. She had never seen this before. Amelia told Serena as much.

"It is the language of the Words," the captain said, "a phonetic language so that the Words of power can be communicated across the barriers of language and culture. This is one of the First Words; *Aseco*. This is the one you can Speak, yes?"

"That's right!" Amelia wouldn't lie to her captain, but until they had a better relationship, and more trust between them, she would avoid sharing that she could do far more than just Speak one word. "What Word can you Speak?" she asked, curiosity forcing the question out. There were a few candidates in her mind, Amelia suspected the captain was following the path of one of the demonic sword gods.

"The first rule of being a Speaker, keep your cards close to your chest. You are far too willing to answer questions about your abilities, and to *use them*," Serena said, pointing at her. "You should have healed everyone one by one, with a smaller individual spell, like when you healed me earlier. Word is going to get around about this. It will reach the ears of my superiors. Even if everyone finds out that you're a Speaker, do not be forthcoming with information about your Word."

"But, depending on the spell, and when you Speak, everyone will know the Word immediately!" Amelia protested.

"And until that moment, no one will know you're a Speaker unless you've *told them*. The element of surprise can be the difference between victory and defeat. Many Speakers on the front-line constantly change their appearance, or blend in with the common soldiers." Serena sat back, looking thoughtful. "I will have Tomes act as your tutor in more than just Imperial. The language of the words, the things you should know as a Speaker yet do not... he will teach them to you, as far as his duty permits him. That is the first clause of the contract."

“Okay! What else?”

“I will teach you the sword, to the best of my ability. Much of it will depend on your own talent. I am a busy demon, but will try and find time for you at least bi-weekly in this matter.”

“Cool! I can’t wait!” Amelia gave her two enthusiastic thumbs up.

“I will pay you twelve hundred denarii monthly. One of my foot soldiers receives a salary of eight denarii in the same period, so you are being valued equal to one hundred and fifty soldiers,” Serena paused, “...but, given your display just now, we will revisit this at a later date. There is only so much of my estate I can use without permission from my family head.”

Oh? This was something new. Her captain was becoming more and more interesting.

“Family head? Estate? Are you nobility?” She asked.

“Yes. You should refer to me as Lady Halen in private, and as captain when on the ship...” Serena raised a finger, “Actually, refer to me as Lady Halen at all times. It will reinforce the notion that you are working for me, as part of my personal retinue that I have the privilege to establish as a noble, rather than part of the crew.”

“Halen? Your surname?”

“My family name, yes.”

“Mmm... Serena Halen. Serena Halen...” Amelia rolled the name around her tongue. It was a lovely name, fitting for such a beautiful demon with such magnificent horns. “Serena Halen... Serena Halen...”

“Stop saying my name.”

“Yes, Lady Halen!” A question popped up in her mind. “What family do you have? Any brothers or sisters?”

“There is the patriarch, my father, my mother also. I have two younger sisters.”

“No brothers?”

“He died during the war.”

Oops! She didn’t want to bring up any bad memories. Amelia tried to give a sympathetic look but was interrupted before she could say anything to ameliorate the suddenly chilly atmosphere.

“Tsk! We are going off track!” Serena jabbed the paper in front of her.

“Here are your obligations, you are, within the bounds of being reasonable, to provide your services of healing to my battalion. You are on call, always, and must have my permission to leave my service or the ship. You have no

obligation to partake in battle directly, although if I request it you will provide your services on the front line, where every effort will be taken by myself to ensure your safety. And..."

Amelia tilted her head as Serena trailed off.

"... you are not to provide your services to the enemy, nor render them aid in any way or form, magical or otherwise."

"Hmm..." Amelia said, placing a finger on her temple. "I refuse!" She expected Serena to have an outburst, but was surprised to find her silent, looking at her calmly. When the captain made it clear she was waiting for more, Amelia explained; "I spent years in bed, mostly immobile. I'm not going to let the same fate fall upon anyone else, demon or human! I'm not going to stop you fighting, I won't get in the way, and I won't run off without telling you, but I *will* heal whoever I want if the opportunity arises."

She examined the demon, surprised to find her nodding to her explanation.

"I expected as much. The rest is acceptable, though?"

"Yes!"

"Alright," Serena scratched out a line on the contract. "I can only request you give me the heads-up before you render aid to humans, if possible. As for your title, you will be listed as a *maid* in my service, for I do not dare to give you a higher title, lest it cause even more problems for my estate and family."

"And the uniform!?" Amelia asked, she was *very* excited to have a maid uniform, a real-life cosplay! The captain gave her a look up and down, prompting Amelia to give a quick twirl.

"We will find something less... republican. Regardless, you will not have to do any actual maid duties. Such things as cleaning and cooking are beneath the status of a mage of your caliber, let alone a Speaker."

"But I like cleaning! I can't cook but... I'd like to learn!"

"Ridiculous... well then, if you are seen cleaning, it will only help sell the idea to the crew," Serena said. "If there is nothing else, sign here." She turned the paper towards her, along with a pen. Amelia bent down, looking for the dotted line.

"One more thing..." she trailed off, "where will I be staying? Sleeping?"

"With me," said the captain, "we'll set you up in my private quarters.

Putting you with the crew would never work, and I'd rather keep you close by lest you get into any more trouble."

Amelia immediately signed the contract.

“All done!” she said, feeling her cheeks go red. If Serena saw, she didn’t say anything. “Anything else I should know?”

“Yes... as a maid, as a civilian under me, you are not subject to military orders, only my own. As per the contract and my order, you will accept requests for aid from any demon on this ship, but should any of my battalion try and order you in some way that conflicts with my own, you may ignore it, and report to me the event.”

“Okay!”

“Furthermore, as a civilian, you are not permitted to just stroll about the ship. Most areas are off-limits to you, unless your obligations require you to go somewhere, then you will not. The bridge is off-limits, as is the entire first deck, on which the turrets are mounted. Other than when you need to exit or enter the ship, there is no reason for you to be on the first deck. There should also be no reason for you to be on the second deck, the crew's quarters, unless you’re being taught by Tomes. The third deck contains the medical bay, mess hall, and kitchens. I imagine some of your time will be spent there. The fifth and sixth deck, cargo and munitions, I can’t imagine much reason for you to ever go there... unless I’m putting you in a cell again.”

“What about the fourth deck? You left that out!”

“Hmm...” the glassy eyes of the moose’s head glinted as Anathor spoke.

“The fourth deck is off-limits to all, even the captain.”

“Off-limits? Even for you?” Amelia asked Serena.

“Yes. I wouldn’t concern yourself with that, put it out of your mind.”

Serena said, but Amelia couldn’t help herself.

“What’s on the fourth deck? Anathor?”

“Hmm...” Said the moose, but was no more forthcoming.

“As I said, do not concern yourself with that. You will come to understand that this is more than a normal ship. The *Vengeance* is special in more ways than one.”

“How... frustratingly mysterious!” She cried out, throwing her hands up.

“Amusing,” said Serena, “for *you*, calling that mysterious, *you*, the biggest bundle of mystery that might have ever befallen Cascadia. Ha! What a crazy human you are!”

“In the very flesh!” Amelia proclaimed, giving a little bow. “At your service!”

“Silly girl...” the captain said, shaking her head. Amelia only gave a grin in response.

“Captain! I mean, Lady Halen! I have a request!”

“... what is it?”

“I want to go outside!”

Amelia stood awkwardly next to Serena. They were in some meeting room on the first deck, and the captain had dragged in every single officer, along with most of the squad commanders.

A semicircle of six to seven-foot demons, all looking at her with suspicion. Their skin had a range of colours and hues, some demons, like Serena, were mostly pale, with subtle patterns of reds and oranges. Others were darker, with deeper grays and blacks. Their eyes were all in some range of red, orange, or yellow, although none quite as crimson as the captains.

Their horns were equally varied. Some were thick and curled, like a set of ram's horns, others were straighter, like goat horns. There were single horns, pairs, and triples, and some demon's heads had so many horns it was basically hair.

Serena explained the situation to her staff, leaving out several key bits, she made sure to emphasize how Amelia was not part of the crew, and very much under her orders and control, and yes, that healing light that spread throughout the entire ship was something she ordered. They had agreed at appropriate times Amelia would pipe up with a quick “Yes, Lady Halen!” before zipping her mouth and keeping her eyes on the floor.

She had been told not to act like her usual cheerful self, and try and be... submissive.

Several officers had protested, most strongly amongst them was a squad commander called Korvus, which Serena had warned her about, telling her to avoid him at all costs. The room had become heated at times, at one point it seemed she might even be attacked, but Serena spooled up her aether, leaking power and intent, and that had quietened it back down.

The captain had emphasized that as a part of her personal retinue, an attack on Amelia was an attack on her, and her family. That statement had seemed to cool the room even further, although the demon called Korvus never took his eyes off her.

Surprisingly, Hillbrand had supported her, despite pointing a gun in her face earlier. The medical officer gave a report on how Amelia had saved the lives of more than a dozen demons, and how a further two dozen could immediately return to work, instead of spending weeks recovering or being dismissed entirely. This prompted a short discussion amongst the officers, as they discussed how such rapid healing could open up a new range of strategies.

After that, Serena had dismissed them and led her to the deck of the ship, where a walkway lay for them to cross to the battlements of what Amelia now knew as Port Highland, a location they had captured in the battle just past.

On the deck, Amelia stood with her arms wide, turning on the spot, feeling the wind through her golden hair, not caring if the demons in the bridge could see her. She was outside! When had she last gone outside the hospital? To feel the wind?

“Watch yourself!” Warned Serena, as she strayed close to a gaping hole in the deck.

“Was this... that explosion from earlier?”

“Yes. There used to be a turret here. We’re patching it up now but will need to travel south, to a proper air-dock, to replace it. A month of repairs, maybe more.”

“I see...” Amelia cast her eyes south, across the deck, to the open ocean of air and space that spread as far as the eye could see. Above her, she could see layers of cloud, and below her an endless field of orange, that seemed to glow softly.

“That is the lumina, the foundations of the world.”

“What’s beyond it?”

“No one knows. We refer to that place as the *under-sky*, it’s where we deliver the bodies of the dead, so they may explore the great unknown, in our place.”

“It feels... weird. It’s not natural, is it?”

“No, it’s magical. It disrupts aether. Even a Speaker would not survive a fall into it, although the ship protects us from most of its effects.” Amelia had already been made aware of one of the unique aspects of the *Vengeance*, its ability to sail into the lumina and not be destroyed.

Really! This ship was getting more and more mysterious! She made a mental note to uncover its secrets in the future, should the opportunity arise.

“And the islands? How do they float?” She asked, gesturing to the enormous pieces of land that impossibly floated with seemingly no sense of propulsion.

“Tens of thousands of years of moon rain saturated the land with moon crystal, which reacts with aether to produce a lifting effect. This reaches equilibrium between the lumina at the bottom, and the lighter aether at the top, and the islands maintain a stable level, depending on their weight, and the density of crystal within their earth and rock.”

“Is that also how the ship... sails?”

“Yes,” Serena nodded. “The same phenomena, trapped and utilized by the brilliant minds of inventors and engineers. The ship has two engines, a lift engine, that uses aetheric combustion to generate lift, and a propulsion engine, which uses the same to generate heat, to boil water into steam and drive the propellers.”

“Wow... it’s all so... so *cool*! We didn’t have anything like this from where I’m from. Instead, our aircraft only had a propulsion engine!”

“Oh? Then how did you sail? How did you generate lift?” Serena asked, sounding very interested.

“We didn’t call it sailing, that’s what we called ships that lived only on the water, on the seas. We called it flying. If you put large wings on a ship...”

Amelia punctuated this by spreading her arms, imitating the wings of a plane, “... and those wings are shaped in a certain way, and you apply enough propulsion to the aircraft, then the wings themselves generate lift just by how they hit the air!”

“Yes, I’m familiar with this, some gliders and lighter craft use that method, although larger ships are too heavy for it, hence the lift engine.” Serena paused, seemingly thinking over some words. “Not now, but at some point in the future, I would like to discuss your old world with you. I still have so many questions, especially about your technology.”

“Mmm, sure thing!”

“Come now, let us walk.” Serena led them across the walkway. Amelia had to resist closing her eyes. She wasn’t the biggest fan of heights, and she certainly didn’t want to fall into the lumina. If she did happen to fall, there were Words she could Speak that would give her flight, so she wasn’t too concerned.

Together they walked along the battlements, occasionally passing demon soldiers standing guard, while other demons seemed to be examining and

repairing some of the destroyed artillery. The conversation had hit a natural lull, and Amelia took some time to look over Port Highwind.

It seemed to be somewhat of an industrial town, with many warehouses and storage locations. The buildings were mostly red brick, but some sections seemed dominated by timber houses with whitewashed walls and clay tile rooftops. This, she figured, was the residential district and as they continued to circle the port, an area that looked to be some kind of town square or marketplace came into view and as it did Amelia couldn't help but frown. The occupants of the port had been penned into the town square. Amelia could see soldiers bringing civilians from across the port to the central location. The humans were surrounded by demon soldiers who stood guard on the ground and the rooftops overlooking the area.

"The civilians," intoned Serena, "and soldiers who surrendered. We can't just let them do as they like in their own houses, planning any possible insurgencies. At least, not until a proper policing force comes in."

"I see," Amelia said, stopping. They both watched the area for a while, the warm sun beating down upon them. "What will happen to them?"

"The soldiers will be taken as prisoners of war, and the civilians, once vetted, will be able to return to their old lives, with some restrictions."

Serena hesitated, before opening her mouth again. "If instead, I said I would execute them all, civilians and soldiers alike, what would you do?" Amelia met those crimson eyes with her own.

"I'd stop you!" she said, raising and tensing her bicep.

"Oh?" Serena mused, a quizzical hint of amusing forming on her face, as she raised an eyebrow. "A Word from the healing branch of Aseco, even Spoken by a talented Speaker, is still only a Word of healing. Do you think it would be enough, to stop *me*?"

Amelia flashed a cheeky smile. "I have some tricks up my sleeve, I think I could manage it, if I needed to."

"Is that so?" Serena asked, "And what tricks would these be?"

"I'm not going to tell you! So don't ask! A Speaker keeps their cards close to their chest, remember!?"

"Huh, would you look at that? The human can learn."

"Hey! I'm very studious!"

"You still made the mistake of hinting towards the existence of further capabilities, now I'm thinking all kinds of thoughts as to what those could

be,” Serena said, placing a finger on her lips, a mock expression of thoughtfulness on her face.

“Hmrrph!” Amelia exclaimed, crossing her arms, and turning away from her. Secretly, she was glad, glad that they could already talk this casually. Amelia suspected that amongst all the demons, Serena had a much higher tolerance of humans than most.

A thought cropped up.

“Lady Halen,” She said.

“Yes?”

“Since I’ve healed all the demons, I’m going to go down and heal whatever humans I can. Would you like to come with me?”

“I... see. I will come, for until you’re better trained I fear what problems will arise if I leave you alone. Very well then.”

Together they made their way off the battlements, towards the first group of humans Amelia had ever seen since coming to this world.

Chapter Six: Korvus the Mad Dog

As they approached the large group of humans huddling together in the square, Amelia felt a knot of anxiety grow in her stomach. It was bizarre. She felt comfortable around demons, yet the idea of being around humans felt strange, almost unnatural.

She figured she had inherited all of her powers from her game character, and had verified much of it; Amelia had previously found time to play around with her aether, to fold it upon itself in different ways as she prepared the *intention* to Speak some of the many Words she knew from the many combat branches she specialized in. It was a pleasant surprise to find they all seemed to be available to her, and most interestingly, they appeared to provoke certain *emotions* as they were prepared. Perhaps this was why healing made her feel so *good*.

Knowing that, and feeling the anxiety in her stomach, Amelia pondered as to whether she had also inherited the *demonic* trait of being mistrustful of humans, despite being a literal human herself.

Or was she? Whatever mysterious force had given her this opportunity of a new life, had built her the body of her game character, which, last she remembered, was polymorphed into that of a cute human woman. However, was she still in a polymorphed state? Was her true form still that of a mighty archdemon, and this current body a temporary veneer of... blue eyes and blond prettiness?

Serena *had* seemed to take to her quite well, which delighted Amelia, and so had Dagon and Tomes, other than the initial talk of murdering her, of course. Was this friendliness because she was still truly a demon behind the scenes, and they were picking up on this on a subconscious level?

Well, she could think more about that later.

They arrived in the square.

The mood was, at best, grim. Hundreds of humans, maybe half a thousand, were crammed in the square. They wore either work clothes or were barely dressed, huddling blankets against the cool air, despite the sun overhead. The *Vengeance* had attacked the port early in the morning, and many of the port's residents had not woken up yet.

A separate group, numbering about a hundred, had been cornered off, and judging by the white and blue uniforms that looked so very similar to her own, Amelia made an educated guess that these were the remains of the defenders.

Their eyes were downcast, the atmosphere somber. The cries of children and women could be heard, and the wails of those in pain. Many of them clenched prayer beads, muttering comforts to themselves. Parents kept their children close, but many of the young seemed to be missing guardians, instead, what looked like older brothers and sisters were hugging their younger siblings close, speaking words of comfort to them.

Some of them would never again see their parents.

It was a terrible sight, an awful situation that tugged at her heartstrings. Amelia was powerful, she knew that much, and she also knew she was ignorant of this world. Could she have prevented this? All she had was power. She was sure she could have destroyed the *Vengeance*, saving the port from this fate. She could also have wiped out the fortress, the surrounding islands, and all the human aircraft, preventing the torpedo from hitting the ship. Or she could have simply left, and let the battle happen anyway.

What she didn't know, is how she could have prevented it altogether, without making herself an enemy of one or both sides of the conflict. This was, she supposed, something solved in the realm of diplomacy, a subject that went very much against her brutally honest nature.

At the very least she could make things *better*, for both demons and humans. At least by doing *something* she could feel in control of a tiny part of this conflict.

“Hey...” she whispered to Serena, leaning in so only she could hear. “Are you able to provide them with any medical supplies? Aid from Hillbrand and her team?”

Serena shook her head, “They hate us, and understandably so. Some small number of them would accept care, but just attempting it would cause this situation to spiral out of control.” She bent towards Amelia, speaking even more quietly; “a decade of propaganda has led to some ridiculous beliefs ferment among the humans. Many of them believe we *eat them*.”

Amelia gave a solemn smile. “I suppose we don’t taste very nice, too stringy.” A weak joke, an attempt to lighten the mood. “Anything I should know, before I begin?”

“... you’re smarter than you pretend to be, aren’t you? I thought the concept of caution was completely foreign to you.”

“So unfair...”

“Firstly,” Serena said, raising a finger, “nothing big or flashy. Do it slowly, one by one.” A second finger joined the first. “Secondly, if asked, do not say you are a captive. Tell them the truth, you are under my employment, and willingly so. Thirdly, and this is the most important, do *not* imply in any way you have any connection to the human church, or any church for that matter.”

“Okay!” Amelia whispered back.

“... and don’t over-exert yourself!” she added, as Amelia stepped forward amongst the humans.

They were lined in rough columns, with just enough space for her and the demon guards to walk up and down the square. Amelia strolled forward, some murmuring having started as more and more humans, civilians and

soldiers alike, noticed her. Amelia's high perception made it easy to capture these snippets.

"Sis, who's that person?"

"A republican officer... ?"

"I've never seen her before... "

"She wasn't part of the garrison. A slave?"

She bent down next to a man who seemed to have been caught in an explosion. His body was riddled with small cuts and wounds, and his eyes were covered in bandages. A nasty bump on his chest suggested one or more of his ribs had broken, threatening to pierce through the skin. A young girl, perhaps in her early teens, was holding the man's hand, her face wet with tears.

"Hello there," she said, intentionally making her voice just loud enough to carry over the square, audible to all. "Is this man your father?" The girl's eyes met her own, red and raw from crying. She looked Amelia over, before nodding slowly.

"Da' worked in the warehouses... he... he got blown up-!" her voice broke at the end, unable to stop herself from sobbing.

"Would it be okay, if I healed him? Is that alright?" She let her voice take on the tone she had heard for so many years in the hospital. The tone she had grown to truly despise, the doctor's bedside manner, but now... now she was the one rendering aid she began to understand its value.

"You... you can do that? Make da' better?" The girl stopped sobbing, her eyes growing wide like saucers.

"I can. I would need to touch him, is that okay?"

"Y-yes! Please miss..."

Amelia gently touched the man's chest, and invoking one of the lesser healing spells, golden light, with flecks of blue, traveled from her own body into the injured man. Within seconds, he was breathing normally, the cuts and wounds had closed up and the broken ribs mended. The man reached up and removed the bandages around his eyes.

"I can see... I can see! Oh, my daughter! My sweet, I can see your beautiful face again!"

"Da!" The girl threw herself into her father's arms, weeping loudly.

"Thank you! Thank you, holy priestess! I'm not worthy... a thousand blessings upon you!" The man cried, grasping her hand with his own, his eyes brimming with gratitude.

"Thank you!" Amelia beamed, as the crowd now had its full attention upon her.

"She healed him!"

"Is she a captive?"

"A member of the church, here? Are we saved?"

"Why would they let her help us..."

"I..." Amelia said, standing up. The crowd grew silent as she spoke. "... am a traveling healer, not a member of the church, offering my services to those in need! I have obtained permission from the captain," she gestured to Serena, "to render aid to all of you. I would very much like to heal those who need it, so please, allow me this kindness..." she punctuated her little speech with a polite bow. Hopefully bowing was seen as polite in this world's human culture.

Unfortunately, the focus of the crowd now seemed to be on Serena herself, and the atmosphere that had started to be touched by optimism and hope was now laden with fear.

"The... sword demon!"

“The captain of the *black ship*!”

“We’re doomed!”

“Lord, save us!”

“Tsk!” Serena spat, drawing her firearm and firing it into the air. The sound of the gunshot sent birds flying into the air across the port, and within the square, the humans cowered. “I don’t have time for this! Amelia!”

“Y-yes, Lady Halen!”

“You have one hour. Heal whomever you can. Guards!”

“Yes, captain!” came a chorus from the surrounding demons.

“If any of them start causing problems, shoot them! If they’re too cowardly to accept the aid of *my human* then they can meet their maker! Someone get me Dagon!”

“Aye, captain!”

Well, that was a little bit aggressive, but it had kept things from escalating. Amelia put her hand up.

“Okay!” She said, trying to sound cheerful. “Who needs healing? Quickly now! I haven’t got long!” A long silence followed, then, a soft voice broke out.

“My arm... is broken. Please...”

“No problem!” Amelia bounced to the next person, and then the next, and the next after that. Each flash of gold and blue was followed by a flurry of gratitude and as the gratitudes rang out, the touch of hope once again fell upon the captive humans.

After a while, Dagon appeared and replaced Serena, who walked off towards the port’s citadel. She would wonder later what that was about. For now, she had more work to do, more happiness to spread.

Serena entered the citadel through the collapsed wall, the front entrance having been destroyed by the torpedo. She had to step over the dead, for the bodies of civilians and soldiers lay strewn about, half buried in the rubble. A demon guard led her through the stone corridors until they entered the office of whoever it was who commanded the port's defender garrison.

She had to duck slightly, the human building not quite built to account for the extra height her horns gave her. Inside the office was a table with maps of the defenses they had overcome, and lying upon this table was the corpse of a republic officer, a gunshot wound to his head. A familiar demon, with pale grey skin, was standing beside the body.

"He shot himself, the moment I entered," said the demon, "but not before trying to burn these," he passed a few sheets of paper, more than half of them burned, to her. "Blueprints. Some secret worth dying to protect."

"Korvus," she acknowledged, and Korvus nodded in return.

"Captain."

Serena looked over the papers, she was no inventor, no genius of mathematics like her younger sister, but she knew enough to figure out what these papers described.

"A new torpedo. A new weapon," she said.

"Aye. Think it's what hit the ship?"

"Could be. It was launched from a light craft. The sizes match... but how? A new type of explosive?"

"No, even worse. Mages are saying there are signs of spellwork, where it hit the citadel. Lingering disruption in the aetherfield outside." He spat on the body next to him. "Wiped out half a squad. Spellwork, in a *torpedo*. It must be runecraft, the old language."

“Seven hells...” Serena muttered. The humans were always innovating, and the engineers of the other human kingdoms were almost certainly contributing to the republican efforts. “With this... a frigate could take down a battleship!” She felt a headache coming.

“They will never stop trying to kill us.” Korvus intoned. “Their false book... their lies. They will never accept that Christ was a demon. They cannot. It’s the source of all their evil cast upon us, their heresy.”

“Tsk!” She clicked her tongue. Reading over the documents, before folding them and putting them in her breast pocket.

“There’s something else, captain,” Korvus said, eying her. “Above.”

“Show me.”

Korvus led her to the roof. Overlooking the town she could see all the fires had been put out, and in the distance, the *Vengeance* displayed a flurry of activity as fireteams undertook emergency repairs, welding plates of metal over the hole in the hull. The fading scents of battle, of charcoal and crystal explosives, still lingered in the air.

It was almost midday, the sun beating down warmth that was quickly whisked away by the cool breeze.

“That’s the other problem we have,” Korvus said, pointing down below. Serena followed his finger and her eyes met a figure, small from here, that was hurrying from one person to the next, short bursts of gold and blue erupting here and there.

She steeled herself. She had been waiting for this conversation. Of all the demons under her command, Korvus, the commander of the ground forces, hated humans the most. She would have to be tactful, as despite her being his commanding officer, he was, like her, a Speaker, and the chain of command between Speakers was enforced less by paper and military discipline, but by force and the threat of it.

“What madness has taken hold of you, captain?” He said quietly, watching the square below. “What have you brought into our fold? You invite the very cause of our destruction.”

“She is vouched for, Korvus. By me, the first officer and quartermaster.”

“Vouched for!?” He snapped, “How long have you known this... *human*? When did she board the ship?”

“I explained this before.” Serena had lied through her teeth when she had pulled in all her officers to show off Amelia for the first time. She had told them Amelia had long been employed by her family, a promising talent they had been nurturing to aid them for the future. It was a lie that was going to have consequences for the family, a lie for which she was going to have to write a very difficult letter to the patriarch. Hopefully, he could be persuaded of the value Amelia could bring, despite any possible loss of reputation and influence.

“You explained *nothing*! This has *never* happened before and for good reason! This was foolish!”

Serena felt herself starting to get angry. It was always like this, with Korvus. Always a fight.

“Anathor said the ship trusts-”

“Anathor said!” Korvus interrupted, spittle flying from his mouth. “The ship!” He turned, glaring at her. “Not everyone is on board with putting faith in the *ship*! And Anathor! He’s not even in the chain of command! He has no allegiance to you! He says it himself, he is the guardian of the ship, not the guardian of *you*!”

“I trust Anathor, he-”

“We don’t even know *what* he is! Huh? And you trust him? Has he ever told you what’s on the fourth deck!? Ever shared that little bit of knowledge?”

Serena narrowed her eyes at him. “*Commander*, if you keep interrupting me, you’re going to have a problem with more than just the *human*.” Korvus’s expression fell, and he turned back to the square, sighing.

“And now... you even defend her, over me.”

“Eighteen demons. Four sailors and fourteen shock troopers, *your shock troopers*. That’s how many she saved from certain death. Dozens of others were *healed*, Korvus. Dozens of your brothers, ready to keep fighting.” Just as she thought she would make some progress with him, Korvus shattered that, with another softly spoken question.

“She’s a Speaker, isn’t she?” He asked.

“... Yes.”

The wind picked up, caressing her hair as a painful silence took hold of them both. It was broken, eventually, by Korvus.

“A Speaker of *Aseco*?” He asked. “One of my soldiers told me she spoke one of his spells.”

“That’s right.”

“... that’s how I know you’re lying, captain.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“Speakers of *Aseco* come from one place, and one place only; the Golden Cathedral. They are all, *all*, under the direct command of the human pope, for their branch is one of the most divine under the human gods. It is only within the human Vatican, the holiest of places, guided by their strongest priests, could a human ever hope to commune with Aseco and his family. There is no way she managed it, secreted away in demon territory under your family.”

Seven hells! How did Korvus know that? She had only known about the origin of Speakers of *Aseco* when Tomes had told her earlier, and all her quartermaster did was read books!

“Ah...” she muttered, resisting the urge to grab her horns, “I’m getting pissed off, why do you have to make my job so hard, Korvus?”

“Likewise captain, likewise.”

“When did you get so smart? Never seen you read anything other than a battle plan.”

“... I had the motivation,” he said, a solemn expression on his face.

Amelia was working on the soldiers now, having healed all the civilians that needed healing. Dagon was staying near her, his presence, along with the surrounding guards, was keeping things under control.

How many people had she expended aether on? A hundred? Two hundred? Her reserves seemed *endless* and the human wasn’t slowing down. Amelia was invaluable, and Serena suspected whatever other secrets she had, would only make her even more so. The issue was, how could she salvage this situation, how could she convince Korvus?

Her mind raced, thinking of another lie she could tell before giving up. She didn’t know what Korvus knew about the situation. She was backed into the corner, with one last card to play, before things became very risky.

The truth.

“We... don’t know how she boarded the ship. It was early this morning. I was going to hang her, but then we figured out she was a Speaker, and then we talked, and then we made a deal...” Korvus was silent, not reacting to what she said. Perhaps, that was a good sign. “She’s not from this place, not from Cascadia, Korvus. She might have come from a different realm altogether. She has no dislike of demons, she even likes us. This was all verified with a truth-teller. Trust me on this, Korvus.”

“Hmm... trust,” he intoned. He clasped his left hand with his right, cracking the knuckles one by one. After he was done, he began working on the other hand. “My father...” he said, almost whispering, “... was a ship-builder. Not the metal kind, but the old one. Wooden. He would buy hardwood from the

humans, republican traders, and have lift engines brought up from Centralis. He would build small hulls, transport ships, and the like. He and his workers were hard, honest men, and got on well with the humans, even if they always tried to cheat him a little on prices. We lived in a small village, under the domain of Greatlord Orlan, by the mountains.”

“... oh.”

Korvus looked at the sky, he wasn’t crying, but sadness bled from him nevertheless.

“They attacked us with the same ships we built for them. It wasn’t even the republican army at first, they came later. The initial assault was led by the fanatics, too unstable to serve in the Inquisitor Navy. Village after village. In the fighting, I came across the son of one of the traders I had broken bread with. He was cutting down a child. I killed him.

When I finally returned to my village, I had hoped that my family had escaped, but instead... instead I met them again... *impaled on pikes*. It was then, that I Spoke the First Word, for the first time.”

Serena gulped. “I didn’t know... you never said.”

“Humans... and demons too, call me a mad dog. Battle-crazed. Thirsty for blood. They use all these words, all these names, that suggest I’m somehow crazy, but the opposite is the truth. I had my mind set clear that day, and every day since.”

He turned to her, his eyes clear and cold.

“But *you*, captain. You are afflicted with the same disease that killed my father, my family, and my friends. For the sake of everything, the crew, my men, I cannot let this go on any longer.” Korvus raised an arm high, fist clenched. Serena was confused for a moment, before recognizing the hand signal that the combat troops used. Her eyes darted to the square, where she saw Amelia, bending over as she treated a wounded soldier.

Her eyes went wide. The square's guards, some two dozen demons, were pointing their rifles straight at the human healer, who hadn't yet noticed.

"I will cure you of your insanity," the demon next to her said, dropping his arm in one swift motion.

"Korvus!" she spat out, but it was too late. A cascade of gunfire rang out on the square, and Amelia fell into a crumpled heap, her golden hair glimmering in the sunlight.

The world suddenly became very dark. She could see nothing but Amelia, unmoving. Her vision was surrounded by black and she could feel her heart, pounding like a drum in her ears. She was freezing cold and boiling hot, and the feeling of wetness was on her face. There was only one thing she could do, one action.

There was no controlling this.

Her aether frothed in delight.

She Spoke the First Word. Her Word.

"Narean"

Chapter Seven: Confession

The Word was Spoken and power, chaos, and violence *erupted* from Serena. Korvus was blown back, slamming through the wall of a building, collapsing it upon himself. The citadel was destroyed, unable to withstand the force of the Spoken Word. The stone walls crumbled, dooming any demons inside to a horrific death. Those below, humans and demons alike, were thrown back, piling up against the sides of the buildings ringing the far side of the square in a mass of bodies and broken limbs. Their lives were saved only by the distance from the Spoken Word.

She hovered there, in the air, her connection with the aetherfield so strong that she could mimic the levitation effect of the lifting engine of the *Vengeance*, of which she could sense in the distance, the pulses from it beating through the aetherfield like a heart.

Something else is there. A thought arrived in her head, formed from curiosity that was not her own. Her attention was pulled to the black ship in the distance. Something *strange* called to her. There was a song, its melody caressing the aetherfield, a song just for her. Beckoning her.

It came from the fourth deck.

No! This was not her mind! Serena bit her tongue, using the pain to align her thoughts once again. She fought to keep the Word in control, to maintain her mind! She wrapped her body in layers of green hues. The normal auras of a warrior - red, orange, and yellow - first, second, and third-level respectively were now beneath her. The fourth-level, accessible only to those who can Speak the First Word, layered upon her skin as a subtle green aura, providing her a defense no shellfire could hope to penetrate.

The same aura spread into her sword, strengthening and sharpening beyond anything a blacksmith could manage.

Narean, the Word itself, a manifestation of the will and power of the demon god of the same name, clung to her mind, eating away at her sense of self and demanding control, demanding violence and that blood be spilled in its name.

“I am in control.” she spat, gritting her teeth and steeling her willpower.

A traitor. Kill the mutineer. The Word whispered to her. *Rip him to pieces.* A warning flashed through her mind. She had Spoken badly, in haste, and was already seeing the first signs of losing control: Aether-Cognitive Resonance.

“Argh!” Serena roared, her voice sounding like that of a beast. Another pulse of power emitted from her, and she felt her horns ignite with hellfire, a tail of flame formed from the base of her spine, and the faintest shadow of wings of black mist, not able to fully form in this realm, took vague shape upon her back.

“Bayle.”

The Spoken Word rippled through the aetherfield, triggering the attention of any Speaker or aetherscope within twenty clicks. The building her enemy had been blasted into *exploded* in black and grey flame and within it stood the towering figure of her opponent, glaring at her.

Dark mist danced along his horns, and his grey body was now, like hers, hued in green. His hands had become scaled and his fingers changed into razor-sharp talons.

The force of his Word had excited Serena, and she gripped her cutlass tighter. To finally come head to head against *Bayle*! A chance then, to finally teach that demon god its uncouth and barbaric way of fighting fell short against her honorable blade!

No! These were not her thoughts! They were the desires of *Narean* manifesting within her. Her control was slipping.

Defeat Korvus. Save the human. She thought.

Kill Korvus. Kill the human. The Word inside her demanded.

“A captain... does what’s best for her crew,” said Korvus. “Stand down, captain.”

Unable to stop herself, she launched herself at the mutineer, bringing down her sword upon him. The blade was stopped by the back of Korvus’s arm, but it still cut him, just barely. She struck him again and again, as he parried and defended her assault.

“Hmm...” Korvus said, before punching her in the gut, having found an opening in her attacks. “You’re not fully in control of your Word, are you?” He asked as Serena flew back, through a ruined wall. She rolled on the ground, before finding her feet and stance, the taste of iron appearing in her mouth.

“Bayle!” she roared, “You traitor!” the flames on her horns took on a new intensity and she flung herself back into the fight. Her sword slashed again and again, her tail of flame whipping and striking her enemy. As the rage increased, she felt herself become faster and as she became faster she felt her mind relinquish more and more control, and as the control slipped, the more powerful she became. Her green aura began to take on flecks of blue.

“Bayle!?” exclaimed Korvus, now needing to duck and dodge her attacks. “Narean is taking control! Captain! You must not become a vessel! You-” he leapt to the side, avoiding a slash that destroyed the wall behind him and gorging a chunk out of the building behind it.

She chased him, chased Bayle. With every swing of her sword, she felt she was coming closer and closer to victory! How dare this demon mutineer against *her*, against the mighty *Narean*!

“I’m sorry, captain,” Bayle muttered, as he avoided another attempt at his life. “That it has come to this...” The demon leapt backward, putting distance between them. A warning flashed in what little of Serena’s mind was still in control.

Danger.

Bayle clasped his hands together, and his aura exploded, the green aura replaced with a deep blue, with flecks of indigo. The fifth-level, with a hint towards the sixth! When had this traitor exceeded her abilities? How dare he!

Serena, or rather, Narean, gritted her teeth. She squeezed the power of the Word inside her further, fueling the process with her rage and determination. Her skin cracked and bled, hellfire spewing controllably from her, and then it settled, as for the first time she crossed the barrier, just barely, into the fifth-level. She struggled to catch her breath, her body and brain burning from the exertion.

Bayle did not give her time to recover and attacked her immediately. A series of punches and claws assaulted her being, at a speed this vessel had never defended against before! Blue aura or not, she had to put everything into the defense, frantically parrying and dodging as the borderline sixth-level attacks threatened to end her, only the natural talent of this vessel kept it alive!

It was a losing struggle, and after only a few moments her left arm was sheered through at the elbow, and a follow-up punch broke her ribs, sending her flying through the walls of multiple buildings. She spewed blood, coughing and spluttering. She tried to stand but her body was reaching its limits and refused to obey her.

“Narean. Your conflict with my god, and your arrogance, has doomed your vessel.” Bayle said, approaching where she lay sprawled. The demon raised his fist, talons shining in the sunlight, before bringing them down on her throat in a killing blow.

Those sharp talons met her skin and- what was this! They didn't cut her! Her vision, which was fading to black, suddenly became clear, as warmth spread through her! Her ribs mended, and her left arm *grew back*. Her body radiated golden light, as spell-wards wrapped around her, supplementing her blue aura.

Amelia... A tiny part of Serena's mind called out, but it was not enough. She could not wrestle back control from the Word she had Spoken.

She was back up! She could continue fighting! She lept at Bayle, slashing away, who returned in kind, however his strikes now struggled to damage her! As she frantically attacked, she felt faster and stronger than ever before, her body enhanced by more than just defensive spells!

"Grr!" Bayle mumbled, as the initiative was slowly lost. "It seems... the human survived. She must die first." He threw a wild swing at her, destroying the buildings behind her, and forcing her to throw herself to the ground to dodge. The traitor took the opportunity, and lept away, his powerful legs taking him in a great arc in the sky.

Then, a tremendous boom sounded out, and a flash of golden light blinded her momentarily, as a great lightning bolt struck out from the sky, blasting Bayle over the port walls and into the farmland and forest beyond.

She raced after him, consumed with rage, leaping onto a building and then over the wall. She found him in battle against... something. A golden light darted around the forest, almost too fast for her to track! Bayle was launching attacks in every direction, trees exploding with every strike, and chunks of earth were ripped up and thrown about the battlefield, each one enough to kill a dozen soldiers.

The golden light stopped for a moment, and she saw it was a person. Inside that blinding light, a pair of blue eyes found her own and as it did, she felt her very core tremble for reasons unknown.

"Hi," the light said, "You in there, Lady Halen?" It vanished, avoiding another attack from Bayle, before casting another bolt of lightning that brought Bayle to his knees. It didn't end there, and spell after spell was cast down upon the demon until the almost sixth-level aura faded, the grey skin cracked, and a glassy expression took hold. The light murmured a spell, and chains of lighting reached from the heavens, holding down the mutineer.

A human saint! A human saint was here! What interference was this, to take her kill from her! To deny her battle against her nemesis!

The saint must die.

She leaped at the light, swinging her sword with everything she had. The vile creature dodged, darting a hundred meters away in a split second. Tsk! She gave chase, swinging her weapon again, but the human would once again dodge, again and again.

“Oh...” the saint said, tilting her head, “Narean, are you there?”

“Don’t you *dare* speak my name, *human*!” She roared, slashing again but finding her sword couldn’t reach the fast-moving saint. “Coward! I will destroy you! What god presumes to interfere!”

“I suppose Serena is no longer there, so... I can speak openly... we... haven’t known each other long,” said the human, “but... there must be a reason I met you. I’ve thought about this a lot...” No matter what she did, the human effortlessly avoided her attacks, it was enraging. “I had my suspicions, and the more we talked, the more I was convinced. Then, I saw you smile and laugh at something I said and it confirmed it, in the deepest parts of my heart!” The human shook its head, smiling, its eyes looked at her with an expression... and expression of...

“Love! At first sight!”

The human dodged another attack, bringing its hands to its cheeks as it *blushed*.

“I said it! Oh my! I’m shaking! I’m sorry, I’m sorry! It’s all so sudden, but it feels so real! Do you feel the connection? I feel it! Ah, it’s embarrassing!”

“Die!” she roared, but no matter how much she tried, her desire could not be made a reality.

“Well...” said the human, “I suppose it’s time to bring you back. You’ve destroyed so much of the port! Hrmph! *Sixth Circle, Aseco’s Restraint!*”

Suddenly, she was unable to move. No matter how much she strained and fought, the chains of lightning that held her were unmoved. “Human!” she hissed, “You vile creature! Release me!”

“Oh dear,” came the response. “What was it you said, Narean? What god presumes to interfere? Well, now it’s my turn to ask *you*.” The human leaned towards her, and Narean felt something she never thought she would feel in the presence of a human.

Fear. Raw, primal, fear.

“What *pathetic, childish, lesser* demon god presumes to interfere with *me and mine*!?”

She felt herself gulp. What mad human had her vessel involved herself with!?

“I had hoped that healing the body would heal the mind. Seems not. Appears I need to push a *little more*,” the human said, sounding thoughtful. “I had forgotten the secrets arts, that allow you to Speak without blowing everything up. Never had the use for it you see, me and my guildmates always took advantage of the initial power release in our raid tactics... Well then, brace yourself. This is going to hurt. A lot.”

The human, with a sickently smug expression on its face, took a breath.

A moment of silence.

And then it *Spoke*, and the Words it *Spoke* rippled not through the aetherfield, but *through* the realm boundary, across the mists, and into the very halls of the demon gods themselves, where every lesser deity dropped what they were doing as an overwhelming, choking pressure dominated their spirits and threatened their very existence as the Words, carrying a deadly warning, forced them to *listen*.

A monster, Narean thought as control of her vessel was ripped from her.

The creature had not lied.

It was very painful.

Dagon leaned back, hoping he did not appear as nervous as he felt. The demon in front of him, across the desk, had enough power to destroy him and everything he knew. A single word could have him begging for his life, which he would do if needed, even if it would be in front of every officer on the *Vengeance* who had been pulled into the captain's quarters.

Not because the man was a Speaker, no. This demon had a far more powerful tool at his disposal.

Political power.

"The admiral..." the demon said, placing a cigar in his mouth, sparking a match with a flourish and lighting it. He took a drag, blowing smoke out of his nose, making him look like a dragon. Well, he *did* look like a dragon, due to the sharp, antler-like horns that crowned his head.

Also, the man's nickname was quite literally the *Dragon*.

"The admiral would like to know when the captain will wake up."

Seven hells! He was going to crumble under this pressure! The weight of the man bore down upon him, and he wasn't even a Speaker! If this was the power of a Highlord, then what was it like to speak to a Greatlord? Or even the positions above them!? It took Dagon everything he had not to swallow, or fumble his words. Damn politicians.

"Captain Halen is still recovering, Highlord. Her body is healed but her mind still rests. We do not know... how long it will be." The last words were a struggle.

"It is so *extraordinary*," intoned the demon, casting his eyes to the ceiling. "The aetherscopes on the fleet's intelligence ships detected two words being Spoken. One, *Narean*, then another, *Bayle*. One from your captain and the other from the commander of your ground forces. They fought. Why?" As he asked the question his eyes narrowed and met Dagon's. The man

probably already knew the answer, Dagon was not the first to be interrogated.

So, he answered the question knowing whatever he said would not satisfy the Highlord. If he had to be dressed down by the *Dragon* for his military career to survive, then so be it.

“Ah... That’s because Kor- the commander led a mutiny against the captain, Highlord. Two squads attacked us and-”

“That’s not quite right, is it?” The Highlord took another drag of his cigar, rolling it in his fingers. “They attacked the human? Did they not?”

“Yes, Highlord. But... the human was part of the captain’s retinue, and so... an attack on the human was an attack... on her position...” Dagon trailed off, unable to continue under the glare he was receiving. The room’s atmosphere was icy cold and the rest of the officers were dead silent, not moving a millimeter. Maybe if they didn’t move the Dragon wouldn’t see them.

“How puzzling,” said the Highlord, “because I just spoke to *her father*, and he has not heard of this development, nor given it his blessing. Her father has become *very interested* in this development, and if *he* is interested then *I* am interested.”

Another drag of the cigar. The room was starting to smell. The captain hated smoking.

“Furthermore... Korvus was a talented Speaker, close to the sixth-level. Some might say he was ahead of your captain in ability... so then, the question to be asked, is how was he subjugated? Do you know?”

“Ah...”

“Because, our aetherscopes detected holy attacks of a *very* powerful Speaker and yet, no Word was spoken that could bring them about. Which means, that human is capable of far more than she’s letting on...” Another

drag of the cigar, another intimidation of a dragon from the demon's nostrils.

"She must know a word from a combat branch. The lightning attacks were too powerful. Your captain has brought an unknown *dual-speaker*, at least, into the center of one of the most important military operations of this war."

"I'm sure she-"

"Damn it, officer! She might be hanged for this! Both of them!"

Dagon gulped. Everything was so far out of his depth. Surely things would not escalate *that* far? "Highlord..." he said, voice straining, "But her father would not... permit that? His own daughter?"

"Could do. Would do. We're trying to *win a war*, not frolicking around with *human* Speakers!" The demon stubbed his cigar out on the desk, crushing it angrily. "Not that I can hang them if I wanted to. I can't even get to them! I can't even talk to the damn *human*! Anathor!"

"Hmm..." came the gruff voice from the moose head. "The medical wing is off-limits to you, Highlord. It is... beyond your authority."

"You're lucky you don't have a material form, you bastard! What about the agreement?"

"You *know* with *whom* the agreement was made, do you not? The ship has claimed both of them as under its protection. You may not touch them. Not without *her* permission."

"I have three battleships sitting outside and a dozen heavy cruisers. What do you think would happen if I turned their guns on this ship, Anathor!?"

"..." the moose was silent for a moment. "Then... Highlord. I'm afraid you would be down a fleet..."

Dagon didn't know that the atmosphere could get any worse, but it somehow managed to. Thankfully his other officers had joined him in

forming a nervous sweat. What comradeship! He would buy them all drinks in the afterlife!

The Highlord did not respond, instead taking out another cigar, which was probably worth more than his month's salary, and lit it. A painful minute of silence filled the quarters.

“Korvus will remain with us. When the captain wakes, inform her of such. I am disbanding your ground forces, we will take them and integrate them into our own. Where are the ones you captured?”

“Uh, in the cells, Highlord. Twenty-one, the others died during the... fighting.”

“Good. Hang them all. Sail to Kenhoro, find some new sailors mad enough to work on this ship, and then go to Shimashina. Fix the ship at the imperial shipyards there.”

“Y-yes, Highlord! That’s... far, why not at a closer dock?”

“One, I don’t care how great a healer that human is, nor her claimed *opinion* of demonkind. I want her as far away from the front line as possible.” The demon jabbed a finger at Dagon. “And two, that’s where your captain’s father currently residing for the foreseeable future.”

“... ah.”

“He wants to spend time with his daughter.”

The Highlord took a slow drag, and then once again crushed the expensive cigar into the desk.

“And the human.”

Four thousand miles away, within the great Cascadian basin, lay the many cities of Centralis, which formed the economic and industrial core of the

demon empire. Near the center of these lies the magnificent city of Celle, the capital.

Within its districts of white and gold, at its highest point, sat the Cathedral of Bone, the empire's center of power. Within its bone walls, inside a room built from the remains of a titanic creature long forgotten to most of the world, sat a woman.

Adorned in white clothes trimmed with gold thread, with blond hair and blue eyes, and two very small horns, so small that along with her pale skin, she could almost be mistaken as a human, sat the woman, sipping tea from a small cup.

She sat in perfect harmony with the world, for over the centuries it had long grown accustomed to her presence. The woman looked out the window at the empire beyond.

Her empire.

Then, without warning, she froze and the small cup fell from her hand, shattering upon the floor. The maid in the room looked at the cup, and then at her master.

“Divine one?”

“Theresa. Did you... hear something just now? Not in the aether, rather... in the mists?”

“No, divine one.” The maid was a triple-speaker, knowing the First Word of three distinct combat branches. “Is something the matter?”

The smallest of smiles appeared on the woman's face.

“A monster... has appeared.”

Chapter Eight: What's Chicken?

Serena woke to the familiar ceiling of wood and steel. She was somewhere in the *Vengeance*. The room was dim, the aetherlights having been turned down to their lowest setting. Was it nighttime? There were no windows to check. She was lying on a bed, not her usual hammock.

The medical wing.

Why was she here? Was she injured in battle? She couldn't remember. Serena moved an arm and then cried out as the movement caused her skin to crack and bleed. Her cry of pain further caused her face to fracture. Through the blinding agony came a thought of understanding. Her soul had been damaged.

She must have lost control of the Word.

Why? When had she Spoken?

Serena tried to call for Anathor, but as she did a golden hue filled the room, mending her skin and dulling the pain. It was only a temporary measure, as soon as the warmth faded she could feel it building back up again.

A soul damaged by divine possession was not so easily healed.

"Sleep now, captain. If you could..." came Anathor's voice.

And then a white fog clouded her eyes, as someone cast a sleep spell on her, sending her back to a deep slumber and the realm of dreams.

Serena's opened her eyes, finding herself standing in the main stairwell of the *Vengeance*. It was dark, the aetherlights not turned on, the only light from a greasy oil lantern hanging from the wall. The sounds of the ship,

creaking and groaning, reached her ears, and the sound of... water? Her mind was muddled. What was happening? Were they sailing through a storm?

No... these were the sounds of... waves.

Not possible. The *Vengeance* was not a watership, and this was definitely her ship, she recognized the structure of the stairwell that went through the ship's decks. But... where were the steel beams? Everything was wooden. Why did it look so... old?

She tried to call for Anathor, but no sound came out.

What deck was she on? A few hesitant steps later she found a door, and a familiar set of words was etched upon it.

Fourth Deck.

It was slightly open.

No... Something in her mind warned her. The door to the fourth deck is forever closed. It is off-limits, even to the captain. The voice in her head felt unnatural. Were these even her thoughts? Who was speaking in her mind? *What is in there must never be allowed out.*

She reached out and pulled the door close. Its handle was icy cold and the heavy thud of its closing reverberated in the space. Serena blinked and then looked down and saw she was holding the key.

Never use the key.

Who used the key? Who opened the door to the fourth deck?

It must be locked.

The mechanism clicked as the lock engaged. As she pulled the key out she heard a voice talk to her in an ancient tongue. She did not know the name of the language, but the meaning and intention behind the words and their speaker were clear.

“Bring me the girl,” said the ship.

Amelia! Serena’s mind yelled out, as she was pulled from the dream into the waking world, a familiar ceiling of wood and steel greeting her. She tried to remember the dream, but it was like trying to grasp fog itself. It slipped from her mind and she soon gave up.

How long had she been sleeping? With a cautious movement of a single finger, and then another, and then an arm she confirmed that her soul had somehow been healed, repaired from the divine energies that had fractured it.

The room was lit, the aetherlights shining bright, meaning it must be daytime. Serena turned her head. The other beds in the room were empty. She was alone, apart from...

“Mmm... fried chicken...”

She looked down at a familiar set of messy blond hair. Amelia was lying next to her, curled into a half ball, sucking on her thumb like a babe. Her other hand was resting on Serena’s left arm.

What in the seven hells was fried *chicken*?

Tsk! She forced herself to set up, pushing with her hands and feet so her back was elevated against the pillows, the movement causing Amelia to mumble something else. Thankfully, despite a subtle sense of exhaustion, she felt pretty good! She wasn’t in pain, nor did she feel thirsty or hungry.

Amelia had obviously played a part in healing her, that was without doubt. However... this *idiot human*! What was she doing, sleeping in the *same* bed as her!? She was nobility! And a woman! If word got out that she shared a bed with a human that... was almost *cuddling*

her...

“Wake up, idiot,” she said. Finding no response she looked for something she could stab her with. Unfortunately, her cutlass was nowhere to be seen

so she had to make do with a finger, which she jabbed a few times into the messy blond hair.

“Wake. Up. Idiot.”

A pair of blue eyes slowly opened and then went wide like saucers. “You’re awake! Serena!” Exclaimed the astonished healer. Serena was about to chastise her for using her first name, but was stopped by a wave of gold and blue flowing into her, and as the warmth and light rippled through her body the last feeling of exhaustion left her.

“How are you feeling? Are you all... mended? Your soul?”

“I think... it’s okay now. Thank you, Amelia.”

“Mmm! I was so worried! Every time I healed you, you would start cracking and bleeding again! Narean really took you for a ride, eh?”

Narean... Serena cast her mind to the demon god she had communed with. Why had she Spoken? Why had she lost control?

“What happened? Why did I Speak?”

“Korvus attacked you! A mutiny! His men also tried to shoot me! Can you believe that!? So rude...”

Ah, now she remembered - but, she had been the one to attack Korvus, not the other way around. An image flashed through her mind, of a blond figure lying unmoving on the floor of the square.

“You... were okay? I saw you get shot... you weren’t moving.”

“Mmm! It was super confusing! I was bending over to heal someone, and then suddenly I just fell over! We found out they had used these huge...” Amelia sat up, spreading her arms wide, “...hunting rifles, with these massive iron slugs! All against me! My wards held just fine but the forces flipped me all about! Took me quite a while to figure out what had happened, and then you Spoke and blasted the whole square! I had to heal everyone all over again before coming to help you!”

“I see... where is Korvus now?”

“Gone. The fleet arrived not long after, and took him as well as all the ground forces! I think... you’re in a lot of trouble. Dagon wouldn’t tell me much!”

Serena racked her mind, trying to remember the fight. After Korvus had Spoken his Word - *Bayle* - she had lost control, and everything after that was a blur. She had been... losing.

“Did you... win against Korvus?” She asked Amelia.

“Hell yeah!” Amelia said, cheerfully punctuating her words with two thumbs up, “Sorry... that’s an expression from my world. You were getting your arse kicked! I think if you were protected by anything less than blue aura you would have died before I got to you!”

“Blue!” Serena exclaimed, “I was using *blue* aura?”

“Yup!”

That was a huge deal. She was already considered a talent amongst demons, having Spoken the First Word so quickly, but the boundary between warrior levels of aura, like mage circles, was tremendous and she had struggled to break past green.

Now she had done it once, even if she hadn’t been in control, she would be able to do it again. Yet, it still hadn’t been enough. Korvus had been winning, his own talent had exceeded her. Or... was it a difference in talent? Had he simply been more determined? To see things through to the end?

“Did you... Speak against Korvus?”

“Well...” Amelia closed her mouth in thought, a finger resting against her chin. “I suppose I did... but!” She said, pointing at Serena, finger-wagging, “Don’t tell anyone I did! I think everything knows I’m a Speaker by now anyway. Some scary guy called the *Dragon* was trying-”

“*The Dragon was here!?*”

“Ooh, the Dragon, the Dragon!” Amelia waved her hands in the air, “Everyone’s going on about the *Dragon*! He didn’t feel like all that much to me!”

This idiot human.

“Is he still here?”

“Nah, he left. He tried to come down here but apparently, the ship wouldn’t open the door for him.”

Problems upon problems. The Dragon was a Highlord of Cascadia, and whilst he was relatively unknown before the war - his political acumen had allowed him to collect no small amount of wartime powers bestowed upon him by his Overlord. It was said the only thing holding back his promotion to Greatlord, was his personal fighting capabilities.

She filed the Dragon away as to yet another problem that needed to be solved in the future.

“Let’s go back a bit. Korvus. How did you win against him?” There was no way that *Aseco* could win against *Bayle* in combat.

“Well, remember when I said I had a few tricks up my sleeve?”

“... I see.” She looked at Amelia for a few moments. “I suppose you aren’t willing to share further?”

“Depends. How much more are you going to pay me?”

“Ha!” Serena couldn’t stop herself from laughing. Never before had someone spoken to her so candidly, even when she was at the military academy, her closest classmates would still watch their behavior out of respect for who her father was.

She couldn’t deny it. It was somewhat refreshing. It felt... friendly.

“Stupid human,” she said.

“Stupid demon,” came the reply.

“Yes, I am,” she said, “I underestimated the attitudes of Korvus and those loyal to him. I thought they would come around in time, but time was not something we had. Korvus is incapable of trusting a human, or living with them. I didn’t understand this, or rather, I chose not to believe it. I must have looked insane in his eyes, to see me bringing what he thought was a powerful enemy in our midst after only knowing you for *hours*. He thought I had been bewitched... maybe I was.”

“Well, I am *awfully* cute, aren’t I? Ow!” Another finger jab put an end to that.

Suddenly, the door to the room was open and a demon appeared.

“Captain!” Exclaimed Dagon, “You’re awake!”

“Still alive,” She grumbled. “Heard the Dragon made an appearance.”

Dagon nodded and then cast a questioning eye toward Amelia and then back to Serena.

“Amelia, go wait in my quarters.” The human yawned in a manner wholly unsuitable for polite company with nobility. Standing up she took a piece of elastic and started to tie her hair back.

“Alright, but let Anathor know if you start feeling pain and I’ll come right back, or I could heal you from a distance I suppose... either way let him know and he’ll tell me!”

“... Thank you.”

“Bye!” Amelia gave her a wave and skipped out of the room, ponytail bouncing, Dagon and Serena watched her go, not continuing their conversation until the sound of her footsteps grew faint.

“She’s barely left your side all week.”

“All *week!*? How long have I been here?”

“Six days, captain. First three days she didn’t leave this room once, didn’t eat, drink, or sleep. Kept herself going by healing herself. Said she couldn’t leave you for a moment. She cried a bit... a lot.”

“... I see.” Something in her heart moved at that. Annoying.

“During the first day, the moment she stopped healing you your skin would start cracking and you’d bleed everywhere. Her magic must regenerate blood or something because I’m pretty sure there was more out of you than could ever be inside you. Wasn’t until the second day it slowed down, and on the third day Hillbrand was finally able to convince her to leave your side. She’s set up in your quarters.”

“That bad, huh.”

“Aye, that bad,” Dagon said, scratching his chin. “What happened, captain? Korvus try and kill you over the girl?”

“... not quite. I’m not even sure he was going to attack me. I saw him give the command, for his men to assassinate her and...” She gave a small shrug, “I over-reacted”.

“Yeah, you sure did. You want the good news, before the bad?”

“Go for it.”

“Good news is over last week the crew has somewhat taken to tolerating, even liking the human. The fact she cured all their broken bones after you Spoke, and then literally saved your life has turned most of their opinions positive. That’s that. No more good news. The rest of it's bad.”

“The Dragon?”

“The admiral wanted to put both you and her in cells. Sent a squad of soldiers to get you two. Ship stopped them. The Dragon appeared. Ship stopped him. I got my balls blasted in front of every officer on the ship. They took Korvus, and disbanded our ground forces.”

“What happened to the others involved in Korvus’s plot?”

“Hanged them. Bodies committed to the *undersky*.”

“How’d the crew take that?”

“Eh, this and that,” Dagon said, mimicking a set of scales with his palms, “I framed the entire thing as a mutiny - which I suppose it was, somewhat - orchestrated by Korvus and supported by his loyal ground forces. You know how there’s always been friction between the sailors and the soldiers... still, the hanging was a solemn affair, thought it best to get it over and done with as soon as possible, rather than wait for you to wake up.”

“How did Amelia react? Would have thought that idiot would try to interfere.”

“Thought so too, but she seemed content on letting it happen. Wouldn’t watch, though. I think the whole series of events has affected her more than she’s let on. Like I said, she cried a lot.”

“Well, from what we know, she’s never seen or been in war. A lot of things must be a surprise.” Serena said, Dagon nodding in agreement. “Anything else?”

“The Dragon thinks she’s *at least* a double-speaker. At least.”

“Why?” She narrowed her eyes. She had suspected the same, especially after Amelia had admitted she had Spoken *something* to fight Korvus.

“The fleet’s aetherscopes only picked up your Word, and then Korvus’s. They didn’t pick up anything Spoken from the girl.”

“That’s not possible,” Serena said, shaking her head, “Their aetherscopes must have missed her Speaking. She took care of *Korvus*! He was a fifth-level warrior, almost sixth! Even accounting for the general increase in abilities from communing with more than one god, she would have still needed to Speak to contend with him.”

“Right, that’s what I said to Tomes after the meeting. This girl... she’s already pushing the boundaries of what’s possible. We don’t know what’s normal in the world she came from.” Dagon twiddled his thumbs, furrowing his brow. “We got talking, me and Tomes, and we were thinking that... you know... what thinking about her abilities and all... that maybe it’s not a matter of her being able to Speak the First Word of a branch or two, or even *three*. Maybe it’s something bigger than that. Maybe she can Speak the Se-”

“Stop. Don’t go down that path, Dagon.” She warned. “And tell Tomes I said that. He tried to bring up the same subject before. Thankfully he had the sense not to pursue it, sense I hope you have too.”

“I... sorry, captain.”

“She likely has a way to limit or maybe even hide the aether release, the grandmaster at the academy could do it. Apparently, all of the Empress’ Lord Guardians have the ability. We can dig into it later, but for now, assume she covertly Spoke a Word from a human combat branch. Do we have a record of known human Words?”

“Aye, Tomes has one somewhere.”

“Next time you see him, tell him to send it to my quarters. I’ll ask Amelia about it. I don’t think she would lie, she doesn’t seem to like it, which is why it’s *so dangerous* and *important* that you *never* go down that previous line of questioning with her.”

“... Yes, captain.”

“Now... back to something less concerning. Anything else from the Dragon?”

“We’re to sail to Kenhoro, finish repairs there, get a new turret installed. Could be a chance to pick up some of those fancy new propellers Tomes was going on about.”

“Yeah,” Serena nodded. Tomes had mentioned he had come across some propellers that helped prevent cavitation. It would be a useful upgrade for

when they went swimming in the lumina. “And then, await orders?”

“Afraid not. Got to sail to Shimashina after.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. Your old man wants to see you.” Dagon sighed. “And... the girl.”

“Seven hells!” Serena resisted the temptation to grab her horns. “That...” She trailed off, pausing. It *would* be nice to see her family again.

Some of them.

“We must be getting close to Kenhoro, if I’ve been out six days.”

“Aye, captain. Two days out. We’re well into Imperial airspace. Ship’s on low alert. Getting some washing done. Thought it best to take it easy on the crew, after the hangings and all that. Moral is a little low, to be honest. Are you feeling able?”

“I’m good now, thanks to Amelia,” she said. Serena swung her legs off the side of the bed and stood up. After that last bout of healing, she didn’t feel weak at all. She looked down at her feet and...

“Where the hell is my uniform?” She was wearing a white shirt and trousers, very different from her usual black and gold captains outfit.

“Was burned and shredded during the fighting. There’s a spare set around here somewhere...” Dagon dug around in some drawers before pulling out a familiar set of clothes. “Here, captain.”

“Anathor! Gather the officers in the bridge.”

“Very well...” came the gruff reply. Serena turned and gave a pointed look at Dagon, who stared back at her. She sighed.

Men.

“Dagon.”

“Yes, captain?”

“Get out.” She motioned to the uniform in his hands.

“Ah! Sorry, captain. I’ll be outside!” He hurriedly placed the uniform on the bed before making himself scarce and closing the door.

Idiot. She found a basin of water, wetted a towel, and began cleaning her body. There didn’t seem to be too much sweat or dried blood, had Amelia and Hillbrand washed her, or did Amelia have some kind of cleaning spell? It would not surprise her, not anymore.

“Anathor,” she said, “have you ever heard of *chicken*?” Serena wouldn’t change in front of Dagon, but she had long accepted that Anathor could and would see everything at some point. He had assured her previously that he had no interest in those things, and it wasn’t like she could leave the ship every time she wanted to wash herself.

“Hmm...” came the reply. “A flightless bird. Extinct in this realm. From pre-Cascadian times, of the old human kingdoms that formed from the initial wave of colonialism more than two thousand years ago.”

“That long ago?” She asked, pausing her changing. Anathor was old, he had hinted at it a few times, but pre-Cascadian, before the demon empire was formed? Was it possible?

“How do you know?” She asked, “Have you... seen them?”

“Hmm... I do not know. There is a memory, but I don’t know if it’s mine or if it’s... never mind...” He trailed off for a moment. “However, I believe the chocos popular in the Northern Terra Firma and Centralis are a descendant species.”

“Oh, chickens are an ancestor of chocos? That’s interesting. I’ll have her try one, see if she thinks it tastes similar.” Then, a thought arrived. “Anathor, could Amelia be from the original world of humans? From which those caravans arrived?”

“Unlikely. That world was sealed from realm travel shortly after they arrived, by forces incomprehensibly more powerful than the gods you all Speak the names of.”

Suddenly, something Anathor had said to her when she had first discovered Amelia in her quarters a week ago came to mind.

“Powerful enough... to fool your eyes, and the ships?”

“Hmm... the ship cannot be fooled.”

The ship... the fourth deck... there was something about the fourth deck that she had forgotten. Tsk! It can't have been important. Serena finished changing.

“How do I look?”

“Hmm... happy.”

“Happy? I wasn't expecting that.”

“You often seem happy after talking with the human.”

“... keep those thoughts to yourself.”

“Yes, captain.”

She exited the medical wing, meeting Dagon in the corridor. Together they headed to the bridge, and Dagon was giving her a run-down of the smaller things that had happened on the ship over the time she had been healing, however, most of it went through one ear and out the other. Her mind was preoccupied with what Anathor had said.

Amelia made her... happy?

Chapter Nine: Arcwhale

“Dismissed!”

The officers on the bridge returned to their stations. There was a feeling of relief among the soldiers, seeing Serena fully functional and barking orders, as usual, did wonders for their morale. A crew with a captain who was unconscious for an unknown length of time was a tenuous situation, especially post-mutiny.

The demons in the bridge chatted amicably amongst themselves, whilst the air and ground tacticians did what they usually did and debated hypothetical scenarios. Although their ground forces had been disbanded by the Dragon, the ground tactician was technically part of the navy and not the army and had thus remained. His acumen of human defensive strategies would be invaluable in planning future missions of all kinds.

They were well into imperial space, and their aetherscopes were picking up frequent transport ships of both military and civilian origin. The atmosphere was casual, the pre-battle tensions long gone. Now with days of free time behind and in front of them, her sailors would be occupying themselves, whether relaxing in the mess hall, napping in their quarters, or - as she could see through the bridge windows - doing washing.

Now the hole from the torpedo had been patched up, the deck was open for the sailors to get some fresh air and hang their clothes and uniforms to dry. Washing lines went from the gun barrels to the deck railing and from there to the long beams of the port and starboard sails, which were fully deployed.

The propulsion engine was inactive, and the ship was sailing on just the trade winds that would take them to the imperial airdocks in Kenhorro. A

dozen sails, six port side, and six starboard side caught the midsky winds and kept them at a modest fourteen knots, all without a gram of crystal fuel being burned.

“Thorne, Allston, with me,” she said, and her gunnery officer and chief engineer fell in behind her as she approached the repair job on the deck. As the sailors saw her emerge on deck a ripple of cheers erupted.

“Cap’n!”

“Welcome back!”

“That human earned her keep, eh?”

She accepted the comments with a raised hand, “Thought about dying,” she exclaimed, “But then I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving your old horns under Dagon’s command!” That earned a bit of laughter - morale wasn’t at rock bottom then.

Serena came to a stop at the former location of turret three. Steel plates had been welded by the fire mages, forming a relatively thin covering of half-inch thick metal.

“How long for a full repair, Allston?” She asked.

“Three weeks, maybe four at Kenhoro, where we have access to their steel and cranes,” grumbled the chief engineer. “The main deck girders and heavy plates need replacing, but the wooden flooring and walls can be finished on the move. Decks one, two, and three need most of the work. Minor work on deck five. As for deck four... guess it’s true what you told us, that it’ll take more than a battleship shell to get in there.”

“In this case, more than that new torpedo they have.” Dagon had informed her that he had given the fleet a full report of what they encountered, unfortunately, the only documents they had regarding the new weapon were stored in the pocket of her uniform and didn’t survive the battle with Korvus.

“We’re damn lucky Anathor and the ship closed the bulkheads before the secondaries detonated. Saved the turrets from chain reacting. Could have lost the ship.”

“Damage to turrets one and two?”

“Nothing other but some light maintenance we finished a few days ago,” Allston said.

“Did some test firings while you were recovering, captain,” said Thorne, the weapons officer. “All green. Need to come to a decision about what we’re going to replace turret three with.”

Serena nodded, the twin-barrel four-inch batteries had served them well but were nearly seven years old now. There had been numerous advances in ship warfare, as both demon and humankind had sought to find every edge they could over the other.

“Any recommendations?”

“Been talking with the tacticians about it. Given how light craft is getting more numerous these days, and especially considering they’re now carrying torpedoes, we should consider a heavy flak battery instead of an artillery piece.”

“Any come to mind?” The standardization of weapon sizes and fittings had become more and more simple over the last decade, as the Imperial Navy had sought to modularize its equipment. The turret pods they had were compatible with a growing range of standardized cruiser-class weapons.

“We’ll only be able to choose from what’s stored in the armory in Kenhoro, unless we can delay long enough to order something from Tanhae, or eastern Centralis. Ideally, they’ll have a six-barrelled two-inch system, if not we’ll definitely be able to find a quad-barrelled piece. Heard the latest flak can output three shells per second, per barrel.”

That would be twelve heavy flak shells a second for a quad-barrel, or eighteen per second from a six-barrel system. A two-inch flak shell had an

effective fragmentation range of ten to twenty meters, depending on the characteristics of the shell itself. If they could fire eighteen a second, they would barely need to aim to paint the sky in metal.

“Alternatively,” mused Thorne, “Torpedos are pretty accurate these days. Could see if we could put a launcher in, if they have any... Rumour is the brains in the Centralis workshops are close to figuring out how to get the torpedoes to track the aetheric combustion signature of the enemy ship automatically.”

Now that would be a game-changer. Didn't her sister mention she was working on something torpedo-related? Serena made a mental note to ask her the next time they were face-to-face.

“We'll see. I'll find time tomorrow to go over the strategies with you and the tacticians. Since we don't have ground forces anymore I don't think they intend to use us as a hammer in the future. Suspect we might be getting something different.”

If I'm not dishonorably discharged. She thought.

“At ease, officers.” She said, leaving after they saluted her.

She made her way to the captain's quarters, greeting numerous demons along the way who were all pleased to see her up and about. Arriving at the door to her office, she hesitated for a moment before going in.

It was just as she remembered it, although thoroughly empty of one *Amelia Thornheart*.

“In here!” came the now familiar cheerful voice.

She found Amelia in the only other room connected to her office, her personal bedroom. The human was lying on a hammock she had set up, waving at her with a smile on her face.

“Did you... need to set up your hammock right next to mine?” She asked, casting a suspicious eye towards the grinning woman.

“I had no choice! Can’t tie it to that beam, as I’ll bump against the furniture, and can’t use that one as it would block the door to the washroom!”

The explanation seemed plausible, so Serena let the matter drop. She lay down in her own hammock, and they both rocked gently in silence for a minute.

“Thank you again, for what you did,” she said softly, “You saved my life”.

“Mmm...” mumbled Amelia, but was no more forthcoming than that.

“Although, if asked about it, don’t mention you slept in the same bed as me for three days.”

“Why?”

“I’m a noble, and rumors about me affect the standing of my family, my father, and my sisters. It would cause problems if such things became common knowledge. The fact you’re a human just complicates things further. The gossip would be unbearable.”

“Even if it was because I needed to be close, to keep healing you?”

Was that really why? That was what she wanted to ask, but stopped herself. Doubts quickly formed in her mind - why *did* she want to ask that question? Was she hoping for a different answer? Why was it so relaxing for her mind to lay here... talking to Amelia?

“Yes... my family has enemies that would love the opportunity to harm us in any way.”

“Wow, what a bunch of losers. Hey,” Amelia said, and the rustle of cloth let Serena know she had turned to face her. Should she keep looking up at the ceiling, or turn to face her? Why was she debating this!? Why was it suddenly so awkward!? “... so you must be super important, right?”

“... Yeah,” Serena answered to the ceiling. She was the daughter of her father, a talented speaker and captain of the infamous *Vengeance*. It wasn’t her ego talking to say she was important in some circles.

“And your family? Are they all... like you?”

“Like me?”

“You know, hot-headed, sword-waving, order-giving grumpy demons?”

“Pfft!” She couldn’t stop herself snorting at that, and then flushing with embarrassment as she made such an impolite sound. Strangely, she felt no urge to chastise Amelia. Why was she this comfortable around her? It was like... she was...

A friend.

“A little, although my sisters don’t wave swords, but my father taught me everything I know, including how to be... a grumpy captain, as you put it.”

“Mmm! I’d like to meet them!”

“About that...”

“Mmm?”

“After we repair the ship, we’re sailing south to Shimashina, where my father is working. He wants to meet me... and you.” She finally turned her head to face Amelia, whose eyes had gone wide in surprise, and her mouth had fallen open.

“I can’t wait!” Exclaimed Amelia, a grin reappearing on her face. “I’m going to complain about you throwing me in a cell! Then you’ll be in trouble!”

“Ha! Idiot. He’s more likely than me to throw you into a cell. He might throw me in there as well, while he’s at it.”

“But you’re a Speaker.”

“So’s he.”

“Ah,” Amelia wrinkled her nose, scratching it, “Well then, guess I’ll have to make an excellent impression! Soon all your family will want their own human maid too!”

“Seven hells! I hope not. One of you in the family is enough.”

“Me, in the family?”

“Tsk! You know what I mean!”

“Just kidding!” Amelia rolled onto her back, scratching her belly. “I’m hungry! You want to get some food?”

“What have you been eating?”

“Hillbrand started bringing me soups and omelets... they were alright I guess. Your bread sucks though. So hard!”

“... Let’s head to the kitchens, and see what the chefs can do for us. I could eat some meat. Dagon better have got some from the fleet.”

They climbed out of their hammocks and left the room. As they did, Anathor piped up.

“Captain, Dagon incoming! Looks like good news...”

A moment later a frantic knocking sounded. “Come in.” She said. The door burst open and a somewhat excited and out of breath Dagon appeared.

“Captain! Schools of Sardis sighted!”

“Where!?”

“Two klicks bearing eighty degrees! About a kilometer below us! Got eyes on them!”

“Anathor! Tell the helmsman to fix to a bearing of eighty degrees! Don’t let the observers lose track of them!”

“Aye, Captain.” The moose responded.

“Dagon! We have nets?”

“Got enough for two of the fighters! I, uh, gave permission for them to start setting up already. Figured you would go for them!”

“Good work. Head back to the bridge. Make sure the ship doesn’t get closer than a klick, don’t want to scare them off.”

“Aye, Captain!” Dagon saluted and disappeared. Serena glanced at Amelia to see her looking at her with a confused expression.

“What’s that about?”

“You said you’re hungry?” Amelia nodded. “Well instead of hardtack and boiled vegetables, why not go fishing? Come now, quickly.” Serena set off, striding as fast as possible without running, Amelia struggling to catch up.

“Sardis,” she explained, “are a delicacy. They are fish that are rarely seen due to them being mostly transparent. They are also fast, which makes them hard to catch. The biggest problem is they have an organ that can detect the aetheric combustion of vessels, meaning you can’t get much closer than a klick before they scatter.”

“How do you catch them?”

“Normally you would use a dedicated fishing ship, but we’ll make do with fighters and nets. We’ll launch the fighters at a distance, far above the Sardis, and they’ll dive down with their engines off, catch them in the nets.”

“Are they... tasty?”

“Seven hells! They are *delicious*, to both demons and humans. It’s rumored that their flesh is dense in aether, and can help promote growth for mages and warriors alike, although I suspect that’s a marketing tactic the fishing companies invented.”

They reached the first deck and instead of heading to the bridge Serena decided to go outside. She wanted to see them with her own eyes. The ship hummed as it began the almost full right turn.

“I’ve only had them a few times. The flesh goes bad quickly, and if you smoke and salt it, it ruins the taste. A good catch of Sardis can pay for an entire fishing vessel by itself if you can get it to market fast enough.” She kept her voice low, “If we can catch some, it’ll be the perfect thing to help with the ship’s morale after the whole Korvus incident.”

“Understood! I’m excited!”

On deck, the dozens of demons that had been relaxing, washing, and chatting were all pressed against the railings at the bow of the ship, pointing and gesturing. They made way for Serena and Amelia, one of the sailors passing her a spyglass.

“They’re flying above the cloud layer, just where it sticks up and out, near the cloud wall, captain!” Said the demon. Serena peered through the spyglass, identifying the spot described to her. It took her a while, but then she saw them. Subtle shimmers against the backdrop of cloud and sky, gliding along in groups of a few dozen or more.

“That’s more than I hoped! Anathor!” She called out. The ship’s guardian would hear her. “Tell Dagon to launch the fighters as soon as they’re ready! Make sure they know what they’re doing!”

“I think... I see them! How are they so transparent!?” Amelia exclaimed, pointing down at the schools of Sardis. The woman had far better eyesight than normal.

“It’s magical. They’re not intelligent, so it’s assumed they evolved the ability as a natural defense against birds of prey and other fish.”

“That’s amazing!”

A minute passed and a loud hum filled the air as two fighters detached from the ship and took to the skies, to the cheers of the demons. The fighters had

attached triangular nets to their wings. Hopefully, it would be enough to catch even a few. The light craft rose high up, and Serena could see the pilots communicating with hand signals, coordinating their upcoming dive.

“They’ll cut the engines in a moment, and then dive.” She explained to Amelia.

“Hmm...” mumbled the human. “Do you want me... to help?” Her voice was quiet, only for her to hear.

“Help?” She whispered. “What do you mean, help?”

“I can feel them, I think. If I focus. I could try and dull their senses... with your permission?”

“You can do that?” Amelia nodded, her face a picture of serious confidence. “Can you do it... quietly?” She asked. Another nod.

“Do it then.” The fighters had begun their dive, the steel hunters streaming down like arrows toward the Sardis. Amelia raised an arm, palm facing toward the fish, and closed her eyes. There was no burst of light, but Serena sensed a stream of aether erupting from the open palm and snaking out into the skies, beyond her perception.

She frantically looked through the spyglass, taking painful seconds to find the Sardis again, and when she did her mouth opened in shock. They had somehow become opaque! Instead of being transparent, they were painted in hues of blue and green!

“Here they come!” A voice rang out and the fighters, like birds of prey hunting in the night, flew in and through the groups of Sardis, before pulling up and closing their nets using their jury-rigged pulley system of ropes and weights. A tremendous noise of triumph and celebration erupted on deck, as it became obvious even from this distance that they had caught far more than a few.

It was excellent flying from her pilots, she would be sure to give them a bonus for that and... she glanced to her side, at the blond woman, who

slowly opened her eyes and returned the look, with a smug grin on her face.

“I did good, didn’t I?” She asked, a mischievous twinkle in her blue eyes.

“You did good,” Serena said, and before a part of her mind could stop her, she reached out and ruffled the blond hair. It was like running her hands through fluffy silk. “Well done.” Before the moment became awkward she turned back to the Sardis, seeing the remainder had scattered into the clouds. The fighters began their turn back to the ship, their pilots throwing out fists of celebration.

“We’re going to be eating good tonight!” She called out, the demons around her hollering. An idea sprung to mind. “You,” she said to Amelia, loud enough for those around the pair to hear. “What spell did you cast, to keep the Sardis from escaping?” Amelia paused momentarily, looking confused before widening her eyes slightly, as she then understood what Serena was doing.

“Just a minor sleep spell! Just enough to make them drowsy! I didn’t want them falling out of the sky!” The many demons around them still chatted amongst themselves but were clearly eavesdropping on the conversation.

“Excellent job. There are dozens of sailors on this ship who have never tasted Sardis before - and now will - thanks to you.” She noticed a number of demons nodding to themselves in her peripheral vision. Best not to let the opportunity go to waste.

“We have any of the cooks here!?” She called out.

“Aye, captain!” One of the demons answered, wearing a white cap.

“Any of you know how to prepare Sardis?”

“Haven’t done it before, but can’t be much different from Arkis.”

“Reckon you can take this one with you?” She reached a hand behind Amelia, pushing her forward.

“Me!?” Exclaimed the human.

“You are my *maid*, and you did say you wanted to learn how to cook, didn’t you? That alright with you, and your boys?” She asked the latter question to the cook, who rubbed his chin.

“Aye, that’ll be alright with us. Come on then, Miss Thornheart.”

“... Okay!” Amelia bounced up. “I’ll make sure to prepare your dish, Lady Halen!”

“Captain.” Intoned the cook, and led Amelia down the deck, as the fighters made the last maneuvers before docking back up with the ship.

“Wait...” a voice sounded out. Amelia had stopped, her attention to the skies off starboard. Slowly, she raised a finger, pointing at something. “There’s something there. In that cloud.”

Serena followed the finger to see it pointing to a huge wall of the cumulonimbus cloud wall, reaching from upper-sky all the way down to low-sky. She walked up alongside Amelia, eyes trying to spot something within the mountain of white. She strained her senses, but a warrior's sensitivity was always less than a mage's.

“What is it? What can you sense?”

“It’s like... a heartbeat. It’s big... I think it’s coming closer!”

Serena was just about to give the command for battle stations, when another voice beat her to it. It was Dagon, shouting from one of the bridge doors.

“Captain! Arcwhale! Starboard!”

With that, a deep bellow sounded in the sky. A noise somewhere between the echoing roar of distant thunder and the drone of a wind-blown organ. It was a majestic and ethereal sound that resonated through the clouds. A dark shadow appeared on the surface of the cloud wall, and then the archwhale breached through with another mournful cry.

It was enormous. Larger than a battleship. It was nearly three hundred meters long, and a hulking body, painted with stripes of purple and blue,

took up most of its mass while two tails - extruding from the rear - took up the other two-thirds of its length.

It was flying in parallel with the *Vengeance*, one of its huge fins still embedded in the cloud wall, splitting it like a knife through paper.

“Don’t point any weapons at it!” She shouted down to Dagon. “It’s just curious! Prepare to dive if we need to!” The arcwhale was pulling up alongside the ship, its enormous eye staring at them.

“Don’t cast any magic.” She said to Amelia. “It might think it’s an attack.”

“That’s... a big fish.” Said Amelia, slowly raising a hand and waving at the enormous creature. “Hello,” she whispered. “Nice to meet you...”

“It’s Rhaknam!” A panicked voice cried out.

“No!” Shouted Serena. “Rhaknam lives in the Shattered Isles! Rhaknam is darker!”

And much bigger. She thought to herself.

“It’s just curious about the ship!” She yelled, reassuring herself as much as the crew. “Don’t do anything stupid! Don’t run! Let it satisfy its curiosity! It might have thought our lift engine was one of its brethren!”

She placed a hand on Amelia’s shoulder, who was still staring wide-eyed at the arcwhale, which seemed - if she wasn’t mistaken - to be looking right back at her. “You okay?” she asked.

“Who... who’s Rhaknam?” Amelia questioned, not taking her eyes away from the titanic animal.

“Rhaknam is their god, the god of arcwhales. They follow him and Speak his name when attacked. Of course, if you try and hunt one and succeed, Rhaknam himself would come up from the Shattered Isles and... cause problems.” She gritted her teeth. She had heard stories. Tales from centuries ago. Nations wiped from the map.

“Wait, they can Speak!?” Amelia exclaimed.

“Yes, at least, big ones like this one here can. *Rhaknam* being their First Word.”

“I didn’t know there were animal gods! I only thought there were demon and human ones!”

“Rhaknam isn’t the only animal god in the sky. There are others - some are known - others are just myths. I’ll go over this with you, or have Tomes do it. There’s a lot you don’t know.”

“How does it stay up!?”

“Remember the heartbeat you felt? It has organs that do something similar to our lift engine, only it does it with flesh rather than steel.”

“That’s incredible! Hello, Mr Arcwhale!” She waved again.

“Stop waving. It’ll go away soon.”

“It won’t attack us, will it?”

“No, not unless we attack it first. A deal was struck - a long time ago - between Rhaknam and the Empress. We share the skies, ignoring each other as best we can but...” she gestured at the gigantic animal, “Sometimes one of them gets curious, or mistakes a ship for another of its kind”.

Another bellow sounded out from the arcwhale, a melody that lingered long in the ears of everyone who heard it. Then, rolling slowly like a great ship, it moved away from the *Vengeance* until it was swallowed back up in the clouds. They watched the shadow of its presence fade until only the white wall of cloud remained.

“Maybe it was after the same Sardis as we were, and got annoyed?” Amelia questioned.

“Maybe. Let’s go. You, head to the kitchens. I have a report I need to write. Every sighting needs to be added to the records, and besides...” she eyed

Amelia, “Who knows what else is going to appear if you stay outside.”

Chapter Ten: The Second and Third Words

“One at a time, you bloody demons! You’re like a pack of damn wolfhounds! One at a time!”

The rabble slightly calmed down at the head cook’s bellowing, but it took only moments for it to fall back into a frenzy again, encouraged by the exclamations of the demons who managed to get their meal.

“Seven hells! How can something taste so good!?”

“I must have died! I definitely died!”

“I feel like a right proper noble eating this, ha!”

“Me next! Me! I was first!”

The sardis was being filleted and cooked as quickly as possible. The sound of its sizzling flesh as it was placed on the hot plate was tantalizing. A rich mouth-watering aroma filled the air and contributed to the chaos of impatient hungry demons.

“Miss Thornheart! Gut these two!”

“Yes, head cook!” Amelia hurried to the part of the kitchen that had been designated as the gutting station. She used a sharp knife to make an incision from the sardis’s tail to its gills, being careful not to cut too deep and penetrate the internal organs. They had been impressed by her knife control and quick learning, something that was certainly aided greatly by her high dexterity stat from the game.

With the sardis's belly open, she gritted her teeth and reached into the abdominal cavity, pulling out the innards. She couldn't deny it made her squeamish, but the knowledge and sounds of a hundred ravenous demons behind her put those thoughts to rest. With the internal organs removed, she ran a thumb - like she had been shown - along the spine of the fish, removing any dark kidney tissue that would ruin the flavor.

They had gone through a sardis and a half before they figured that out.

Finally, she rinsed the insides of the fish and once that was done, repeated her actions with the remaining sardis. The results were passed to the next cook in line, who was delicately cutting through the connective tissue around the gills to detach the head.

"Done, head cook!"

"Get over there! I need more cooked! Don't let the rest burn!"

"Y-yes!"

"Yes what!?"

"Yes, head cook!"

She ran to the hot plate where fillets of Sardis were cooking. Amelia breathed through her mouth, not daring to breathe through her nose lest she start drooling all over the food! She grabbed a pair of metal tongs and began turning the fillets that needed it and removed the others that had just reached a subtle golden colour. Amelia wasn't sure if the flesh of fish was supposed to become golden when cooked, but sardis did.

She replaced the empty spaces on the hot plate with new fillets that made a satisfying sizzling sound as they contacted the metal. The cooked fillets were carried over to the opening where the head cook was defending against the horde.

"Head cook! We're falling behind over here!" One of the cooks shouted.

“Miss Thornheart!” The head cook peered down at her, raising two fingers. “Two pieces per demon! Two pieces per plate! No favoritism!” He dragged her to his spot in front of the crowd. “Go easy on her or she won’t heal any of you animals in the future!”

Amelia gulped and the head cook vanished deeper into the kitchen, leaving her at the mercy of the frantic mob!

“O-one at a time! Hey! Hands off!” She swatted the hand of a demon reaching over the counter.

“Hurry up!”

“We’re hungry over here, miss!”

“I’ll pay you if you give me an extra piece!”

Amelia found her stride and began serving the demons. She wasn’t sure but thought that perhaps they were slightly less aggressive with her than with the head cook. That didn’t stop the mess hall from being a madhouse though. Two pieces per demon. Two pieces per plate. She absorbed herself in the task.

“Don’t stand around eating you idiots! Get your grub and get out of here!” Tome’s voice could be heard from somewhere. The mess hall was a long, thin part of the ship and could only hold so many sailors at once. They were being funneled out the moment they got their food, to the outside corridors, first deck, or their quarters where they could enjoy the sardis.

“Two pieces per demon! Two pieces per plate!” She repeated to herself, a mantra to keep order in the chaos. After a while, she realized the noise had died down, and coming out of her work trance she couldn’t help breaking out into a nervous smile.

“Working hard?” Serena intoned, a space forming around her that she naturally commanded.

“Y-yeah!” Amelia looked at the demon, noting the small smile that had appeared on Serena’s face. Honestly! Even though it was nice that she wasn’t snarling at her anymore - with that look in her eye that said *I really want to stab you right now* -she kind of missed it... Maybe she should annoy her in the future, see what happened when she pushed the captain’s buttons.

“I’m waiting...”

“Ah! Sorry!” Amelia hurried and placed two pieces of golden fish on a plate. “Two pieces!” She said, beaming at Serena. “Per plate! No favoritism!” She handed the food to the captain, who cast a wary eye at it, then at her, and then at the pile of cooked sadis. Then, reaching out an arm, slowly and steadily, like a snake after its prey, the captain took another piece!

“Three!?”

“Officers get another share,” Serena said, standing straight and dignified before reaching out and...

“Four!?”

“Hmm? Oh, didn’t you know? Captain gets one more,” she gave an exaggerated sigh, “Especially as she’s been under *so much stress* recently”. With a definite smug grin on her face, rivaling that of Amelia’s own...

“*Five!?*”

She shouldn’t chastise her captain, but she couldn’t help puffing out her cheeks in frustration! “Why five!? That’s unfair!”

“Well, an extra one for every Word you can Speak,” Serena leaned in, eyes glinted mischievously, “And how many will you be taking, I wonder?”.

She... she was playing with her! It wasn’t a serious attempt at extracting information from her, she was sure of that! Amelia bit her lips, trying to think of a good comeback but finding nothing came to mind. Blast it! She

knew it would come to her when she would drift off to sleep tonight, too late!

“Cooks!” Serena called out, her voice taking on that commanding captain’s edge. The demons in the kitchen stopped what they were doing immediately. “An extra piece for you all, for your work! I last had sardis when I graduated and that was cooked by Hakian chefs from the desert! I’m telling you I think you may have outdone them!” The cooks raised their fists, hollering.

“Aye, captain!”

“Give another share to the pilots, any remaining pieces we’ll cut in half and serve for tomorrow’s breakfast. If there’s not enough, we’ll do it by roulette.” Commands given, Serena looked at Amelia. “As for *you*. Once you’re finished with your work here, come to my quarters.”

“Yes, captain! I mean Lady Halen!” With that, Serena turned and - extruding control and dignity - left the mess hall. All was quiet for a few seconds before the chaos picked up once again as the last few dozen demons scrambled to be first in line.

Amelia worked hard, and before she knew it she had been lost in her task and there was no one else left to serve. Looking around, the last of the sardis had been prepared and stored for tomorrow.

“Phew!” She said to herself, taking a plate and putting one, two, and then a third piece of sardis on it. It was common knowledge now she was a Speaker so she didn’t feel concerned about that third piece.

Besides, if she truly followed Serena’s instructions, she wasn’t sure if there were enough fillets, or space on her plate!

Her mouth had started watering again in anticipation! “Thank you! It was fun learning how to prepare fish! I’m happy to help in the future!” She gave a polite bow to the group of cooks.

“Miss Thornheart!” Bellowed the head cook, folding his arms and looking at her sternly, “Where do you think you’re going!?”

“Y-yes, head cook! Umm... to eat?”

The demons stared at her for a moment and then started chuckling amongst themselves.

“The captain instructed you to come to her quarters after your work is done, is that right?”

“... yes, head cook!”

“And *that!*” The head cook pointed to the workspaces of the kitchen covered in the blood and guts of fish. “And, *that!*” he gestured to the sinks, where a mountain of unwashed plates was piled up. “What do you think that is, Miss Thornheart?”

Amelia felt her shoulders drop.

“... more work, head cook...”

She put her plate of heaven to the side. Fighting back tears she grabbed the washing-up cloth and began filling the sink.

Over the next two hours, she would curse more than a few times.

With her hair and clothes wet, with bits of foam lingering here and there, Amelia opened the door to the captain's quarters.

“You should knock, in the future,” Serena said immediately, without taking her eyes off the paper she was writing on. Despite being mentally exhausted, seeing the captain reinvigorated her a little.

“Even though these are also my quarters? Anathor will let you know when I’m coming, won’t he?”

“Even though. Additionally-” Serena raised her eyes at Amelia, her speech stopping seeing the condition Amelia was in. The corner of her mouth crept up in a smile. “Oh dear, they had you washing up?”

“I have *never*,” Amelia said, letting herself spawl onto the wooden floor, “done so much washing up in my life”. She let out a long groan. “Hundreds of plates. Hundreds! I want to cry...”

“You finished it all though, yes? With minimal complaining?”

“... yeah.”

“Then I imagine you passed.”

“Passed?” Amelia raised a weary head from the floor to see Serena looking down at her with amusement.

“All new cooks get washing up duty first. It’s the ritual of passage. Anathor told me the head cook complimented your work ethic after you left.”

“Really!? That’s great!” Amelia sat up, “Maybe I’ll try and invent a dishwasher...”

“Dishwasher? As in... the job title?”

“Nah, like the machine. We had them. You put all the dirty dishes in and then press a button and it would clean *and* dry them all for you!”

Serena raised an eyebrow, looking interested. “Oh? I thought you said you didn’t have aether? How does it work? Just steam-powered?”

“No, it all runs on electricity.”

“*Electricity*? Really?”

Amelia nodded, “Yeah! Like the lights on the ship.”

“The lights on the ship run on aetheric principles, not electricity.”

“What!?” Amelia jumped up, examining the lights in the room. It was as Serena said, these lights, despite looking and shaped like electric ones from her world, were completely different on the inside. There appeared to be some kind of shining crystal inside. “What’s the crystal?” She asked.

“Moon crystal. They interact with aether in interesting ways in different circumstances. It’s what allows the lift engine to function in the first place. I suppose you didn’t have crystals in your world, or anything similar?”

“No! It was all electricity! Do you run anything on electricity?”

“How would you even create light from electricity?”

“Uh, you run electricity through a thin piece of metal, I think it has to be a special kind, and put it in clear glass surrounded by a special gas... I think?” Amelia shrugged, she had never had to think about something as common as a light before.

“I don’t think that would work here. Too much electricity causes interference with the aetherfield and vice-versa. An electrical light would probably blow out whenever there was a lumina storm in the vicinity.”

“That makes... so much sense! How long do these... aetherlights last?”

“As long as the crystal remains undamaged...” Serena turned her eyes upwards, thinking, “... Forever I suppose.”

“*Forever!?*”

“Yes?”

“Ha! You have no idea how incredible that is! A never-ending source of light! People back home would shower you with prizes for discovering that!”

“Well, it’s nice to finally have something about *my* world shock *you*. How refreshing.” Serena gestured for her to approach, “Look here”.

Amelia bent down and examined it. It was a table with many columns and three rows. The headers of the columns were written in what she now knew as Imperial, even if she still couldn't read it. The text in the rows was the script Serena had shown her previously, the phonetic language of the Words.

"This," Serena said, "Is a somewhat updated table of all the known human Words. Centralis Intelligence might know more, and the human nations themselves will be keeping some hidden, but this is most of what we know."

Amelia peered down, there were twelve columns and for each one, the first row was entirely filled, the second row only a handful, and for the third row a single solitary entry.

"Since you can't read this yet," Serena said, "I will sound them out for you. As the Dragon and I both suspect - and you've hinted at - you may or may not be a dual-speaker, if not more. I'll skip over the bit where I explain how incredibly impossible that is and put it down to the fell gods playing a joke on me. Instead, I'll read these out."

Serena took a breath, and with a quick glance at Amelia, began reading out the Words.

"*Agni, Gaia, Aeolus, Yemaya*. Those are the First Words - and name of gods - of the human branches of fire, earth, air, and water." She looked at Amelia a moment and then continued. "*Besram, Surya, Rula, Aseco*. Those are for the branches of protection, light, healing, and divinity. Then we have the warrior Words. *Ares, Sullar, Luhran, Theran*. These are the branches of the sword, spear, bow, and shield."

"Okay..." Amelia said. Other than Aseco, she didn't know any of these Words personally, although many of the names were familiar to her from the game. "What about the second row?"

"The second row is for the known Second Words of each branch. Considering how insanely *rare*," a flash of a glance in her direction, "it is

for anyone, human or demon to know a Second Word, we know very few of them. It is not knowledge that is given out easily.”

Serena pointed to a few entries. “We know of *Vulcan*, the Second Word of the fire branch, Spoken after *Agni*. We know of *Alorium* the Second Word after *Aeolus*, the human wind god. For the warrior branches we only know the Second Word of the sword and bow, which are,” Serena traced the script with her finger, “*Kartikay* and *Apollo*. For the remaining branches, we only know the Second Word of divinity, *Asclepius*,” a momentary pause, “Spoken after *Aseco*, your Word. Any of these... ringing any bells?”

“... maybe.” She said, suddenly feeling the urge to look away. Could she Speak *Asclepius*? If she went by the game, she should be able to, but Amelia never had the opportunity while in battle with Korvus and Narean, where she had favored more familiar and powerful Words to subdue both him and the rampaging minor god. “What about the third row? There’s only one entry, under *Asclepius*.”

“That... is the only known human Third Word, known only by the pope, who has sat on his golden throne in the Vatican for centuries. It is *Ascemurella*, the highest god the humans have managed to commune with.”

“I see,” Amelia said, “And... are you expecting me to tell you any additional Words I know, if any?”

“No. I just want to put it in context for this discussion about how rare Speakers are, and how closely their secrets are kept. Second Word Speakers are strategic weapons, closely guarded and controlled by both sides in past, current, and future conflicts.” Serena sprayed out a large sheet of paper, on this one was a map.

“This is *Cascadia*, both the name of the floating continent and the namesake of the empire of demonkind, the *Cascadian Empire*. It is split into five major administrative regions. In the center is *Centralis*, which is the economic hub of the empire. Several dozen cities in the Centalis basin contain the majority of the empire's population,” Serena gestured at the map, “And to the north, east, south, and west we have the four *Terra Firmas*

which are each ruled by an *Overlord*, each of them being a powerful Second Speaker, as well as a triple or quad First Word Speaker.”

“And Centralis? Doesn’t the most important area have an Overlord?”

“No, because Centralis is headed by the Empress of Demonkind, the divine *Elana*. She is immortal - a shard of infinity - and has lived for nearly a thousand years. Like the human pope, she is a Speaker of the Third Word. Demons consider her to be a god in demon form, and as you learn more about her you will come to understand why.”

“What’s her Third Word?”

“It is unknown. We only know that it is the Third Word of the branch of demonic hellfire.”

“I see!” Amelia felt herself getting excited. Demon Words were her speciality!

“Although, there are records and evidence of it being Spoken in the last millennium. The Shattered Isles here,” Serena pointed to an area of empty space, south of Centralis and a little bit east of the Southern Terra Firma, “This used to be a peninsula, but was destroyed when the Empress Spoke her Third Word. It is now a stormy, broken area, consisting of thousands and thousands of islands. It is where the arcwhales call home, and the territory of Rhaknam, the arcwhale god.”

Amelia felt herself gulp. In the game Speaking the Third Word was just an extra powerful area-of-effect attack! It wasn’t something that could rip apart the land!

“Why did she Speak?” Asked Amelia.

Serena shook her head, “Get a history lesson from Anathor or Tomes another time. I want to give you a grounding in the structure of the empire and your place in it.”

“Okay!”

“Now each of the four Terra Firmas has an Overlord, and each of those has three or four *Greatlords* under them. Greatlords are typically also Second Speakers or triple-speakers of the First Word. Each Greatlord rules a region that is comparable in size to a human kingdom of twenty or so million people. Look, you can see on the map how the Terra Firmas are split into these regions.”

“And, where are we now?”

“We’re here, sailing south towards Kenhoro in the Eastern Terra Firma. Now, each Greatlord essentially has their own nation, which they govern in accordance with their Overlord's will, who in turn are given a large amount of freedom by the Empress to do with their territories as they wish. Under each Greatlord are a dozen or more *Highlords*, who are either promising Speakers or very talented administrators. Highlords govern entire cities or important economic centers like ports.”

“Highlord... like the Dragon?”

“Yes, and like many Highlords the Dragon occupies other positions in the structure of his Overlord’s administration. The powers given to him from these positions are why he’s so... intimidating. Now, we’re almost done. Below each Highlord is half a dozen Lords, who may or may not be a Speaker, and hold important estates and land within the domain of the Highlord.” Serena took a breath, “Finally, below them are the Lord-prospects. Any demon Speaker automatically becomes a lord-prospect and gains the privileges that come with it, such as hiring a personal retinue. This is also why you refer to me as *Lady Halen*. Should my service be satisfactory to the Greatlord above me, they may bestow upon me full Cascadian Lordship.”

Amelia took that information in, letting it simmer. She had a thousand questions but could tell Serena wasn’t in the mood for a long lecture.

“Right, so where do I stand in all of this?”

“Speakers are *rare*. Even Speakers of the First Word. The military academy that trained me in the sword only sees one or two Speakers graduate a year,

the rest reaching mostly second-level aura, and *that's pretty damn good*. Most captains of cruisers like the *Vengeance* are not Speakers. In fact, along with the ship itself being infamous, the fact both me and Korvus were on it made its name and its exploits reach far wider than they normally would.

“You are a powerful Speaker, a suspected duel-speaker, or more. You rival the Highlords in power and dare I say it - with how easily you seemed to defeat Korvus and save me - you may even approach the level of some of the weaker Greatlords,” Serena said, jabbing a finger in her direction. “This makes you of *tremendous* interest to people far above my station, and the station of my father, who is an important Highlord in his own right. Assassination attempts are not out of the question, by either rival demon nobility or from the human nations.”

“Huh!? The humans might try and kill me!? Why!?”

“Once it gets out that you are not, in fact, a captive, and are willingly aiding demonkind, they will try something. You are a Speaker of *Aseco* and that means you share that branch with the pope himself. They will likely see it is an act of heresy that needs to be stamped out.”

“Oh.”

“I suspect for this reason the Dragon is sending us south, to keep you away from the war and knowledge of you from spreading faster than it already is,” a small sigh escaped Serena’s lips. “Of course, alongside potential assassinations and kidnappings, even more demons will try and lure you to their side, bribe you, employ you, you name it. Demonkind has no gods of healing, and thus you are a *very, very* rare commodity. It’s not unlikely a request will come from the Greatlord himself or... even higher.”

She didn’t like the sound of that! “Nu, uh!” Amelia shook her head vigorously. “I’m staying right here! With you!” She was happy to see Serena smile at that - and if she wasn’t mistaken - she could see the very faintest redness spreading on her cheeks!

“How... loyal.” Serena leaned back on the leather chair, clasping her hands together. “You must be observant in the future. People will approach you

directly and indirectly, pretending to be unaware of who you are, meanwhile hidden behind them are the intentions of their masters, or a poisoned knife. I suggest you, if possible, keep ward-spells active at all times, much like how I keep a layer of aura running even when I sleep.”

“Understood!”

“When we travel to Shimashina, and meet my father, there may be complications. Technically as my maid you... belong to me in a sense, and are not directly touchable by the Cascadian Lords, even those high in the ranks. That does not mean some of them cannot apply an enormous amount of pressure and incentives to my father, who may or may not pressure me in turn. It depends...”

“Depends on what?”

“How much my father likes you.”

“Heh,” Amelia flashed two thumbs up. “I’ll be on my best behavior!”

“Ha! Pfft!” Serena laughed, covering her mouth. “Your *best* behavior would cause chaos in any noble estate in Cascadia! During the month in Kenhoro, Tomes and I will be thoroughly teaching you some proper manners so you can at least *pretend* to be a normal dignified Speaker like you should be!”

Amelia opened her mouth to protest and then closed it. Serena was probably right. Besides, how difficult could it be? It would be like cosplay, right? To pretend to be some stuck-up rich girl, prancing about with servants and dresses?

“Sounds fun! I can- oh no!” Amelia slapped her forehead with her hands. It was a disaster! She had been so mentally drained from the kitchens she had forgotten! “I forgot to bring my share of food! The sardis!”

“Took you a while. Anathor told me as much. Here.” Serena reached into a side drawer and pulled out a plate. On that plate was two - no - two and a half fillets of fish!

“For.. for me?” She felt her mouth start watering, as she looked at Serena with wide eyes, trying to put as much pleading as possible in her expression.

“Seven hells, you’re like a starved pup. Stop looking at me like that. Yes, you can have it. It’s cooled down but still tastes as good. I’ll get the rest of my share tomorrow.”

“You’re... you’re the best captain in the world!” Amelia bounced up, taking the knife and fork on the plate she cut a piece of fish, which was so tender it was just falling apart. Serena watched her, amused.

“Eat up, after which we’ll go on deck and I’ll introduce you to the sword.”

“You’re going to teach me!?”

“Yes, idiot. It’s part of your contract, remember? It’ll be good entertainment for the crew and who knows you might have some talent.”

“Thank you! I can’t wait!” She placed the sardis in her mouth and chewed, and as the rich flavor filled her senses, she couldn’t stop herself from letting out a moan that in anyone’s world probably belonged more in the bedroom than at the table!

The unelegant noise was worth it, as Serena’s eyes darted to look at something else while the redness reappeared on those well-defined cheeks!

She devoured the rest of the food and after spending a minute enjoying the heavenly taste that lingered in her mouth, she shook her head and began tying her hair back.

“I’m ready!” Amelia exclaimed.

It was time for her first-ever swordsmanship lesson.

Chapter Eleven: Sensei

Amelia gripped the wooden sword with both hands and stared down her opponent. Serena was turned slightly to the side, her own wooden sword pointed to the floor as she extruded confidence. The wind gently rustled her black hair, contrasting against the evening sky.

“First lesson,” she said as she slowly approached Amelia, who gripped the wooden sword even tighter as the threat loomed. “Don’t grip the sword too tightly; you don’t want to tire your hands.”

Amelia relaxed her hands a little and the moment she did a flick of Serena’s wrist wrenched the sword from her grasp and flung it to the ground.

“Not that loose,” Serena said, a smile forming on her lips.

Amelia grabbed the weapon and once again faced the captain as a titter of chuckles sounded from the others. They were on the first deck, and a circle of demons had formed, providing an impromptu arena. After asking Serena why so many of the crew were watching, the captain shrugged and said, *‘Evening entertainment’!*

“Second, let’s fix the stance,” Serena motioned with her sword. “Feet. Keep them slightly more than shoulder-width apart for better balance.” After adjusting her stance, the sword was pointed at her knees. “Don’t lock your knees; stay flexible and ready to move. Bend them slightly to lower your center of gravity.”

“Like this?” Amelia adjusted her stance as best she could from the instructions.

“Yes. Your stance is the most important thing. Everything else will be built from it. This one is called *Hachiji-dachi* and is the *natural stance*. Now,

tense your body and feel how little force is needed to tip you over.” Amelia clenched her core and Serena placed a hand on her collar, slowly applying pressure. Doing her best to ignore how her heartbeat skyrocketed, she focused on how her body quickly began tipping backwards. Unconsciously, she moved her back foot to stabilise herself.

“Not a lot, right? *Hachiji-dachi* is your gun and sword, it-” Serena stopped at the questioning look Amelia cast her way. “... What?”

“Gun and sword? Is that an expression?”

“... Yeah. It means your foundation. Something you become so proficient in you can always fall back to it.”

“We have an expression like that! We call it your ‘bread and butter’! Wait! Do you even have butter here!?” As she thought about it, suddenly a lot of food from her home might not exist here! What about cheese!?

Oh no. She wasn’t sure she could survive without cheese!

“Yes, we have butter. Focus on the lesson, idiot.”

“Sorry!” Amelia gave her a small smile.

“Sorry, what?”

“Sorry, Lady Halen!”

“Idiot. Call me *sensei* when I’m training you!”

“Yes, sensei!” She squeaked. The crew forming a circle chuckled at that, and a few jeers were thrown in.

“Don’t be too harsh on her, Cap’n!”

“It’s like I’m back at the academy!”

“Little mouse looks out of her depth!”

“You’re going to find out why the humans call her the *hellfire captain*!”

Amelia felt her mouth quiver as a flash of anxiety rippled through her. Maybe asking the captain to train her wasn’t a good idea. Serena did have *that look* in her eye, after all.

“Fifty push-ups, go on.”

“Y-yes, sensei!” Amelia got down, but before she could even begin...

“Idiot, why have you let go of your sword? Never let go of your weapon. The weapon *is* the warrior, and the warrior *is* the weapon. You are one! Grip your sword and do it on your knuckles!”

Serena was enjoying this, wasn’t she? Amelia gripped her sword in her right hand and began doing push ups. She was far tougher than a normal human, so the pressure on her knuckles didn’t bother her at all. Soon, she was lost in the rhythmic motion of the exercise. How much time had passed? She had lost count! Just as she started to feel her muscles slightly protest, a voice called out to her.

“Stop! Up!” Amelia scrambled up. “I said fifty, and you did a hundred. What am I to do with a student who cannot follow instructions, I wonder?” Serena tilted her head, placing two fingers on her cheek with an expression of mock distress.

She was definitely enjoying this.

“Still, your physical endurance is exceptional, which is expected of someone who has communed the First Word. You have your wards active, yes?”

“Yes, sensei!”

“It depends on the talent of the mage, but ward-spells are roughly equivalent to a warrior's aura in defensive ability.” Serena took out her firearm, pointed it at Amelia's chest and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot was like a crack of thunder. Amelia flinched, felt an impact, and smelled gunpowder. She... she had shot her!

“You shot me!” She exclaimed.

“Yes, it was rather an enjoyable experience.” Serena spun the firearm on her finger before bringing the barrel to a stop under her lips and blowing on the smoke. Amelia had to admit, it looked pretty cool! “I’ll make a habit of it if you don’t follow my instructions.”

“From the attempt on your life, you’re already aware of how difficult it is to hurt you with conventional weapons. However, the noise of gunfire will still induce panic and shock to the inexperienced, so we’ll work on fixing that with you.”

She couldn’t believe it! Serena was going to keep shooting her! Sure, she wasn’t in any real danger, but she was still getting shot! Amelia resisted a small sigh escaping as she resigned herself to her fate of being a bullet sponge.

“A first-circle ward from a mage is roughly the same as a first-level aura of a warrior. It will make you unreachable by most handguns.” Serena calmly continued with her explanation as if shooting her maid was the most natural thing in the world. “The second-circle, and second-level will protect you against most rifle-fire. You should always keep something active at all times, if possible.”

Amelia nodded. She was running the *Ward of Thew* constantly, which moderately boosted her characteristics. On top of that, she had stacked a second-circle and two third-circle wards from the *Aseco* branch that significantly enhanced her defence against physical and magical attacks. All of these were cloaked because she glowed like a miniature sun if she didn’t.

She had more defensive spells from the demonic branches she was more familiar with, but she refrained from using them. Amelia didn’t know what kind of detection abilities others in this world had, and she didn’t want her communion with the demon gods to be known. Not yet.

“A half-decent warrior or mage is resistant to most forms of conventional warfare, which is why we use these.” Serena wriggled her sword. “The martial weapons can be reinforced with a warrior's aura or spells so they can cut through ward spells and auras, as well as not break under the forces required to do so.” An orange hue appeared across Serena’s skin, shimmering in the evening light. The aura spread from her hand to cover the sword, causing it to take on a subtle orange tint.

“Take your stance. Spread your wards to your weapon. Angle your sword like this to receive my strike.” Serena demonstrated the position, and Amelia did her best to mirror it while wrapping the sword in her magic. The captain raised her sword and struck down, collapsing Amelia’s guard and stopping just short of her throat.

“You need to keep these muscles engaged at all times,” Serena poked Amelia under the shoulder. “Pull the shoulders down. Try again.” Amelia did as she was instructed, and this time, when she received the captain’s strike, her block held firm. However, she was forced to take a step back to stabilise herself.

“That is the rising block called *age-uke*. It can be used to parry or take the brunt of a strike. See how you took a step back? Your stance needs adjusting,” Serena used her foot to pull Amelia’s front foot forward, “More. More... there. Bend the knee more. That’s it.” Amelia’s knee was now over her foot, and her center of gravity felt much lower.

“Again. Make *age-uke*. Receive the strike.” The sword came at her again, but she wasn’t pushed back this time. “Your stance will decide whether attack breaks your defences or not. This is the front stance, called *zenkutsu-dachi*. It maximises your stability against frontal assaults, as well as allowing you to strike hardest at the enemies before you.”

Serena moved into the first stance she had been shown. “*Hachiji-dachi*.” She said, before stepping out with one leg and bending the knee bent over her foot, mirroring Amelia. “*Zenkutsu-dachi*.” Serena then shifted her weight back onto her back leg, making an L shape. “*Kokustu-dachi*, the back stance. Useful for parrying, baiting attacks, and kicking. Finally, we have,” Serena moved her weight to the center, bending both her knees

equally. “The straddle stance for maximum stability and defensive fighting. *Kiba-dachi*.”

“These four stances are the foundation of the school of combat I was taught in, *Shimokan*. The stances are your *sword and gun*, or bread and butter if you like. We will go over them together. Copy me.” Amelia began emulating Serena’s movements as she flowed from one stance to the next. She had no idea about actual fighting, but even as an amateur, she could see the experience in Serena’s footwork and movement.

She thought her dexterity, strength, and perception from the game would make her a natural, but the reality was very different. Over the next hour, Serena constantly pointed out and adjusted every part of her body, from her feet to her hips and even the direction she was looking. Her only advantage was her endurance, which allowed her to maintain a deep stance for far longer than an average demon or human.

Even so, the physical effort built up over time, and Amelia soon started to sweat with exertion. She could heal herself, but Serena instructed her not to.

Serena showed her several more blocks and had her use them to defend against attacks from all directions in all the different stances, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each position. As time went on, Amelia found herself forgetting she was on the deck of the ship, surrounded by nosey demons. It had become just her and Serena, sensei and student.

It was nice to learn something new. Magic seemed to come naturally to her, unfairly bestowed upon her by some higher power. However, the paths of the warrior? This was something else. You had to repeat motions hundreds, thousands of times over until they were ingrained in your mind. Just being strong wasn’t enough. She needed *technique*, which would take years to develop into proficient muscle memory.

Amelia fell in love with the movements. After years of being bedbound, she was doing something she could only dream of before. She could move her body and be rewarded for it! Why didn’t everyone do this? It felt amazing!

As time ticked on and the sky slowly darkened, Serena showed her a few *katas*. These were sequences of movements that, if done correctly, would start and finish from the same spot. Amelia lost herself in her focus, only being distracted when Serena would come close to adjust her in this or that way.

She wanted to ask: did Serena's heartbeat rise like hers when they were close? Did Serena find her blue eyes as pleasant and pretty as she found her crimson ones? Did she feel as comfortable as she did around her, as if they were life-long friends? When she looked at her with an examining eye to correct her stance, was it all business, or was there any interest in her body at all?

"You're distracted." Came a commanding voice from behind her. "It's getting late. The body and mind will remember the training when they rest. Let's end it here."

"How did I do?" Amelia asked, quickly adding, "Sensei?"

"Above average talent, but nothing exceptional." Serena peered down on her. "Thank the fell gods. If you were a genius at martial combat, I might have needed to retire. I believe you will grow quickly; your inherent strength and endurance already put you years ahead in that area of development."

"When will I get to, you know..." Amelia swung her sword a few times, unable to stop herself from making *whoosh* noises. Serena had made her hold the sword throughout the entire training session but never once asked her to strike with it.

"Next time, if you keep practising the *katas* in your spare time."

"Okay! I'll practice really hard!"

"Good. Let's retire for the night. I have work to do."

Serena sat in her chair and began busying herself with paperwork. Most importantly, she began to think about how to write a letter to her father. From the Dragon, they discovered that he had already been made aware she had hired a human Speaker. Even so, she should prepare a letter to soften the atmosphere that would no doubt be extremely awkward in their upcoming meeting, more than a month out.

Amelia had disappeared into her quarters to wash up, leaving her alone in the captain's office. Serena tapped the paper, thinking about what she should say. She should probably mention they were training her in etiquette. Her father would pick up on that and be more forgiving of any mishaps. Maybe.

"Captain," Anathor said, "Word from the bridge. We just got hailed by Kenhoro perimeter ships."

"They're out a bit far. Have sensors sent them our identification?"

"... Just sent, Captain."

"We have visuals? Aetherscope signatures matching?"

"Hmm..." the moose mumbled, "Visuals match... signatures matching. Two light cruisers. *Moris* class. Replying incoming..." Serena waited patiently. There was a speaking tube connecting the captain's quarters to the bridge, which she rarely used. She more often relied on the nicknamed *Anathor-tube* form of communication.

"Hmm... they congratulate us on our victory and will escort us to the imperial airdocks in Kenhoro."

"*Will?*" Serena felt her eyes narrow. "They didn't offer?"

"No, Captain."

Tsk! She bit her tongue, thinking. "We might have complications the moment we make land. They're not escorting us. They're keeping an eye on us."

“Because of the human?”

“That’s right.”

The side door opened, and Amelia stepped out. “What’s happening because of me?”

“Kenhoru authorities sticking their-” she looked in Amelia’s direction, reflexively taking a breath. “What are you *wearing?*” Amelia had removed her uniform and was left in only her undergarments, the loose-fitting top and shorts that left her midriff and legs bare. To make matters worse, she had been cleaning herself up and had gotten enough water on her top that it had started to... cling to her chest.

“What? I was sweaty from the training, and if you remember, I have *no other clothes!*” Amelia put her hands on her hips, and Serena found it difficult to keep her eyes from wandering. Amelia was well-proportioned but lacked the muscle definition a trained warrior would have. She looked... soft.

Tsk! *As if I would find a human... attractive!* Serena chastised herself mentally.

“First etiquette lesson. Displaying yourself like that-”

“Like what?”

“Like *that!*” Serena waved a hand, gesturing in Amelia’s direction. “In the presence of not just a captain - but also a noble - is improper, and if anyone finds out, that would only lead to rumours, especially for me!”

Amelia tilted her head in confusion. “Why, especially for you?”

“I...” She bit her tongue. That was a mistake. She shouldn’t have this conversation now. She had started to suspect Amelia was somewhat... impressed by her. To discuss the rumours that had been started during her academy days within the all-women’s dorm... would complicate things further.

Even if, as the saying goes, where there was smoke, there was fire.

“Nevermind. If anyone comes, you disappear into the bedroom, got it?”

“Yes, sensei!”

“It’s only *sensei* when we’re training, idiot.”

“Okay!” Amelia gave two enthusiastic thumbs up. The raising of her arms caused her chest to compress, and Serena could not stop her eyes from flickering to the location.

Damn it!

“What do you want, anyway?” She said, not able to keep a hint of frustration from her voice.

“I heard you were talking about me.”

“... Right. We’re being escorted by two Kenhoro authority ships.”

“Cool! Can I see them?”

“No, idiot. They’re most likely here because you’re here. They’re keeping an eye on us to see if anything happens. You won’t be going on deck tomorrow. You can spend some time with Tomes. He’ll get you started on your letters.”

“Okay,” said Amelia. “Can I do my *katas* here? It’s easier to move around like this, and the bedroom is too small. I’ll be quiet! Promise!”

“... Can’t you do anything else? I’m trying to work.”

“Well, I would read, but I can’t really do that, can I? I don’t want to go to sleep just yet... I’ve spent enough time in bed!” Amelia shook her head from side to side. “Besides, doing the *katas* is fun! It’s a bit like meditation!”

“Did you... enjoy the training?” Serena asked.

“Mmm, mmm! Sure did! Apart from you shooting me!” Serena couldn’t help but smile at that. It was amusing to see Amelia so flustered. She would have to shoot and stab her at random times in the future - to add some variety and entertainment to her daily life.

“You’ve got that look in your eye again, Captain,” said Anathor.

“What look!?”

“... Nothing.”

“Do your *katas*. Be quiet, and don’t ask for any help. I have a letter to write.”

“Okay!” Amelia began going through the motions she had memorised so quickly earlier that evening. Serena set about writing her letter, but no matter how much she tried to focus, her eyes kept being drawn from the paper to the person in front of her. She would only look when Amelia was facing away from her, and the more she caught herself looking, and the more she realised where she was looking, the more the realisation slowly dawned in her mind.

Over a human. She thought. *Really, Serena? You’re such an idiot.*

Eventually, as the last of the evening light faded and the night came, Serena got up from her chair and, despite her earlier statements, gave Amelia some further instructions.

After all, it was somewhat exciting to feel how her heartbeat sped up.

When they were close.

Chapter Twelve: Polina Volkova

“Polina Volkova?”

A speckled youth with a baby face and circles around his eyes called out as he opened the door to her office. They didn’t even knock anymore. It was somewhat understandable, as they were swamped with work from sunrise to sunset, and the juniors were running on less sleep than she was.

“Yes...” Polina groaned. It was too early to deal with others. Couldn't she have a little quiet time alone first? “What is it?”

“Priority from upstairs.” The junior handed her a large sealed envelope.

“Right,” She said, gesturing to the pile of documents and envelopes on one side of the desk. “Shall I put it with my backlog of priority assignments here? Or perhaps...” She waved towards the other side of the desk, where another tower of paper lay waiting. “Should it go under the extra-important priority backlog?”

The junior shrugged. “It’s more... *extra-important-right-now* priority,” he gestured for her to look at the document. Polina saw the red stamp pressed upon the envelope and resisted the urge to cry.

“Did he give this to you himself?”

“Yes, said to tell you that you’ve got ten minutes.”

“Until?”

“Until you need to be in his office upstairs with an analysis.”

“Christ!” She waved the junior away. “Get out then! Times ticking!”

After her door was closed she ripped open the envelope and spread out the documents. She skimmed the summary. It was a report consisting of an aggregation of eyewitness accounts of a recent battle between republican forces and...

“A single ship... the *black ship*,” She muttered to herself as her heartbeat increased. “It’s the *Vengeance*. You’ve appeared before me again...” Her brain clicked into focus, and the weariness she felt was pushed away. Port Highwind had been taken by surprise, leaving the skies undefended for an assault fleet to push through.

The report didn’t seem to focus on that. In fact, it didn’t seem that concerned with the *Vengeance* itself. That was strange. That ship was a priority assignment for the bureau, and there was a dedicated team to tracking it. A team she had desperately tried to get on.

Polina gave herself a mental slap. Now wasn’t the time for ruminating on the past. The report was more concerned with the testimonies of a group of republican soldiers - defenders of the port - that had been rescued as they were being transported in an opportunistic strike.

She became bewildered at what she read as she examined their eyewitness accounts. “A human healer... gunshots...” As she read further, her eyes widened in surprise. “Serena Halen and Korvus Maranai *fought!*? They *Spoke!*?” With renewed vigour, she devoured the information from the other eyewitness accounts.

Just as she was about to start mentally constructing different scenarios, she caught sight of the wall clock. She was late! Polina lept up, scrambling to put the documents back together, and then threw herself out of the office, only just remembering to slam the door behind her. The flurry of her movements caused all the junior analysts on the floor to glance in her direction before returning to their own mountains of grunt work.

She ignored them and began leaping up the stairs, taking three at a time. She ran through corridors and almost crashed right through the locked door between her and her destination.

“Ahh... ahh... Here.” She passed the guard her identification while desperately trying to catch her breath. The guard examined it and then gave her a look of amusement.

“Polina Volkova.” He said, marking her admission in a notebook and opening the door to her. Polina didn’t wait and burst through. Then, conscious of where she was, she forced herself to slow down to a brisk walk as she made her way around the cauldron.

The cauldron was the bureau's centre and shaped like an amphitheatre. The floor's design carried the sound of footsteps throughout the entire space, and no single place was outside the line of sight of at least one standing guard.

Polina found herself at the right door. She took a few seconds to calm her breathing and mind and then politely knocked on it. Almost immediately, the door opened, and in front of her was someone she had not expected to see.

“Natalia Marakova?” She said, not intending for it to be a question. The neat black-haired operative looked her up and down with an examining gaze.

“Polina Volkova. How long have you been with the bureau?”

“T-three years, ma’am.”

“And you were recently promoted?”

“Yes, senior analyst, ma’am.”

“Ever been in the field?”

“N-no, ma’am.”

Polina saw Marakova clenching her teeth and sighing through her nose. “Come in,” she said. The office door opened fully, and Polina stepped in, having to duck slightly under Marakova’s arm, which held the top of the door frame. The office was clean and tidy, with leather furniture and a

singular desk. This room served only as a conversation area. The actual office lay behind the thick wooden door on the other end of the room.

Behind the desk was a man with a familiar prominent figure, sharp eyes, short hair and a semi-permanent scowl.

“Boris Ivanov,” Polina said in greeting.

“Polina Volkova. Welcome. Would you like a coffee?” Director Ivanov said, gesturing to the equipment on a side table. Polina swallowed reflexively. She *was* running on little sleep, and coffee beans were getting harder and harder to source these days.

Of course, top brass like Ivanov and Marakova would have their stockpiles.

“Yes, thank you, Director Ivanov.”

“Go on then.”

“Y-yes!” She placed the report on the table between her and Marakova and hurried to the side to grind the beans.

“Senior Volkova, make me one as well. Strong.” Marakova called out to her.

“... same for me,” the gruff voice from the desk said. Polina found a third cup and began the slightly laborious but oddly satisfying task of grinding the beans with a hand grinder. The smell of the rich coffee soon filled the room, an irresistible fragrance that made her mouth water.

“Boris, are these...?” Marakova trailed off.

“Jimari beans. Last batch I could get my hands on before Cascadia stopped exporting coffee to us.”

“How unfair that the demons possess most of the tropical climate where coffee can be grown at scale. Our greenhouse-grown variants taste awful.”

Polina continued preparing the coffee, adding the beans into the small press and adding hot water. The fragrance from the beans was already noticeable, but now the room smelled like a street cafe. The coffee grown in the Southern Terra Firma was not kidding around.

“Do... any of you take sugar?” She asked the room.

“No,” the others replied in unison. Polina poured three cups of the Jimari coffee and then finished hers with two spoonfuls of sugar. She handed the others their cups and then sat with her own opposite Natalia Marakova. As the others seemed content simply enjoying their drinks, she quietly sipped her own, savouring the taste.

After a few minutes of silence, and just as Polina was starting to suspect she had only been summoned so that she could make these two their coffees, Boris Ivanov began speaking.

“Polina Volkova.”

“Yes, Boris Ivanov?”

“We are familiar with each other, but what do you know about Natalia Marakova?” He said, grasping his hands together. It was his sign that it was time for business. Polina placed her cup down.

“Ma’am is the team leader for the group that is responsible for monitoring and tracking the *Vengeance*.” Polina tilted her head politely at the woman across from her. “Pleasure to meet you in person, ma’am.” Marakova merely gave a small grunt in response.

“Not just the *Vengeance*,” Director Ivanov said, “They also track its captain, with whom I know you are familiar. Serena Halen, yes?”

“... Yes,” Polina resisted the urge to clench her fists.

“You also applied to join their field team earlier this year and the year prior?”

“That’s right.”

“It was I who rejected you,” Marakova said. “Your personal... dislike of Serena Halen made you unsuitable for fieldwork on my team.” The woman eyed her calmly. Her words had no emotion or bias—pure logic and rationality.

“I... understand.”

“Did you finish reading the report?” Director Ivanov asked.

“Yes, director.”

“And?”

“Well...” Polina breathed, collecting her thoughts, “If the sheet of graduates in the report is accurate, then there are no church graduates of *Aseco* with the name *Amelia*. Therefore, she slipped through the cracks, or the name was false. Her physical description is generic enough to match half the female students in the healing or protection branches.

“It’s unlikely to be a demon illusionist, as the healing was real by the accounts. We can assume she *is* human. She claimed to be a travelling healer and was under the employment of Serena Halen,” Polina paused, shrugging slightly, “It’s *possible*. I understand Serena Halen’s personality is that she is quick to anger and reckless. She is also hostile to humans, but not mindlessly, like Korvus Maranai.”

Marakova nodded at that. “The healer showed no signs of captivity or being forced to be there. The demons have no gods of healing, and Serena Halen is rational enough to take the opportunity to employ a human healer if she finds one that isn’t hostile to demonkind.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Polina agreed, “And given that the *Vengeances*’ stormtroopers, led by Korvus Maranai, tried to assassinate her, it might explain why they fought. It fits their personality profiles... the only thing that doesn’t add up is the healer because she-”

“-survived the assassination,” interrupted Marakova, “Meaning she’s at least second-circle to withstand that level of gunfire. But it gets even more

weird. After Korvus and Serena Spoke, the aether release caused dozens of casualties in the square where the soldiers were held. The healer not only survived but then cast a field spell that healed everyone at once!"

"Which would make her a talented third-circle mage," Polina said, "With a cloaking spell, as she must have had wards running but was not reported as glowing."

"With *enormous* aether reserves, and if it's true that she healed a hundred people in a row, that is impossible." Marakova jabbed a finger onto the table, "The academies only produce a handful of third-circle mages each year, and they are *all* accounted for. Sure, some healers have gone missing in action on the republican lines, but they don't match her physical description or capabilities. The church would have already discovered and hoarded a mage that could cast a healing field spell, so they could commune with the First Word."

An impossible healer who appeared in an impossible situation with impossible capabilities. It was a compelling mystery.

"The reports of holy lightning attacks shortly after also complicate things further. Their reported size even suggested they may be *fourth-circle*. What do you make of that, Senior Volkova?"

"Uh... it must be exaggerated. Soldiers typically aren't exposed to magic higher than the first circle so they often misrepresent the power of minor spells. Furthermore, only two Words - one by Serena Halen and one by Korvus Maranai - were Spoken so it cannot be fourth-circle magic. However, the lightning attacks are consistent with what we know of *Aseco*, and the blue flecks of light reported when the human healed the soldiers is further evidence of that branch."

"You can see why we have such a problem," Director Ivanov interjected, "We have evidence of the impossible. A third-circle *Aseco* healer that is seemingly as proficient in healing as they are in combat. It takes an enormously long time to become proficient in just one discipline of *Aseco*, and that's with all the aid of the church. This woman was reported to look youthful. She should be in her late forties, at a minimum."

“Not only that,” Marakova continued, “My team tracked the *Vengeance* in the weeks and months leading up to this event. Not once was there any indication of a human being onboard that ship. We also witnessed no significant tension between Serena Halen and Korvus Maranai. The only thing that explains their behaviour is...” The team leader raised one finger, “That the captain somehow kept the healer a secret from both us and him, or...” A second finger went up, “The healer somehow boarded the ship after it left the dock out of range of our trackers.”

A thought struck Polina. “Is it possible she’s a church spy? A secret mission from the senior leadership?” As she asked the question, the director and team leader glanced at each other for a moment. After their silent communication ended, Boris spoke up.

“This is a little beyond your pay grade, but just know what information we are receiving from the church high command very much indicates this is as surprising to them as us.”

“Then...” She shrugged. “The puzzle pieces must fit together somehow. We don’t have enough information... Where is the ship now?”

“We received word it passed the Kenhoro perimeter not long ago,” Marakova said, “The report didn’t go into much detail, but the *Vengeance* took a hit. It’ll be facing a month of repairs at least.”

“Are we able to get an informant on board? Bribe one of the crew?”

“It won’t work,” Marakova said, shaking her head.

“Are they that loyal to her?” Polina asked.

“They are loyal, but that isn’t the reason. The ship has a guardian on it. An advisor to the captain. A Formless.”

Polina gulped. “So it’s true then, the stories?”

“Yes. He sees and hears everything on the ship, and is sensitive to the intentions of those who board it. You cannot trick him for long. We either

have to bribe or capture the crew when they're on land leave or resort to observing from a distance."

"I see..." Polina said. "With respect, director, ma'am. It appears my line of thinking has matched your own. I apologise for not being able to come up with anything new." She tilted her head in apology.

"Head up, Polina Volkova," Boris said, his frown slightly softening, "You were not brought here for just an opinion. That report - and this conversation - was your briefing."

"Director?"

"Your *blessing* has been of great assistance to the bureau on many occasions, and it has been one of the major reasons we've kept you behind a desk. You're too valuable to risk in fieldwork."

"Ah... thank you, director," she mumbled.

"However, after this event, I'm under a lot of pressure from my superiors to find out about the nature and origin of this healer." Polina swallowed. There were not many people ranked higher than the director. He must be under mountains of stress, like her. "Therefore, a decision has been made, against the recommendation of both Natalia Marakova and me, for you to join some of her team members who are setting up a cell in Kenhoro."

Fieldwork! They were sending her outside the office! Away from paperwork! She would finally be closing in on her nemesis!

"It's an honour!" Polina exclaimed, feeling a smile erupt on her face. "I won't disappoint you, director, ma'am!"

"We'll see..." Marakova mumbled. "We will be leaving tomorrow, circling east and taking the trade winds to Ponan. From there, we'll travel to Tanhea and then Kenhoro. We'll cover as a merchant group. You'll have a new identity. You'll have to learn much as we go along, so pay attention."

"Yes, ma'am!"

“I mean it,” she raised a finger to make a point, “Half the trackers we send after that ship drop off the face of the continent after a few months. Cascadia has a tremendous interest in that ship, and their own ministry of intelligence has agents working counter-espionage to protect it. There are conditions. Under no circumstances are you to approach Serena Halen if given the opportunity.”

“I understand!” Polina said, trying to extrude the picture of obedience. Inside her mouth, however, she bit her cheeks. Would she be able to resist, to stop herself?

“Secondly, under no circumstances are you to board the ship. We are there to observe and gather intelligence, not to infiltrate the crew. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Polina nodded.

“Very well, Polina Volkova,” Director Ivanov said, “Return to your office. Delegate your remaining work to the juniors. Natalia Marakova will collect you at the end of the day.”

“Yes! Thank you for the opportunity!” Polina stood up, and with a final expression of gratitude, she left the office. Walking back to her office, she couldn’t resist humming.

Her blessing had finally come through, giving her the opportunity she needed to get close to Serena Halen. She had begun to resent it, thinking it was too valuable for them to ever let her do fieldwork. This event had changed everything, and now the need for intelligence tipped the scale in her favour.

Thank the gods for blessings!

Not just the one she had shared with the director.

The other one, too.

The one she had never told anyone about.

The one she would use to kill Serena Halen.

Chapter Thirteen: A Puzzling Nightmare

Serena's thoughts were muddled - like pushing through tar - she tried to figure out why the old stairwell was oddly familiar. She had been here before, but when? It felt like... the *Vengeance's* stairwell. However, things were different and not quite right. Where were the steel deck plates? Why were there greasy oil lanterns hanging from the walls instead of the usual aetherlights?

"I'm dreaming again," she muttered, the sound of her voice reaching her ears a half second after she spoke. An unnatural fog clung around her, muffling sounds and preventing the light from reaching too far. Serena unhooked one of the oil lanterns and cast it about, peering through the darkness. The metal hinge on the lantern squeaked as she moved.

There it was again.

The heavy wood door stood before her. The familiar words etched into it. *Fourth Deck*. Why was she here again? Serena tried to think and remember. There was something... something about Amelia.

She found her hand holding the key. The captain's key. She looked at it. Why was it here? Serena slowly moved her eyes to the defiant door in front of her. There was something coming from within. Serena pressed an ear against the hard wood.

Music. Singing. The mournful song flowed into her ears, and she couldn't stop a tear from falling down her cheek. Why would someone so talented be singing such a sad song? Serena felt a chill, a sudden drop in temperature,

and the song stopped. She looked down and saw she had inserted the key into the lock.

“No,” she whispered, “The fourth deck is off-limits, even to the captain”. Serena forced herself to remove the key, and as she did, it evaporated into white mist. “Only the one who made the agreement may enter,” she mumbled.

When had she learnt that?

Heavy footsteps sounded above her.

“Who’s there!?” She called out, the delayed and muffled sound disorientating her speech. Serena scrambled up the stairwell, chasing after the person. “Wait!” She yelled, following the noises through twists and turns of the corridors, only her oil lamp giving her any light.

Serena turned a corner as the sound of a door closing echoed in the space. It was a familiar door with familiar brass lettering upon it.

Captains Quarters.

“This is my room...” she whispered, placing a hand on the doorknob and twisting. She stepped through and found herself not in a room but standing on a field of fog that reached out as far as she see. There were no walls and no ceiling. Just darkness and a floor of fog.

There was something else. A man, sitting in a chair, facing away from her. He wore a brown uniform, and the edges of a grey bushy beard could be seen. On his head, he wore a triangle-shaped hat. A captain's hat.

Serena approached him but found that the closer she got, the harder the fog became to walk through. It was pushing her back, resisting her presence like it didn’t want her there.

“Hey!” She called out. The man turned his head slightly.

“You’re here.” A deep, gruff voice croaked out that seemed oddly familiar. She couldn’t place it.

“Who are you?” She asked, fighting against the fog. She was a few meters away from the man but could not get closer, no matter how much she exerted. The fog began frothing, becoming agitated at her continued attempts. It clung to her now, working its way up her body.

“You’ve committed a cardinal sin. There will be a punishment.” Grumbled the man.

“What sin!?” Serena yelled. “Who are you!?”

A moment of silence while the fog engulfed her, blocking her vision. At the last moment, she saw the man had begun to turn into white mist.

“Too late... You must protect the girl...”

“Protect who? Amelia!?” She choked out as her vision turned back, and she was wrenched from the dream into the waking world.

“Amelia!” Serena shouted, sweat running down her forehead.

“Hello, yes, that’s my name.” Came the reply.

Amelia, wearing her white and blue uniform, stood in the doorway to the bedroom. She was carrying a plate of steaming sardis. Her mouth opened as she tilted her head in confusion.

“Were you having a nightmare?” She asked.

Serena took a few moments to calm down. Yes, it was a nightmare.

“Quick!” She exclaimed, “Pen and paper!” Seeing Amelia hesitate for a moment, she leapt from the hammock and pushed past her into the office space. She sat down on her desk and began trying to remember the events.

“Fourth deck... fourth deck... was it open or locked?” She scribbled what she could remember. Was there music? There was a man. Someone had committed a sin. It didn’t fit together! Damn it!

Something at the end. She had to protect someone.

“What’s going on?” Amelia asked.

Amelia. She had to protect Amelia. Who told her that?

“Anathor,” she said. The moose responded almost immediately.

“Yes, captain?”

“I think the ship is trying to talk to me. I’m having dreams again.”

“Hmm... Can you understand it?”

“I don’t know!” Serena stopped her hands from grabbing her horns. “It’s all... foggy. It vanishes from my mind as soon as I wake. It feels different from the previous times. Has the ship said anything to you?”

“... No, captain, although...” Another paused for a moment, “It has been more... active recently. Ever since Miss Thornheart cast that wonderful healing spell.”

“Me?” Amelia questioned. “Did I heal the ship?”

“I do not know, little one,” Anathor replied. “There is a chance... some of your magic soaked into the fourth deck. It may explain some of the things I have been sensing. Have any of you been hearing... music at all?”

“Music?”

“Yes.”

“There was music in my dream. Someone singing... I think,” Serena said, re-reading her notes. “I can’t remember anything else! Are you hearing music, Anathor? Amelia?” The girl shook her head.

“Sometimes...” Came the gruff voice.

“Is it something that’s a concern for us?” Serena eyed the moose.

“... No. Only echoes of the past. If Miss Thornheat could avoid casting that spell again unless absolutely needed... if it happens too many times, we could be in violation of the agreement.”

Serena rubbed her eyes. She would need to ruminate on this later. “How far from Kenhoro, Anathor?”

“Two hours, captain. Mainland will be within visual range soon.”

“Are we still being escorted?”

“Yes, captain.”

“Before any of that...” Amelia put the plate of sardis in front of her, and its delicious smell finally reached her nostrils. “Eat before it gets cold!” the healer exclaimed with a smile.

“You got us breakfast?”

“I got *you* breakfast. I wanted to eat together, but couldn’t resist! I had my share on the way back! The head cook gave me a little extra. So...” Amelia shuffled on her feet, looking everywhere but at Serena.

“So...?” Serena mimicked, placing the first piece of sardis in her mouth. Seven hells, it was even better than yesterday! She could immediately feel her mood improving and the stress of the nightmare fall away.

“So what’s the plan, with me?”

Serena swallowed. “Since you’re up, head to Tome’s quarters. He’s got something to give you. There’s not enough time for a lesson on your letters, but he can give you some more information about Kenhoro, so you don’t do anything completely stupid.”

“You’re not going to keep me trapped on the ship!?” The girl raised both hands in the air. “Thank you!”

“You thought I would keep you locked up in here?” Serena asked, seeing Amelia nod in response. “When we make land, we will all be finding

quarters in Kenhoro. Only the engineers need to stay close, as they'll be making use of the dock's cranes to repair the ship properly, as well as install a new turret. They'll be working day and night, so the noise from the steam grinders and rivet guns will prevent anyone from sleeping.

"Some crew members have family homes they can stay at. Most will stay in the barracks. I don't think putting you in a barracks and mixing with other crews is a good idea, so we'll be renting a place."

"We?"

"Yes, we," Serena said, not missing the sparkle in Amelia's eyes and the grin she failed to hide. "I'm keeping you close until you understand a bit more about how things work. After a week or two of supervision, I don't see why you can't be left to wander about the city and surroundings yourself. I can't keep you chained to me forever, can I?"

"I suppose... not."

"There are some hotels I've stayed in before. One is owned by a family friend, so we'll try there first."

"Okay!" Amelia gave a characteristic thumbs up. "I'll head to Tome's then... but before that... can you give me your hand?" Amelia reached out her hand, palm facing upwards. Serena narrowed her eyes. What was she up to now?

"Why?"

"So I can heal you! You had a nightmare, right?"

"... I don't need healing."

"Well, I need the practice. Please?" Amelia wobbled her hand, inviting Serena to grasp it. Serena sighed and then accepted the request. Their hands clenched together, and for a few seconds, nothing happened.

"Well?" Serena asked.

“Ah, sorry! Here I go!” Golden light with blue flecks flowed down Amelia’s arm into Serenas' body. She felt the familiar warmth of a comfortable hug across her entire self. Her mind settled, her emotions stabilized, and she felt fully awake, despite not having her morning coffee.

“Thanks. That... helped.” She said. Amelia’s magic was really something. She felt full of life. The healer flashed a triumphant smile.

“No problem! Can I do this every morning? It helps me practice and would help you... start the day?” Amelia’s eyes took on a pleading look, and once again, a memory of the wolf pup she had raised as a young girl came to mind.

“... Fine.”

“Thanks!”

“... You can let go now,” Serena said, eyeing their joined hands, which was now becoming awkward.

“Can I also put a ward on you? For protection?”

“You can do that? Maintain it from a distance?” Maintaining wards on her own body was impressive enough, but for Amelia to do that to another person was a whole other level of capability. It was like a warrior maintaining an aura on a weapon that wasn’t in their hands.

Although given what she suspected Amelia to be capable of, it wasn’t that surprising.

“I think so... I’ll have to see. Can I try?”

“Which ward?”

“The *Ward of Thew*. It gives a general boost to all your... uh... to your capabilities. Makes you a bit stronger and gives you an all-round defence against physical attacks. It should stack well with your own aura.”

“First-circle, right?”

“Yeah, I want to start with something small first. See how my aether reserves handle it.” Amelia explained. Serena thought about chastising her for referring to an *Aseco* ward as *something small* but decided against it. They had been holding hands for nearly a minute now, and Serena didn’t want to drag it out any longer.

It would be awkward if her hand started to sweat.

“Alright, try it.”

“Okay! One moment!” Amelia’s eyes focused on nothing, and Serena sensed the spell forming within her. The aether frothed and turned as it got ready to be expressed by its master’s intention. “First circle. *Ward of Thew*.” Amelia chanted, and Serena’s body began immediately glowing with golden light.

She clenched her free hand and then, removing her other hand from Amelia’s, clenched that one as well. She was definitely stronger. She knew her capabilities very well. This was at least a quarter increase for sure, maybe more. Unbelievable.

Something small, apparently.

“How’s your aether holding up?” She asked Amelia, who was grinning at her wildly.

“It’s good! I want to see how it changes with distance!” Amelia bounced to the far side of the room and then back. “Doesn’t seem to be any difference. How does it feel?”

“Great. I never imagined I would be touched by the *Aseco*’s grace of gold. It’s incredible, to be honest.” Thankfully, the only witnesses to this were Anathor and both of them. If it got out that a demon had been warded by *Aseco* spellwork, it would cause a diplomatic incident between Cascadia and the Federation. “I can’t exactly walk around glowing, though, can I? Best to cancel it for now.”

“Not just yet! Let me try something else! Hand!” Amelia reached out to Serena, who accepted the request once again. Amelia closed her eyes for a moment, and the aether inside her tumbled and boiled before suddenly settling down. “No, not like that...” Amelia mumbled, and the aether again became frantic. “Like that!” Amelia said, opening her eyes which were shining blue. “Third circle. *Cloak of Secrecy*,” the healer said, and immediately, the golden glow dimmed to almost nothing.

Serena resisted an urge to swallow. Did this idiot just *cloak* an externally cast ward? She had never heard of that happening. Was it even possible? Apparently so.

“Have you... ever done this before?”

“Yes! Although not in this... you know.” Amelia trailed off, smart enough not to keep vocalising the reality of her soul and body, regardless of where they were.

Serena released her hand from Amelia’s once again and focused inwards. She could feel the ward still, a subtle shimmer, like her aura. They were laced together, forming something far stronger than what they could do alone. Serena stood up and walked around the quarters, adjusting her body to the change. “How’s the aether now?” She asked.

“Still good. I’ll cancel it from a distance if it ever becomes a problem, but for now, I’d like to keep it going,” Amelia shrugged, suddenly looking shy. “After what happened at the port... I’d feel a lot better if I could protect you in some way.” Serena stopped, noting the girl had begun to blush a little.

This idiot kept doing things that were making her heartbeat kick into gear.

Serena resisted a sigh. From the dream she had just experienced, it was possible that the ship was requesting that she protect Amelia. If that was true, then she wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do! The one who was supposed to be under her protection was protecting her!

“I see. Let me know if it becomes a problem. Don’t hesitate to cancel it if you need the aether, especially when we’re separated over greater distances

in the city.”

“Mmm! I’ll keep it in mind!”

“Good,” Serena collected her thoughts. “I need to wash up, then head to the bridge, make sure the docking goes alright,” She pointed a finger at Amelia, “You head to Tome’s now, alright?”

“Okay!” Amelia bounced to the door, poised to open it. “One more thing!”

“What is it now...?”

Amelia gave her a cheeky grin. “If you keep snoring during the night, I’m going to kick you in your sleep!” She flung the door open and vanished before Serena could respond.

Tsk! What an idiot she was!

Amelia was the one who snored!

“Captain on deck!” Dagon called out, and everyone on the bridge scrambled to attention.

“At ease,” Serena said, waving a hand as everyone returned to what work they had. The core officers were present, apart from the chief engineer who had left his second in command here. The rest of the subordinates were running at half-staff as the bridge didn’t need so many hands on deck when it was just cruising.

“Navigation?” She asked, not barking the order. It was early in the morning, and she was in a good mood after being healed.

“Twenty knots! Bearing two hundred and ten degrees from the north! Seven thousand meters!” The navigation officer read out from the pitot-static instrument. “Mainland should be visible any moment now!”

Any moment turned out to only be a few seconds. “Mainland visible!” The sensors officer called out. Serena peered through the bridge windows, just about making out the distant mountain tops. A swell of cheers and applause broke out in the bridge room. They were home again, having survived yet another battle.

Unfortunately for Serena, over the next few months, she knew should would be fighting a number of very different battles.

“First officer, when did we switch the propulsion engine on?” Serena had noticed the distinctive hum of the engine as she had made her way to the bridge.

“About half three in the morning,” Dagon responded, “Trade winds died down”.

“They normally carry us all the way.”

“It’s about time of the year the eastern sky-rift starts throwing out storms. Likely caused a knock-on effect.” Serena nodded to that. Soon, light merchant travel in the eastern skies would shut down as storm season ravaged the space. The *Vengeance* could push through a storm if it needed to. It was heavy enough, unlike the lighter merchant ships that ran the route between the Eastern Terra Firma and the Sabanis Dominance in the north.

“Have our new friends given us any trouble?”

“No, captain. They seem content on just observing. We had them send us a list to see what the Kenhoro stockpiles are looking like.” Dagon waved over Thorne, the weapons officer.

“Bled bone dry, captain,” Thorne said, “Looks like the fleet took spares of everything and then spares for the spares. The only silver lining is there’s a logistic convey from Ponan en route, which is due next week.”

“Do they at least have the girders and armour plating we need for repairs?” Serena asked. Delaying the turret replacement wasn’t the end of the world. They didn’t seem due for a combat mission for a while, courtesy of the

Dragon and potentially her father's influence. However, fixing up the armour was a priority. Those steel plates they had patched the hole with looked impressive from the outside, but the half-inch metal wouldn't stand up to much shellfire.

If she thought about it, with the *Ward of Thew* running, she could potentially punch through one as she was now without channelling any higher auras or Speaking. She would have to test that later.

"They do on the list, but you know how things are... the list never matches what's actually there. Things get moved, paperwork dropped... underhanded deals... you name it." Throne shrugged.

Serena clicked her tongue in annoyance. "If it comes to it, we'll pull military law and source some from the civilian industry. We'll wait till the Ponan shipment arrives first. We don't want to upset the locals unless we have to."

"Aye, captain."

"Let's begin our approach. Helmsman, pitch down. Three degrees."

"Pitching down! Three degrees!" The reply from the helmsman came as he operated one of the levers next to him.

"Pitch down! Three degrees!" The engineer on duty yelled into the speaking tube. She was one of the only other women on board, and her feminine voice, although a little coarse, stood out in the bridge mostly full of men. She was Allston the chief engineer's niece. Serena had once challenged the man on whether her position wasn't an act of nepotism, and the man had shrugged and told her, '*She's a damn better engineer than I am*'.

Through the bridge windows, the mainland was now clearly visible. The Cascadian continent floated in the sky at the height of almost four thousand meters, and from their current height, the mountain tops - where the population centers were located - could be seen. A few minutes later, the green of the great forest that carpeted the majority of the empire could be

made out. As more of the continent became visible, the mood on the bridge improved.

“First officer.”

“Yes, captain?”

“Before we let the crew out into the city, make sure they know not to be too forthcoming about Amelia.”

“Aye, captain. But... the men will drink, and drink makes men talk...”

“Yes, I simply wanted to try to minimize information spread where we can. Make sure to highlight very strongly the military consequences with regards to accepting bribes for information about this ship or anyone upon it.” She gave Dagon a hard stare. This was important, and she would flog or hang those who became too greedy or easily swayed while on land leave.

“... Aye, captain,” Dagon responded.

With that dealt with, Serena turned away and occupied her mind with thoughts about all the events that had transpired over the last week. She thought about the crew. She thought about Korvus. She thought about her dreams and the ship.

Most of all, she thought about Amelia.

“Hang on, why are *all* of the major cities on mountains? Doesn’t it make farming difficult?” Amelia asked.

“Did the captain not go over this with you?”

“Not really, she said you would give me a history lesson.”

Amelia was sitting in Tome’s quarters which was the epitome of organization. She couldn’t yet read the numerous labels that were attached

to everything, but she could see there was some highly complex system of colour-coding that Tomes had applied to the room.

Tomes had been giving her the rundown on Kenhoro. Being close to the front line and to a country called the Sabanis Dominance, it had a constant stream of demon and human travellers and merchants. Apparently, about one in five of the population was human, and there were even human-majority districts in some parts of the city.

She interrupted him, however, as he made an offhand comment about how the entire city was located in *the mountains like all the others*.

“I see. I guess I should start at the beginning.”

“Yes, please!”

“One thousand years ago, many-”

“Wow, when you say at the beginning you really mean it, huh?” Amelia couldn’t stop her outburst and felt herself be crushed under Tome’s glare. “Sorry...” She muttered.

“One thousand years ago,” Tomes continued, intentionally pausing, daring her to interrupt again. “One thousand years ago, many nations - both demon and human - inhabited the Cascadia continent. Back then, there were no airships. No firearms. No steel. The Words were unknown to us. Everyone lived on the ground, prospered, fought wars and got on with life. Cascadia saw it all, floating in the sky as it always had done... and then!” Tomes flourished with hands, bringing his two fists together. “A collision!”

Amelia felt her eyes go wide. She had to admit the man had a talent for storytelling. She felt like a kid being told stories by a grandfather.

“Our continent collided with unknown dark lands in the far north, and from these treacherous lands came legions of black beasts! Titanic creatures that sought to destroy all life!” Tomes threw his hands dramatically in the air. He was definitely enjoying himself.

“Oh my!” Amelia exclaimed.

“They were led by the chaos god known as *Anathema*, although most people refer to it as the *Malignant Darkness*.” Tomes raised a finger to his lips. “Don’t say the first name out loud, it brings bad luck!” Amelia nodded frantically.

“They butchered their way across the continent in a century-long invasion we call *The Long Discordancy*. Outmatched and facing extinction, humans and demonkind fled to the mountaintops and plateaus, where we built our fractured civilization on higher ground. The invaders spread with them an inhospitable wilderness, the ancestor to the great forest that blankets the world even today!”

“And it was in one of these desperate small plateau kingdoms,” Tomes continued, raising a finger, “That a young woman was born, a talented mage that led her subordinates to battle against the enemy forces. Her hellfire spells burned the black legions to ash, and bit by bit, they began to win!”

“Only then did the avatar of the enemy appear. He was far stronger than anything that had come before! Hellfire tickled his skin, and swords broke upon him! The young mage battled him for seven days and seven nights, but she was not strong enough! It was then, when all seemed lost, all her subordinates laying dead around her, that the future empress communed the First Word and Spoke for the very first time!”

“What then!?” Amelia had drawn her knees up, lost in the story. She could see it now in her mind, a beautiful demon - who looked just like Serena - in shining armour conquering a great evil!

“Then, Elana took her place on what would later be called the *True Throne*, fashioned out of the skeleton of the avatar himself, and began the long process of expelling the invaders from the continent, gathering all to her cause. This *reconquista* took eighty years, and during this time, Elana communed the Second Word! The wilderness was pacified, and the most dangerous beasts were slaughtered. Some descendants species remain even today if you go deep enough.”

“Once the enemy had been forced back to their home continent to lick their wounds, Elana - who was only a queen then - knew it would only be a matter of time before they communed their own Words. So she marched to the point of collision and prayed to the higher gods for seven years! Eventually, her faith reached a great god of hellfire, who communed the Third Word with Elana, and when she Spoke it, the enemy land was driven from our sky, never to be seen again!”

Tomes took a much-needed breath. “Then, returning home, she was content in ruling as a benevolent queen. However, the kingdoms began to fall back into their own ways, fighting over land and religion. She knew they had to be united should the enemy ever return. Therefore over the next century, Queen Elana unified much of the continent and formed the Empire of Cascadia and became Empress! That was a bit over eight hundred years ago, and we have prospered ever since under her rule! The end!”

Amelia clapped enthusiastically. “That was a great story, uh, not a story. A great telling of history! Thanks, Tomes! You did kinda skip over the last eight hundred years, though...”

“Hmm...” Tomes said, scratching his jaw. “I remembered halfway through I have two hundred crew payments I need to document and balance, so I skipped the latter chunk. Some of the books on the captain’s shelves are history books, so you can dig deeper when you learn to read Imperial.”

“Oh, okay! Well, it explains why all the major cities are in the mountains. Do many people live on the ground?”

“Yes, as populations grew and the need for more fertile farmland became urgent, more effort was put into clearing more forest. As of today, every major city has significant ground around it that is cleared for farming. Numerous small towns and villages have popped up there as well. Practically the entire Centralis basin is cleared of forest and has been for a while now.”

“I see! I can’t wait to see Kenhoro!” Amelia was itching to walk on land. The time on Port Highwind was so short, and then she had been stuck onboard for a week! She was definitely getting claustrophobic.

“That reminds me, take this.” Tomes fished out something from his person. “Captain gave this to me. It’s a symbol of her house, the *Halen House*. There’s a good chance you’ll be stopped at random times and asked about who you are and what you’re doing. Showing them this should clear things up.”

He handed her the dark metal piece, which had a silver carving of a wolf attached. “Take this and wear it around your neck.” He gave her a piece of string, which she threaded through a hole in the metal and tied it to form a makeshift necklace.

She would definitely treasure this for the rest of her life!

“Myself, Dagon or the captain will be with you at all times during the first week so that you find your feet in the city. We can give you an advance on your first month's payment, so you have some money to spend. Any questions?”

Amelia shook her head. “Nothing comes to mind!”

“Right. I have some work to do. We don’t have time to start on letters properly, but we’ll go over the numbers. Look here: This is the imperial script for number *one*...” Tomes wrote down all the numbers from one to twenty and told her to go practice in silence.

Amelia obeyed, happy to finally learn some Imperial. It seemed to be in base ten, but the numbers from ten to twenty had their own special symbol. After that, things seemed to flow in the same manner as they did in her old world. She lost herself in the task, and before she knew it, she was filling out the fifth page.

“We’re landing,” Tomes said, barely looking up.

“We are!? Are we even moving? I can barely feel it!”

“The last part of landing takes the longest. Heavy ships like the *Vengeance* will spend twenty minutes coming into dock at half a knot or less.”

“Why so slow?”

“Because the ship is thousands of tonnes of metal, wood and demon. If that hits the side of a building or a crane at anything above a knot, it’ll plough straight through simply due to inertia. Battleships come in even slower.”

Amelia squirmed in her seat, her excitement rising. Soon she would be outside! On the mainland!

“Any moment now, we’ll hit the keel blocks, and the shoring arms will attach to the hull to hold it in place...” As Tomes finished, a jolt rippled through the ship's structure. It felt similar to the last moment of a train pulling into a station.

Amelia tapped her feet like an excited child.

They had arrived in Kenhoro!

Chapter Fourteen: Kenhoro

With a hiss of steam and a clunk, the metal gangway came to a stop. A familiar man in a dark blue uniform was waiting for her. A double pair of small horns crowned his head from which an enormous ponytail flowed. From behind a pair of spectacles, sharp green eyes glared at her, a rare trait that suggested the man had ancestry from the far West.

“Dockmaster Yu. Always a pleasure to see you well,” Serena said smoothly with a smile. She had come to appreciate Shin Yu, the dockmaster of Kenhoro.

“You!” He pointed a finger at her. “Get that ship out of my docks! Go somewhere else! Why come to Kenhoro, huh!?” Shin waved to the east. “The Tanhae docks are over there! Yes, hello!? I can hear them now! They want you to go over there! Shoo! Bye bye!” He motioned with his hands frantically.

Shin Yu spoke Imperial with a thick accent, and much of his native Manwese tone slipped through. He was unbelievably direct when speaking Imperial, lacking the full vocabulary to be more tactful. Not that anyone would criticise him for it. No captain would dare get on the bad side of the dockmaster.

“Come now, we’ll be out of your horns before you know it. A bit of work on the hull, and we’ll vanish like the wind.” Serena flashed her most charismatic smile.

“That ship! Bad luck!” He was wagging his finger at her now. Shin Yu enjoyed expressing himself with his hands. “You! Bad luck!” Serena pondered how she could placate the excitable dockmaster when a pair of figures approached from the side.

“Just the man I need!” Allston, the chief engineer, appeared flanked by his niece. “We need two overhead cranes, thirty meters of two by one girder, eighty meters of half by half. Good man, how many armour plates do you have lying about?” Allston put an arm around the dockmaster and practically dragged him away, ignorant of the noises of protest coming out of the man. His niece rolled her eyes and gave Serena a knowing look before following after them.

Well, that was one problem that was dealt with. Those two would talk over each other for hours. She turned and shouted back up the gangway, “Dagon! Start letting the crew off!” After she heard the affirmative reply, she made her way to the requisition office, where she found a demon lazying around behind a windowed desk reading the broadsheets.

The man did a double take, eyes widening in recognition and surprise. “Speaker Halen! It’s an honour!” He scrambled to his feet and gave her a hasty salute.

“Turn that around, officer. Let me have a look,” she said, nodding her head at the broadsheets. The requisition officer obeyed, and Serena read the large block capitals printed across the broadsheet: *EASTERN FLEET ADVANCES*. The subheading underneath read: *ADMIRAL ZHAO EXPLOITS COLLAPSE AFTER KEY LOGISTIC CENTER LIBERATED*.

“When was this printed?” She asked.

“This morning, Speaker Halen!” the officer enthusiastically responded. “They say that it was your doing! They’re saying you might be awarded a silver eagle!”

“Who’s saying that?”

“It’s all in there, Speaker Halen,” the demon gestured to the broadsheet she was reading. Serena skimmed the contents. She was named, as was the *Vengeance*. There wasn’t a picture of the *Vengeance*; the broadsheets were forbidden from publishing a photograph of the ship. Yet a lack of visuals didn’t stop them from building up the ship as an unstoppable vessel undetectable by the enemy.

Reading further, she found the officer was right and the papers reported that Greatlord Feng - master of Kenhoro, Tanhae, and Ponan - had recommended her for the medal. Serena wondered if her father had anything to do with that. He could have leveraged the strategic position the war had put their family in for such a cause. Alternatively, if they were planning to honourably discharge her from the Navy, then the medal would be the method to buy her silence.

“How did the broadsheets find out about this so fast?” She asked.

“Admiral Zhao took a media team with him. They docked up in the civilian bays last night.”

That would explain it. If the media arrived at Port Highwind shortly after the fleet did, they would have beaten them back to Kenhoro, especially as her own departure was delayed due to the fighting and the politicking of the Dragon.

“Right,” Serena said, turning her gaze from the broadsheet and to the officer. “You got any raincoats? One my size and one,” she held her palm up flat in level with her eyebrows, “about this size. Get me a pair of boots, size seven through to ten, and the socks for them. Find a couple of rainhats as well.”

The requisition officer scrawled down her request and disappeared into the back. Amelia wasn't technically wearing a military uniform as they had ripped any identifying parts off, but it was still republican colours, and she didn't want to take her out to the city until she was wearing something that wouldn't draw attention. While mentally mapping out the path they would take in the city, a voice called out to her.

“Lady Halen! Is that you?”

Serena turned towards the goatee-sporting demon with a handsome face. He wore a uniform that was similar to hers, but instead of gold trim, red thread decorated the edges.

“Aiden!” she exclaimed in surprise, recognising the man. She corrected herself after noticing the marks on his shoulder. “Officer Adachi? Congratulations... looks like you found your place in intelligence.” Aiden Adachi stroked his goatee and gave her a grin.

“Took three attempts but got there in the end! When was the last time we met? At graduation?”

“We saw each other two years later at the shareholder meeting in Asamoto. You were...” Serena couldn’t help but form a smile, “Too far gone to recognise me. You thought I was my sister and tried flirting with me, you bastard.” Aiden’s drinking prowess at the academy was somewhat legendary, and it hadn’t seemed to have died down when they had encountered each other four years ago.

The habitual drunk rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “My bad, my bad. You know Nina’s name is cropping up more and more in reports? She’s got a team working for her now. Whatever she’s building, they’re throwing coin at it.” Serena nodded. She didn’t know too much about what her sister was working on currently, but whatever that genius was cooking up would no doubt be a significant help to the war effort and the family.

“We’re all very proud of her...” She trailed off with a cold stare at her old friend, happy to see that she could still make him wither under her glare. “Why are you here, Officer Adachi?”

“They got me doing grunt work, stock takes and the like,” Aiden said, shrugging while looking to the side, “You’d be surprised at just how bad the-”.

“Cut the shit, you’re here for the human right?”

“Damn right, I am!” The demon blurted out shamelessly, “Can I meet her!?”

“... for what purpose?”

“The big horns want me to do a personality profile on her. That’s it, honest!” Aiden’s eyes took on a pleading look. “Come on Serena, this is my big opportunity! I’ve been doing logistics for years now, and I’m ready to pull my horns off!”

“What happens if I say no?”

“Then... I guess there’s an escalation. You know how far they can go. They want to do things quietly and peacefully out of respect for you and your family. It really is just a profile, please?”

“Give me a week.”

“A week?”

“Miss Thornheart is somewhat ignorant of things. I’m teaching her a bit of common sense before letting her... roam. Etiquette as well. We’ll be meeting my father in Shimashina after the repairs are done.”

“How long are you here for?”

“A month, maybe. No longer than six weeks. Ships got a big hole that needs filling.”

“Where are you staying?”

“... at The Highguard, if they have rooms.”

“Ah, family friend, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Well then... In about a week, the moonrain festival will start,” A glint appeared in Aiden’s eyes, and his mouth formed into a knowing grin. “We could go all out then? Show her a good time?”

“You mean, go out drinking?” Serena sighed. This man never changed. He was an idiot, although a different type of idiot than Amelia was.

“They have a street here, half a klick long, you know? I don’t know its Manwese name, but the Imperial translation is *Beer Street*. Know why? Pubs!” Aiden cast his hands dramatically, “Everywhere! We could do a pub crawl and introduce the human to a proper demon drink! Like we did on those academy weekends.”

“That is a terrible idea,” She shook her head, “We’re not students anymore, Officer Adachi.”

“But!” Aiden exclaimed, raising a finger. “We are demons. And I’m still on my crusade to find a human that can outdrink Aiden The Drinker!”

“It was Aiden The Drunk, idiot,” she said, smiling at the academy memories popping into her mind. Maybe it wasn’t a completely terrible idea. As a Speaker, it wasn’t like she or Amelia could get drunk easily, and the girl was *twenty-five*. Serena didn’t want to or plan to treat her like a child. Besides, it *could* be fun. Perhaps Amelia would like to dance, perhaps-

What in the seven hells was she imagining? Serena mentally slapped herself. What dangerous fantasies were creeping into her mind? She tried to push them away but found she was unable to. The image of her and Amelia dancing together...

It was nice.

Damn it. Who said she couldn’t have a *friend*? Who said she had to play the stiff captain *all the time*? She was allowed to have fun, right?

“Alright,” she said. “Next week. For the festival.”

“Wonderful! Thank you, Serena! You’ve saved my hide!” He gave her a friendly salute. Serena had an increasing suspicion that Amelia and he were going to get on. “Oh, one more thing. Some of the prisoners of war from the Port Highwind liberation were intercepted by the enemy. So keep an eye out, alright? We’ve put a team on the both of you, and it’s possible they’ll try to approach the human while we’re here.”

“Republican intelligence is in Kenhoro?”

“Probably not. They don’t have the resources. It’ll be federation boys, which means if something happens, at least try and be a little *diplomatic*.”

“... Sure,” Serena said, thinking about the most diplomatic way to stab someone.

“You’ve got that old look in your eye again.”

“What look!?”

“... Nothing.”

“Speaker Halen! Here we are!” The requisition officer reappeared carrying a sack. “Two raincoats, four pairs of boots from size seven through to ten. Four pairs of socks and a pair of rainhats. Sign this, please.” He pushed forward a piece of paper and pen. Serena signed the document, and the sack of clothes was handed to her.

“What will you do now?” She asked Aiden.

“Well, I should probably follow you, all secret-like,” he shrugged, “but I think I’ll get a drink and start planning the pub crawl...”

“You’re... incorrigible.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just one of the many ways you’re an idiot.”

“Can’t be that much of an idiot! I’m an intelligence officer! Although...” a momentary pause, “Actually, most of them are idiots. Damn it...”

“Go have your drink, Officer Adachi. I’ll see you in a week.”

“Alright! See you then, don’t do anything stupid while I’m not there!”

“Stupid... like what?”

“Like employ a human speaker stupid, stupid!” He laughed, and Serena joined in. She really enjoyed her time at the academy; demons like Aiden were the closest she had to a friend.

She waved him off and headed back to the *Vengeance*. On deck, she found Allston lost in thought.

“Allston?”

“Ah, captain. They have most of the things we need, but the armour plates won’t be here until the Ponan shipment arrives. So we should be good to go in a month. Thorne’s in the armoury, seeing what turrets they have in stock, if any.” That was a relief. The plating was the last work to be done so they could busy themselves with repairing the steel skeleton until the Ponan convoy arrived.

“Good work, Allston,” She said, patting the man on the shoulder. “Try and give your boys some breaks, alright? Have a chat with Tomes and see what extra payment we can arrange.”

“Aye, captain.”

The chief engineer drifted off into his own thoughts again. Serena left him there and headed back into the ship.

It was time to take Amelia out into the city.

Amelia thought that if Serena had taken one minute longer, she would have escaped the ship no matter what. She didn’t want to spend another second here! After Tomes had described more of Kenhoro and its towering pagodas she was itching to see it in person!

“Finally!” Amelia cried out when the door opened, and the familiar set of magnificent horns appeared. “I was going to die from boredom!” Serena stepped through, carrying a mysterious sack.

“Wouldn’t want that, would we?” Serena said, before turning her gaze to Tomes, “How’s it going?”

“Payments payments and... more payments. These books will take a while,” Tomes peered up through his neat spectacles, raising a finger to point at a small pouch on the table, “Some spending money for you both, a hundred denarii. Take it you two won’t be staying in the barracks?”

“No,” Serena said, shaking her head and pocketing the small but heavy purse. “I’ll see if Highguard has any rooms. What about you and your brother?”

“We’ll find somewhere. Probably on the outskirts. Hotels are going to be busy near the center with the upcoming festival.”

A festival! “There’s a festival!? What kind!?” Amelia blurted out.

“It’s the moonrain festival,” Serena explained, “A celebration of the moon cycle that provides our world with crystals. There’ll be fireworks, music, costumes, and... drinking.”

“Can I... can we go?” Amelia asked, trying to inject as much pleading as possible into her voice. She had never been to any kind of festival before, only witnessing them through monitors from her hospital bed.

“Sure,” came the reply, and Amelia threw her hands up in celebration. She was going to a festival! “Thank you!”

“As long as,” Serena said, raising a finger, “You be good and absorb all the lessons about civilian life I and Tomes are going to be giving you. You need a basic understanding of the laws and what rights you have as a *human* in *demon* territory,” she paused for a moment, before continuing, “It’s a little more complicated with you, as you’re employed by House Halen so you have additional privileges that you should know about.”

Now that was interesting. She was going to ask Serena about these privileges, but Tomes spoke up first.

“There’s further complications, captain,” Tones said, “I’m not sure if Cascadian Speaker privileges apply to her. She’s not technically a citizen of the empire. I’m not even sure what she would fall under. A refugee? Doesn’t really fit. And...” He took off these spectacles, habitually cleaning them, “If the federation makes a public claim for her, it could cause an awful set of problems.”

“Hmmp!” Amelia said, crossing her arms and sticking her head to the side, “I don’t care who or what tries to claim me! I belong to Lady Halen!” She snuck a glance at Serena and was pleased to find a tinge of redness had appeared. Serena was secretly a big softie, wasn’t she?

“Shut up, idiot, and put these on,” Serena dug around in the sack she was holding and threw her an overcoat and several pairs of boots and socks. “It’s a raincoat to put over your uniform. Don’t want you walking around in republican colours. The first thing we’ll do is head to a tailor and find you... something else.” Serena gestured to the boots. “See what pair fits you the best. Change your socks also.”

Thank the heavens! The pair she was wearing felt awfully tight, and while her tough skin could never blister, it was still a persistent source of irritation. She untied the laces and removed the old pair. The size seven made it impossible for her to slip her feet in. The eight she could just manage, but the nine fit perfectly. She walked around a bit to get a feel for them, and once she was satisfied, she wormed her way into the raincoat. The thin brown leather easily covered her uniform underneath.

“All ready!” She flashed Serena a thumbs up.

“Good. Take this, put it on. Tie your hair up so it can’t be seen.” Serena handed her a conical-shaped straw hat. Amelia did as she was told and tied her hair up into a bun before placing the hat on her head and fiddling with the thin chin strap to make it comfortable.

“It rains a lot in the east, so you’ll always want to go out with a raincoat and a rainhat. Let’s go. Tones, I’ll come find you in a day or two, see how our finances are looking.” Serena donned her own raincoat, and before Amelia could ask how she was going to wear the accessory, Serena simply pulled it

down on her head, allowing her horns to pierce through the straw. Amelia couldn't help but let out a giggle.

“What?” Serena said, looking puzzled.

“I thought there would be special hats that account for your horns?”

“Oh,” Serena tapped the hat, “The individual variation in horns is great enough that they need to be custom-made. I'll go to a milliner later in the week and have some made.”

“What's a milliner?”

“A hat-maker.”

“Oh, okay!”

“Ready?”

“Yup!” Amelia nodded enthusiastically. Her hat bounced about, so she adjusted the chin strap so it was tighter. She followed Serena through the first deck and outside.

“Whoa,” She couldn't stop herself, exclaiming in wonder. The Imperial docks were massive. She didn't think she had ever seen so much steel in one place. They stretched in each direction for maybe half a kilometre each, a dozen empty bays to the left and another half dozen to the right. There were a few smaller ships docked up, but nothing the size of the *Vengeance*.

Each bay had enormous steel towers and other structures around them, some looked like cranes, some looked like the arms used to hold ships in place and the others she had no idea about. Looking up she saw the docks had a second tier, with another dozen and a half bays and beyond that there was a third tier. The scale was hard to wrap her mind around.

There were huge warehouses lining the wall between the tier she was on and the one above. From these, train tracks spewed out, going off into other areas and the bays themselves. It appeared that moving a ship from the bay into a warehouse was possible if needed.

High above, massive brass lettering, perhaps ten meters high, spelt out a phrase in high imperial. There was another phrase under it in letters half the size. There was a single word she could read here, thanks to her work with imperial numbers that morning. The number seven hundred and eighty-six.

“What does that say,” she said, almost whispering. Serena followed her finger to the giant letters.

“It says, *Kenhoru Imperial Airdocks*. The bit underneath says *Opened In The Year Of Divinity Seven Eighty-Six By The Imperial Highness Of Cascadia*.”

“Imperial Highness being...?”

“Empress Elana, yes.”

“Wow, it’s... so big. There’s so much *metal* everywhere. It all feels so... practical.”

“That’s imperial military architecture for you. Kenhoru proper feels completely different. It’s mostly wood and clay. It’s an amazing city. Come on.”

“Okay...” Amelia followed Serena quietly. She kept lifting her head up just to take in the sheer scale of the space, which made her feel tiny. Serena led her through a small opening, and soon, they were lost in a small maze of corridors.

“We’re taking a side exit,” Serena explained, “There will likely be people looking for you at the main gate.” Serena stopped and then looked directly at Amelia. “Never Speak in the city unless your life is in danger. It is against Imperial law to do so in urban areas. There is much greater tolerance for using first, second, and third-circle spells or techniques to defend yourself, but you should still only use these if needed. Understand?”

Amelia nodded furiously. Once she and Serena were closer, she would tell her that she could Speak covertly and ask her how the law handled that.

“Second, if you ever get lost or something goes wrong, come back here to the ship. Use the symbol of my house Tomes gave you to get through the gate. If that doesn’t work, force your way through and get on the ship. You’ll see once we get out, but the imperial docks have a series of huge lighthouses above them, they can be seen throughout most of the city.”

“I understand!”

“Good, let’s go.” They continued for a minute and then came to a steel gate manned by a pair of guards. Serena spoke to them quietly for a moment, and they suddenly enthusiastically saluted her. Seeing that made Amelia feel proud. Her captain was so cool and respected! The guards opened the gates, and they stepped through into Kenhoro proper.

For the second time, Amelia couldn’t stop exclaiming in wonder. The streets were paved and lined with lampposts and trees. Hundreds of people formed small groups going this way and that. There was a light rain, and everyone was wearing some form of raincoat and rainhat. The people moved like brown blobs, although some were brightly coloured, especially the children, whose little horns poked through their straw hats. They were so adorable!

There were some humans mixed in as well. One in ten. On average, they were shorter than the demons, and their intact straw hats stood out amongst a sea of horns.

The street was lined with three-story buildings, the bottom floor being a shop of some kind. Amelia couldn’t read the shop names, but she could see a cobbler, a flower shop and a cafe or two. Some of the signs were written in a different script she had never seen before. She pointed it out to Serena.

“That’s Manwese, the native language of this region - Kenhoro, Tanhae, Ponan, and some of Shimashina - High Imperial is only truly dominant in Centralis, and its culture and language has naturally exported itself to the Terra Firmas over the centuries. Everyone speaks Imperial though so you needn’t worry.”

“The buildings look gorgeous!” Amelia exclaimed, and they did. Each floor was separated by a curved tiled roof that jutted out from the white-washed walls, supported by thick beams of dark wood. The ends of these beams ended in carvings of strange animals.

“It’s called a garbled roof. All the roofs in the region are curved like this. It’s effective at keeping the rain off. Look at that one. Can you see how it has a triangular piece on top?” Serena gestured to a building down the street, and Amelia saw a pagoda standing five stories tall, topped with a fancy-looking triangle tiled structure decorated with small statues. “That’s a hip-and-garble roof. Important buildings like shrines or government buildings have them.”

“And is this some kind of shrine?” Amelia could see some people bowing towards the structure as they passed. Something seemed to be giving off smoke. Were they burning incense?

“Yes, it’s a religious structure, built as a home for the Kami.”

“Kami?”

“Spirits of the elements. Quinto is the dominant religion here, and it worships the Kami.”

This was confusing. Wasn’t the Empress supposed to be a literal thousand-year-old god? Why would they worship something else? Was that even allowed? Amelia raised her questions with Serena, who explained that the Quinists believed that the Empress was a great Kami taking demon form.

“There are many religions in the four corners of Cascadia, and you’ll find out that they all - in some way or another - worship the Empress.” That made sense. If the Empress was a thousand years old then the religions would have adapted and formed around her as a central figure.

“I see...”

“Come now,” Serena led her through the crowd and down the streets, eventually stopping and stepping into a tailor’s shop. “Here,” Serena said,

indicating towards some coat hooks at the entranceway. “Every shop or eatery has these to put your raincoats and hats on.” Serena removed her outer layer, and Amelia followed.

“You are Clothmaster Dai?” Serena asked the short demon tailor who was waiting patiently. “You fixed my father's suits a few summers ago, is that correct?”

“That’s right, Lady Halen, I presume?” The female tailor gave a small bow. “It’s an honour to have the famous Speaker and captain in my shop. How may I- oh my!” The tailor's eyes went wide as she bounced up to Amelia, and before she could protest, Amelia found herself being turned this way and that. “What a dreadfully fitting uniform! Surely this wasn’t provided by House Halen!?”

“No,” Serena said, an amused look in her eye as the eager demon manhandled Amelia. “She is an employee of the house, only recently signing a contract. This old republican uniform is the only thing that fits her. I’m looking to have a few outfits made.”

“Of course, of course.” A tape measure appeared from somewhere and suddenly Amelia was directed to stick her arms and legs out in different directions while the tailor eagerly took measurements. “What kind of work will she be assigned?”

“... I’m not sure. We need something practical and easy to move in. Three sets should do, I think. Also, another three sets of casual wear. We also want a formal suit and several sets of bedwear. Oh...” Serena paused for a moment, looking away from Amelia, “And a pair of dresses, red”.

Oh? “Dresses?” She asked, raising an eye at Serena.

“Yes... for the festival.”

“Are you going to be wearing a dress?”

“... of course.”

How exhilarating. Amelia had never seen Serena in anything other than her uniform or the medical wing garments. Hell, Serena even slept in her uniform most of the time! It was criminal to hide all those curves behind a stiff military outfit! Now she was even more excited for the upcoming festival.

“Lady Halen, we’re all done. Any preference for colour for the work uniforms?”

“Dark grey or black, with silver trim. As for the casual clothes, keep the colours dull, something that can easily blend in.”

“Of course,” said the tailor. “For now, you must let me put her in something that isn’t so outrageous! Those republicans really have no sense of style. Hmm... here we go!” A set of clothes was fished out from a stack of uniforms and handed to her. “These should be far more comfortable. Head through there, my dear. Shout if you have any trouble.” The demon gestured to a curtained area.

“O-okay! Thank you, Miss Tailor!” She gave a small bow and hurried into the side room. Pulling the curtain along the rail, Amelia undressed and began slipping into the new clothes. They were light brown and grey, but the clothes were clearly very high quality and more comfortable than her previous uniform. It took her a while to work out how to tighten certain parts. There were tassels that seemed to be elastic that could be pulled and fixed into place.

Eventually, she was happy with how it felt, and she stepped outside the side room.

“Much better,” Serena said approvingly.

“Oh my dear, you’ve tightened it all wrong!” The tailor ducked all around her, adjusting parts here and there, and the clothes that had already felt comfortable now felt like second skin. “Try moving,” the tailor said.

Amelia moved her arms and walked around the room. “This feels amazing,” she said, “I never knew clothes could feel this comfortable! You’re

amazing!” Amelia gave a genuine compliment.

“Oh, thank you, dear,” the tailor said with a smile on her face. “It’s not just me! That’s cotton from the sheep fields of Fengra! Very expensive, but very comfortable.”

“How long will the clothes take to tailor?” Serena asked.

“Hmm... six days for the work and casual uniforms, another three for the suit and another three for the two dresses. Let’s call it a fortnight.”

“Price?”

“Two hundred and twenty denarii. I’ll have to buy the dye for the dresses, but I won’t charge for that! Just let me see her wear it!” The tailor beamed at her. What was she, some kind of dress-up doll?

And what was that price!? If she remembered right, these clothes were equal to about *two years* of a normal soldier's salary! So this is the price of someone with the title of *Clothmaster*?

“Right, we’ll come back in a few days for the work uniforms. Where's your credit book?” Serena asked, and the tailor provided her with a small book that Serena wrote in. She then ripped a page out of the book and handed it to the tailor.

“Thank you for your custom, Lady Halen,” said the tailor, giving another small bow. “And thank you, miss,” She bent her head in Amelia’s direction, “for allowing me to make you such fine clothes!”

“Uh, no problem! I can’t wait to see them!”

“Come on, you,” Serena pulled her to the shop exit, where they donned their raincoats and hat. “Let’s go,” she said, stepping outside the shop.

“Where are we going now?” Amelia asked. There was a moment of silence, and then the answer came, softly spoken.

“To get a hotel room...”

How scandalous that sentence was! As she was led once again through the crowd, Amelia let her mind come up with all kinds of inappropriate scenarios.

The best part was Serena had said *room*, singular!

What a flirtatious captain she was becoming...

Chapter Fifteen: Matching Masks

As Serena led her charge towards the center of Kenhoro she was constantly bombarded with questions. Amelia was intrigued by every little sight or smell. Honestly, it was endearing to see somebody so fascinated by demon culture. On more than one occasion, Serena had to stop Amelia from walking into someone as she was so distracted by the next shiny thing.

She did her best to answer what she could, although she often failed to give further detail when the inevitable follow-up questions were thrown her way. The culture in Kenhoro and the surrounding area was familiar to her due to her military career, which caused her to spend a significant amount of time docked. However, she was not a native, and her homeland - The Three Sisters - was several hundred clicks to the southeast.

“This is the Kenhoro procession, the main thoroughfare in the city,” She said to Amelia as they stepped onto the enormous paved street. Frequent trams passed them, excess steam hissing out the tops as they trundled past in the tracks embedded in the ground. “Here, hold on,” She wrapped an arm around Amelia’s waist and hoisted the both of them onto a passing tram.

An interesting noise came from the human, which she almost ignored.

“Sorry. Getting on and off a moving tram is an urban skill you’ll need to learn quickly,” Serena cast an apologetic look at the red-cheeked girl. “Never walk along the tracks. The trams have scoops installed on their fronts to push pedestrians out of the way, and the drivers are perfectly happy to use them.”

“Okay! There are *so many* people!” Amelia said. The tram was almost full, and outside there was a constant river of people moving up and down the procession. “How many people do you think live in the city?”

“About a million, give or take. Probably another two hundred thousand in the surrounding area. You should see the Centralis Basin. The last census of that region came to *eighty million people*! It’s probably eighty-five now,” Serena shook her head, “Imagine the logistics to feed that many people! Kenhoro is a big place, but it has no underground. In Centralis, there are thousands of clicks of tunnels through the mountains and earth, connecting them all.”

Amelia looked at her with wide eyes. “Whoa!” She exclaimed. “Can we go there?”

“Eventually,” Serena said. They would inevitably, at some point. If she were going to receive a silver eagle for her work, they would typically invite her to the capital for the ceremony. “We can see the titan,” she said.

“Titan?”

“Tome’s gave you a history lesson right? About how the empress was victorious against the Titans?”

“I think so...? He mentioned gigantic monsters at some point.”

“The Titans were the generals of that ancient enemy. They led the legions of beasts and were felled one by one by the empress. Other than the bones that were used in the construction of the Cathedral of Bone in the capital, there wasn’t much evidence of the rest of them.

“That was until a century and a half ago when they began digging the underground railway in the Centralis Basin. They came across a gigantic skeleton of a creature slain long ago. Only the skull is accessible to the public, but they’ve turned it into somewhat of a tourist attraction.”

Amelia’s eyes grew even wider. “Have you ever seen it!?”

“No,” Serena said, shaking her head. “And yes to the question you’re about to ask. We’ll try to find time to visit it when we go central.”

“Thank you!” Amelia beamed, flashing her a perfect smile. Serena let herself enjoy that smile for a few seconds. “You know, eighty million isn’t that much,” Amelia whispered, moving in closer. “The biggest nation from where I came from had *three billion people*.”

Serena narrowed her eyes and found Amelia wasn’t jesting. Three billion people. How could she even begin to imagine that? “All human?” She asked, and Amelia nodded back. Christ. That was a lot of... humans. “How would you even feed that many people?”

“Mmm...” Amelia’s eyes looked thoughtful, “You know how advances in metallurgy allow better armour and better engines to be made?” Serena nodded. “Well, I guess we’ve perfected growing crops. Better fertilizers. Centuries of breeding the best crops. It’s all automated also.”

“Automated?”

“Yeah, like...” Amelia raised her hands, seemingly struggling to find the words. “Imagine an advanced steam engine, but it’s smart enough to know how and when to perfectly plant, grow and harvest crops. It can work day and night, farming hundreds of kilometres of farmland year-round.”

“That’s interesting. My sister would be very interested in hearing about that.” What Amelia described sounded like a far more advanced version of the golems widely used in the southern desert.

Amelia opened her mouth to reply, but they were interrupted by the tram conductor.

“Tickets! Don’t think I missed you sneaking on back there!” The smartly dressed demon called out, pushing his way through the crowd and up to them. Serena adjusted her raincoat, pulling it so that her shoulder with the gold thread and military insignia could be seen. The conductor paused for a moment before motioning his head towards Amelia.

“She’s with me,” Serena said. The conductor nodded and made his way back down the tram. Serena covered her uniform back up and saw Amelia looking at her with a questioning expression painted on her face. “All

military can ride transport in the city for free,” Serena explained. “Came into effect a couple of years ago. Speakers also have that privilege, although...” She bent down slightly, lowering her voice. “Don’t pull that trick when you’re alone, not until we can figure out where you stand legally. You’re not a citizen of this region or the empire.”

“How do I become a citizen?” Amelia whispered back.

“I suspect an offer might be made to you sooner rather than later, once your lack of ties to...” Serena dropped her voice as quietly as she could, “... the enemy is confirmed.” Amelia nodded, and her blue eyes moved to an area above Serena's shoulder.

“Is that the lighthouse you talked about?”

Serena turned and saw the towering steel lighthouse. Even during midday, the enormous aetherlight still shone brightly. “Yes,” she said. “There are two more, but you can’t see them. Use them as a landmark to return to the docks if you need to.”

“Okay! Do you... expect there’ll be trouble during our stay?”

Serena paused, thinking over how to answer the question. She couldn’t say no, but couldn’t guarantee a yes either. It depended on how aggressive Cascadian and Federation intelligence would be. If there were heretical or republican cells in Kenhoro then an outright kidnapping or assassination attempt wasn’t out of the question.

“There’s a possibility. You’re keeping your wards up at all times?” Seeing Amelia nod quickly, she asked, “How are your aether reserves?” The cloaked ward Amelia had cast on Serena was still maintained.

“It’s manageable. When we find time, I want to try some others, if that’s okay.”

“... Sure,” Serena said. “Let’s jump off here.” Serena could have let Amelia jump off by herself, but she was curious as to whether the human would

make that cute noise again. She slipped an arm around Amelia's waist and, while pulling her tight, hopped off the tram.

Her efforts were not in vain.

“Let’s head this way, through the central market,” Serena said, leading the red-faced girl. The light rain had stopped, but she warned Amelia to keep her hat on so that her golden hair was hidden. They slipped in with the river of pedestrians, and soon a massive cascade of noise and smells assaulted them.

“Spices! Black spices all the way from the desert!”

“Northern spirits! Whiskey from Kasimanda! Vodka from Skipifold!”

“Come get the best Vinay kebabs! Slow-cooked for twenty-four hours!”

“Masks! Get your festival masks here! Crystal jewellery for your horns!”

A city of market stalls called out to them. They were brightly coloured, with enticing signs and aggressive stall owners — anything to grab a potential customer's attention.

“Masks!” Amelia pulled Serena to one of the stalls.

“We have carnival masks in every colour you can dream of, young ladies!” The shopkeeper’s words flowed naturally from his mouth. “The festival is only around the corner! I would hate to see you unadorned with the very best accessories in Kenhoro! Look here,” the man gestured to his wares, “We have masks in patterned clothes for those after a simple look, or if you want to stand out, we have ones decorated in coloured quartz! And for the extra special customer who truly wants to impress a man...” The stallkeeper pointed to a row of masks behind a glass cabinet. “Masks lined with cut moon crystals from the four corners of Cascadia!”

“Not all the corners,” Serena pointed out, “You’re missing red crystal.”

“Right you are, dear customer! Unfortunately, due to the ongoing conflict, the red stuff is a little hard to get these days. I could put in an order for you,

of course!” The stallkeeper rubbed his hands together.

“Can I try this on?” Amelia pointed towards one of the carnival masks donned in blue moon crystal. The stallkeeper eagerly unlocked the cabinet and handed the mask to Amelia, who looked up at Serena. Amelia held the mask in position. “What do you think? Matches my eyes, right?”

Serena swallowed awkwardly. How did adding a small carnival mask add so much... enticement? The blue glow from the crystal only highlighted Amelia’s eyes more. “Take the hat off,” She told Amelia, “See if it fits properly.” Amelia obeyed, removing the hat and revealing her golden hair.

“A human...” the stallkeeper mumbled before quickly turning back into cheerful merchant mode. “What brilliant golden hair you have! It shines even more than my wares! If I may ask, dear customer, whence do you hail from?”

“She’s from Karligard,” Serena said before Amelia could respond. She hadn’t missed the brief drop in the stallkeeper’s face when he had seen Amelia’s lack of horns. Discrimination had been rising through the years, and the humans in Kenhoro had slowly been grouping closer to their districts on the outskirts. “It looks good,” She said as Amelia finished adjusting the mask. Good was an understatement. Amelia looked stunning.

“You like it? Okay then! I’ll buy it! How much?” Amelia grinned at the compliment.

“You don’t need to buy something just because I said so, you know,” Serena said, trying and failing to chastise the girl.

“I know, but I want to dress up for the festival. What about you?”

“What about me?”

Amelia turned to the stallkeeper. “How quickly can you get one just like this,” Amelia motioned towards the mask on her face, “But with red crystals?” Amelia turned to Serena, motioning towards her eyes. “For your red eyes. It should match, no?”

“Red is expensive these days. I don’t want to spend that much on a mask. I’ll get something like this...” Serena picked up one of the masks patterned in red cloth.

“No, no!” Amelia protested, shaking her head. “We have to match, or there’s no point! Mr Stallowner, can you get a red one like this in time for the festival?”

The stallkeeper's expression was puzzled as he listened to their back-and-forth and was a little slow to react. “Ah, of course,” he said, "Of course!” He clasped his hands together. "I can have it ready within two days. Is that acceptable for you?”

Serena began to protest, but Amelia cut her short. “I will pay for it! Don’t worry! How much is it, Mr Stallowner?”

“Thirty for the blue mask and fifty for the red one.”

“Okay!” Amelia turned to Serena. “You have the money on you, right? Take it out of my wages for this month!” Serena looked at Amelia for a moment. She would have to teach her the price of things. These two masks were half a year of a soldier's salary.

“My dear customer, what a wonderful choice! Would you like me to gift wrap them for you? Free of charge!”

“Yes, please!” Amelia removed the blue mask and handed it back to the stallkeeper, who busied wrapping and bagging it. Serena handed the man his money, and the purse Toms had given her felt far lighter. The stallkeeper handed Amelia the bag and a receipt so she could pick up the remaining mask in the future.

“Here you go, valued customer. If I may ask, you spoke of wages. From what profession do you hail from?”

Amelia flashed a grin and jabbed a thumb at her chest.

“I’m her maid!”

Serena sighed.

Idiot.

Chapter Sixteen: A Highguard Mystery

Hotel Highguard oozed wealth. Its lobby was lined with marble walls, and the floor was covered with a shiny black rock Amelia had never seen before. A dozen pillars were dotted about, each holding an expensive-looking piece of earthware inscribed with ornate patterns. On the far side of the lobby, a grand staircase layered with a red carpet led to the floors above. There were two elevators to one side, each with a demon attendant.

“Take your raincoat and hat off,” Serena said as she removed her own. “Hold these,” she said, passing them to Amelia, who tried to fold them awkwardly over her arm while holding the gift-wrapped bag from the market outside. “Hurry up,” Serena commanded as she strutted off to the reception.

“Yes, Lady Halen!” Amelia piped up, remembering Serena’s instructions to be on her best behaviour. She followed behind obediently.

The receptionist gave a deep bow as they approached. “Welcome to the Highguard, Speaker Halen,” said the receptionist politely, “Or do you prefer Captain?”

“Speaker Halen,” Serena said, “Is the owner in?”

“The owner is unfortunately occupied for the foreseeable future,” the receptionist explained, his eyes briefly flicking to Amelia. “I can pass on a message for you.”

“No need,” Serena said, resting an arm on the receptionist’s desk. “We require a twin room. One month. For both of us.” Serena gestured to Amelia

at her side. The receptionist blinked a few times before a smile formed on his face that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Our greatest apologies, Speaker Halen. All our rooms are fully booked for the next three months."

"I'm sure they are. However, I am well aware the Highguard always keeps rooms in reserve. We'd like one of them," Serena said, her voice taking on a hard edge. Amelia couldn't help but start to feel a little excited. Serena in authoritative mode was her second favourite Serena mode, coming in shortly behind secret-big-softy mode.

"Once again, I sincerely apologize, Speaker Halen. We are unable to provide one of the reserve rooms... in this case."

"Oh?" Amelia noticed Serena's eyes narrowing. The danger level was increasing. She quickly checked Serena's waist and was relieved to see Serena wasn't carrying her normal cutlass. "And if you could explain *precisely* what you mean by *this case*?"

"Of course, Speaker Halen," the demon nodded his head, "We currently have a large number of military staying with us. Many of these guests are extra vigilant regarding their surroundings, and I believe there is a high chance of conflict arising if you and your..." a set of orange eyes met Amelia's, "... assistant stayed with us."

Serena was silent for a full ten seconds, staring down at the receptionist whose calm facade was just starting to crack, his smile looking a little more nervous than before.

"Military?"

"That is correct, Speaker Halen."

"From which battalion or squadron?"

"I... believe they take the name of the Crimson Reapers."

“Mercenaries! Tsk!” Serena clicked her tongue, tapping the desk with a forceful finger. “When in the seven hells did Highguard start housing *mercenaries and privateers*?”

“The activities of our valiant and brave guests have allowed them to meet our very competitive prices, Speaker Halen. They have purchased all available rooms.”

“Activities? Ha!” Serena’s laugh echoed in the large lobby, and Amelia wondered how uncomfortable the lift attendants were getting. “You mean looting and plundering out in international airspace?”

“Speaker Halen, if you could refrain-”

“No. You listen here,” Serena jabbed a finger at the flustered receptionist. “House Halen and the owner are on good terms. We have hosted him as a guest in our estate many times. I will speak to him myself. Where is he?”

“I cannot-”

“I was not *asking*,” Serena snarled, her voice abandoning all pretence of politeness. What a terrible hot-head she was! “I am *instructing* you. Tell me where I can find him, or you’ll experience some of that *conflict* you hope to avoid right here, right now!” The threat was punctuated with a crack as the edge of the receptionist desk Serena held splintered under her strength.

As covertly as she could, Amelia twisted and turned the aether inside her and silently cast a little bit of ice magic. A wave of cold erupted from her, and the receptionist involuntarily shivered. Serena glanced in her direction, and Amelia responded to the questioning look with a small shrug.

“T-there’s no need for that, Speaker Halen,” the receptionist blurted out, looking thoroughly intimidated at their joint attack. “Lord Yulan is recuperating in the penthouse suite. If you insist so strongly, then we have no choice...” the demon awkwardly gestured to the lift. “One of our attendants will take you there.”

Serena held the man in her gaze as if glaring at him for long enough would melt him into a puddle. “Recuperating?” She asked.

“Y-yes. He is... unwell.”

Serena cast a side-eye at her. Amelia responded with a small nod to the implicit question. “Very well,” Serena intoned, “Shall we go see the owner, Miss Thornheart?”

“Mmm, mmm! Sure thing!” Amelia nodded enthusiastically. Leaving the stressed receptionist behind, she and Serena entered one of the lifts and the attendant - who looked like he’d rather be anywhere else - produced a silver key from about his person. The attendant inserted the key into a keyhole and twisted three times. An audible click sounded and from below their feet there was a hiss of steam and the elevator began to trundle upwards.

The three of them stood in awkward silence. If they were alone, Amelia would have asked all kinds of questions but the presence of the lift attendant kept her lips closed.

Another hiss of steam and the lift came to a halt outside a short hallway. The gates of the lift opened and for a moment everything seemed very still.

“Let’s go,” Serena said, stepping out into the hallway. “Leave that here,” Serena gestured to the raincoats, hats, and gift bag containing the mask she was carrying. Amelia placed them on the floor to the side.

“Speaker Halen,” a small voice called out. It was the lift attendant, bowing deeply in Serena’s direction. “If you can do anything to help Lord Yulan’s position, many of us would be most grateful.”

Serena evaluated the man with a cold gaze. “How long have you been under his employ?”

“Five years, Speaker Halen.”

“How long has Lord Yulan been recuperating?”

“A little over a year now.”

“A year!” Serena exclaimed. “Who has been running Highguard in his place?”

“That would be his nephew, Manager San.”

“Lord Yulan has a nephew?” Serena tilted her head in puzzlement. “I have never seen or heard of this nephew. Why?”

“I can only repeat what I have heard but... *Manager San* was estranged from the family many years ago for eloping with an Ainese woman that Lord Yulan did not approve of. He recently reappeared to make amends with his uncle.”

“And was it this *Manager San* who was responsible for allowing that rabble in?”

“Yes, Speaker...” the lift attendant seemed to chew his words a little, “... Manager San appears to be close with their commander.”

Serena blinked a few times. “I see,” she said, “And when *exactly* did *Manager San* make his return?”

“Ah...” The lift attendant kept his eyes firmly on the floor, a pained expression on his face. “That would be...” The demon's voice became barely a whisper, “... shortly before Lord Yulan became bedridden.”

Serena closed the distance to the attendant and bent down so they were close. “Is the situation that bad?” She whispered.

“Cargo moves through the hotel only at night. Manager San and his allies monitor it. We are being replaced, one by one.” The lift attendant bowed deeply. “If you can do anything, I beg of you!”

Serena straightened up slowly. “Will they be suspicious of you?”

“... Yes,” came the reply from the still-bowing attendant.

“Then, you know what I must do? For your sake?” The attendant stood up, his mouth quivering, but Amelia could see the determination in his yellow

eyes.

“I am prepared, but if you could control your strength-” The man was cut short as Serena’s fist smashed into his face and blood exploded from his broken nose.

“Ahh... ahhh!” The man cried, clutching his bloody face.

“Return below. Use all kinds of colourful language to describe me,” Serena’s voice took on a note of sympathy, “Describe my actions as violent and without restraint. Tell them I threatened your life with a sword. If you find the opportunity, exit the hotel. Hold this in your hand so it’s visible to the outside crowd.”

Serena reached into her pockets and pulled out a silver insignia identical to the one Tomes had given Amelia earlier. “You may or may not be approached by someone. Ask them if their accent is from Ichtaca, regardless of how they sound. If they say yes, then inform them that *Speaker Halen is exercising her privilege*. Is this understood?”

“Ah... I understand, Speaker Halen!” The bloody attendant took the insignia and hid it in his sock. “I will do as you ask!” The man spoke with newfound enthusiasm that would look rather noble if he wasn’t pouring blood onto his uniform.

“Is there any other way to access this floor?” Serena asked.

“There are only the stairs. Right here.” The attendant pressed a bloody hand against the wall, and a mechanical click sounded as a section swung back, revealing a stairwell.

“Return this way. Go now. Be quick,” Serena ordered. The attendant gave a hasty bow and vanished down the stairwell. Amelia watched him go and listened as his footsteps quietened. She turned to Serena and raised her eyebrow as best she could.

“Well, this has escalated rather quickly!” she said, forming her mouth into a sly grin. “How thrilling! What was all that about with the... you know?”

Amelia motioned a punch with her fist.

“I merely want to give them pause in following us. If they believe I am out of control, they will be more hesitant. For some reason,” Serena sighed, “I have a reputation for being violent.”

“Oh my!” Amelia made a mock expression of shock, “How could anyone have gotten that idea?”

“Shut up.”

“Who is this Lord Yulan anyway?”

“He's a family friend. Growing up, I used to call him uncle, and he used to call me *little Ren*.”

“Ren?”

“Popular nickname for the name *Serena*.”

“Oh! I wonder what my nickname would be! Amelia... Amelia...” Amelia rolled her own name around her tongue, trying to come up with a suitable nickname. “Mel? Hmm, I don't like that. Oh! I know! Lia! You can call me Lia if you like! What do you think?” She pumped her fist up and flexed her bicep. “Ren and Lia! Saving the world! Fighting against evil and corruption! Saviours of Highguard!”

“What in the seven hells goes through your head, idiot!” Shaking her head and walking to the lift, Serena tried to hide it, but Amelia could see the smile.

She was going to ask, ‘*So what's the plan, little Ren?*’ but caught herself just in time. She was very happy with their relationship's direction and didn't want to push things too fast. Luckily, little Ren answered the question herself.

“First, I'll break the lift so they cannot interrupt my investigation,” Serena said.

“How are you-”

Serena's fist smashed through the wooden and marble wall, ripping through copper pipes that spewed out boiling hot steam. Serena herself seemed unaffected by the heat and continued wreaking havoc on the steam system that operated the lift. A few moments later, the fully functioning lift became a twisted wreck.

Amelia clapped her hands quickly. “How educational!” She flashed a smug grin at Serena. “I’m learning a lot from you about how to solve future problems! This etiquette lesson is very engaging! Pfft!” She couldn't resist a giggle at the end, the humour of her own joke too much for her to keep the act up.

Serena rolled her eyes but didn’t chastise her. “Secondly,” Serena said, “I’ll stop them coming through here, at least until they find enough muscle.” Serena closed the hidden door to the stairs and placed a hand on the marble. Amelia sensed the aether inside Serena bubble before the marble melded together, sealing the hidden door shut.

“I didn’t know you knew earth magic!” She exclaimed.

“There’s a lot of things you don’t know about me.” Came the reply.

“Mmm! I can’t wait to find them all out!” She leaned against the wall, folded her arms and mustered her cheekiest grin. “Any more cute nicknames I should know about?”

Serena didn’t reply, but the marble in the wall flowed like liquid forming a sword in the shape of a katana.

“You’re not going to stab me with that, are you?” Amelia asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I’ll stab you later. Let’s go. Observe and be ready for a fight.” Serena brandished the marbled katana, testing out its weight with a few test swings.

“Okay! But you know... I don’t really want to fight. I can sit there and tank a lot of hits, though!”

“You can *what* a lot of hits?” Serena asked, stopping mid-swing and looking confused.

“Umm...” Amelia paused, realizing she had used another expression from her world. “Do you not have... tanks? Big armoured land machines? With a big gun?”

“No, why would anyone use that?”

“To like... you know,” Amelia shuffled her feet awkwardly. She wasn’t a military expert! “Protect the infantry and stuff...”

“Protect the infantry? Surround the men in an armoured box?”

“That’s right!”

“Add in a big gun to aid in their defensive and offensive capability?”

“Yeah!”

“And then, because it would weigh so much, install a lift engine to counter the weight of the armour?”

“I suppose so...”

“Congratulations. You’ve just reinvented the warship. I’ll make sure to recommend you to Centralis High Command, *Lia*.” A sly smile appeared on Serena’s face, and Amelia felt her mouth open in shock. The audacity! She made sure her cheeks were thoroughly puffed out, and she strode up to the smug demon and tried to look as threatening as possible, which considering how unbelievably cute she was, can’t have been very much.

“You! You-” She was cut short and suddenly felt all her anger melt away as she felt her hair being ruffled. Her hair was being ruffled! What a pleasant feeling!

“Come on, idiot. We’ve dallied around long enough,” Serena said, removing her hand. Amelia looked at the hand longingly for a moment before remembering herself.

“Okay!”

They moved down the hallway and rounded the corner into a dimly lit foyer. The floor was embedded with polished jade tiles. Wooden screens - intricately carved with stylized animals - lined the walls. A clockwork bronze dragon formed the centrepiece of the room. The clicking and turning of the cogs caused it to sway its ornately constructed head left and right. Two glowing amber eyes seemed to stare at them.

“Wow...” Amelia muttered, taking in the grand sculpture.

“It’s...” Serena paused, “I’ve forgotten its name, but it’s one of the more powerful kami worshipped by the Quintists. It’s a fire kami, taking the form of one of the fabled great lizards.”

“So cool! Hey, those aren’t aetherlights!” She pointed to the brass gas lamps lining the walls and hanging from the ceiling. They gave the room a feeling of warmth with their soft light.

“Lord Yulan is old-fashioned,” Serena explained. She looked around for a moment before striding off towards a set of stairs that led to a sliding door. With a moment of hesitation, she gripped the sword and flung the door open. From within the dark room, nothing came. As Amelia focused, she could hear the soft breathing of another person.

Serena flicked a switch on the wall, and the room was illuminated by a number of gas lamps flaring into life. The bedroom was dominated by a four-poster bed with a high canopy of red silk. An old demon with grey hair and great horns lay sleeping.

“Lord Yulan...” Serena whispered softly. “Come in, it’s clear,” she said, motioning to Amelia, who stepped into the room. She had to navigate the floor as it was strewn with scrolls depicting artwork and Manwese

scripture. Against one wall, there was an altar burning incense with carved sculptures of strange creatures that Amelia assumed were kami.

Hanging from the ceiling were dozens of pieces of paper with strange symbols painted on in black ink. These were also pinned on the bed's wood and seemingly randomly on the walls. Good luck charms, she guessed, or perhaps wards against evil spirits or kami.

“He doesn’t look great...” Amelia said. Lord Yulan was breathing weakly, and his face was painted with a pained expression.

“No. He doesn’t,” Serena said, moving to the edge of the bed and digging through the contents of the bedside table. Dozens of bowls and vials lay haphazardly stacked, containing an assortment of incense, herbs and strange-coloured tinctures. Serena smelled a few, a frown appearing. “These are traditional Manwese remedies. They are for inducing sleep and... oh, I see.”

Amelia watched as Serena found a vial containing a fine blue dust. “What’s that?” She asked.

“Dust,” Serena answered. “Finely ground moon crystal that is then baked for a long time and grounded even further.” She looked sympathetically at Lord Yulan. “It can be ingested or smoked to alleviate mental and physical pain, but it is highly addictive.” Serena opened a drawer and pulled out a smoking pipe. She smelt it before turning her head in disgust.

“They did this to him,” She muttered. “Induced addiction and then used the excuse of caring for him to put him into a comatose state. Took control of the hotel.” She shook her head, eyes reflecting sadness and anger. “They would have slipped it into his food at first. Lord Yulan has... had a strong mind. He would not have become like this on his own will.”

Serena pocketed the vial of dust, tobacco pipe and some other articles. She turned to Amelia with a complicated expression on her face. “I know... it’s not part of your contract but-”

“Say no more!” Amelia replied, giving her a reassuring double thumbs up as she began glowing and bathing the room in gold. The brilliant light - with flecks of blue - flowed from her into the air and into Lord Yulan’s body. The demon glowed for a dozen seconds before it finally dimmed, and the room returned to normal.

All was quiet for a moment as Lord Yulan’s breathing sounded deep and healthy. His expression became relaxed, and a peaceful smile was on the old man’s face as he slept deeply. Also, he was... he was...

Snoring.

“Seems like it worked,” Amelia said, shrugging. Serena frowned at the sleeping man before clicking her tongue, lifting her leg high and giving Lord Yulan a wicked kick!

“Wake up, you useless old fart!” She yelled, giving him another boot.

“Argh! What the! Who dares!” The old demon frantically sat up, glaring at Serena before his eyes slowly widened in surprise. “Serena? Seven hells! Is that you!?”

“How are you feeling, you damned old man?” Serena said, folding her arms and looking thoroughly annoyed.

“I feel... wonderful. Serena! What are you doing here!?” Lord Yulan's crimson eyes narrowed and then opened again in surprise when he noticed Amelia.

“Hi! Nice to meet you!” Amelia gave him a small wave.

“Who... who’s this human? Serena! What’s going on!?”

“This here is Miss Thornheart under my employ.” Serena put an arm around Amelia’s shoulders and pulled her close. Amelia did everything she could not to squeak an embarrassing sound. Her cheeks felt red hot, and she forced herself to look away so Serena couldn’t see her face.

“She's a human healer and has healed you under my instruction,” Serena continued.

Lord Yulan blinked for a few seconds.

“A human healer!” He exclaimed, “Since when did House Halen manage such a feat!”

“Since recently. She's under *my* employ. My personal retinue. She is not under the control of my father.” Serena took a breath. “She is also a Speaker, so be respectful.”

“A Speaker! She is so young!” Lord Yulan suddenly narrowed his eyes. “Serena, have you considered-”

“She is not a darkblade. I've verified it.”

“Where does she hail from!?”

“It's complicated, and we have more important matters to discuss. Can we move the conversation along, old man?”

Lord Yulan stared at Amelia for a little longer. It was rather awkward, so she gave him a small smile. “My deepest gratitude, young human, for the aid you have rendered upon me. House Yulan will not forget what has transpired here today...”

“You're welcome! I'm always happy to help Serena out!” Amelia exclaimed with a bigger smile. “Besides, this will help me get a raise,” she turned to look at Serena, oozing smugness as she took the opportunity. “Right, *Ren*?”

Oh dear! What a super-effective attack! Serena's cheeks bloomed with redness, and she looked thoroughly stricken with embarrassment! Success!

“You... you idiot! Don't call me that!”

“You're blushing!”

“So are you!”

“Ah! I forgot! Don’t look at me!” Amelia turned, hiding her flushed face from Serena again.

Lord Yulan looked between them for a few seconds. “It appears you’ve made a friend, Serena?”

“I...” Serena began, “Damn it! This is a conversation for another time. Look here, old man! This is what they were giving you.” She produced the tobacco pipe and vial of Dust, handing them to the bewildered Lord Yulan.

“This is... Dust, isn’t it?” he asked, turning the vial against the light.

“Yes.”

Lord Yulan looked around the room, taking in the mess. “How long have I been here?”

“About a year, your lift attendant told us. Some in the hotel appear to still be loyal to you. We were told it was the work of your dear *nephew*,

someone with the surname *San*.”

“That...” Lord Yulan stared off into space for a moment. “That bastard! I welcomed that snake back into the family! I still see he’s the same conniving son of a-” The old man caught himself, coughing into his hand awkwardly. “Apologies Serena, Speaker Thornheart. I’ve lost myself in my emotions.”

“No need, that bastard has welcomed the *Crimson Reapers* into the hotel. He seems to be working with them on some kind of smuggling activity. Could be weapons, could be drugs. He’s using your hotel in some way to hide or sell the goods. Also, the twerp seems to have instituted a segregationist policy in the hotel, something I took *particular* exception to.”

“Seven hells!” Lord Yulan exclaimed. “Where is he now!?”

Serena shrugged. “I don’t know. I caused a scene down at reception and demanded to see you. Forced my way here and then broke the elevator and blocked the stairs. I imagine it won’t be long till they try and force their way through.”

“Surely they won’t try and fight you?” He turned his eyes towards Amelia. “Fight you both? You’re both Speakers!”

“I don’t know what they’ll have planned, but it won’t be good. I suspect they have law enforcement under their thumb and will try and cause a scene to make it look bad for us. Frame this as a kidnapping or something...”

“Kidnapping!? What do you intend to do with me?”

“Get you out of here. There’s a squad from Centralis Intelligence following us. I’ll make contact and hand you over... and then...” Serena looked up as a smile formed on her face.

“You have that look on your face again, Serena,” Lord Yulan said.

“What look!?”

“... Nothing.”

“Tsk! Anyway, you old man, let’s get you out of here. Do you want to change first?”

“Yes, of course! I can’t be seen like this. One minute, ladies!” Lord Yulan jumped up with a sudden bout of energy and began rummaging in a wardrobe for some clothes. “I feel brilliant! What wonderful healing abilities you have mastered, young Speaker Thornheart!”

“You’re welcome!” Amelia grinned. She decided she very much liked being called *Speaker Thornheart*.

Lord Yulan stepped behind a paper screen and soon reappeared in a smart suit. “I’m ready, Serena. What now?”

“Can you still maintain the first aura?”

“Hmm...” Lord Yulan closed his eyes and after a moment his body began to glow with hues of red. “That was easier than I thought! It has been years since I last did this!”

“Excellent,” Serena strolled across the room, pulling down the shuttered blinds. Daylight flooded the bedroom and from beyond the window the streets of Kenhoro were sprawled out. The urban expanse was sprinkled with towering pagodas and in the distance Amelia could make out the triple steel lighthouses of the imperial docks.

Serena coated her marble katana with an orange aura before stabbing it through the window frame, cutting out the window in its entirety like a jigsaw piece. The window fell inwards, and Serena caught it and let it down gently.

A breeze filled the room, and paper began flapping all over. Amelia gulped nervously. Surely she didn’t mean...

“Ready?” Serena asked the room.

“How thrilling!” Exclaimed Lord Yulan, rolling his glowing red shoulders. “I feel young again!”

“Are you *crazy*!?” Amelia spluttered. “We’re going to *jump*!?” She tiptoed to the edge of the room and peered out. Her stomach twisted into knots as she felt a queasy feeling rising. They were maybe twenty floors up, and the people below looked like ants.

“What’s the problem?” Serena asked. “A jump like this is easy for a first-level aura or ward, right?”

“I’ve changed my mind,” Amelia said, “I’ve decided I very much prefer fighting and all that! Let’s go back the way we came and fight our way down!”

“Are you... scared of heights?”

“No! Yes! I don’t know! It just feels weird!”

“Have no fear, young Speaker! Look!” Lord Yulan appeared at the edge with them. “The outside seating is unoccupied! We can aim there!”

“I...” Amelia tried to desperately calm her frantic heart. “I... I can only do it if you hold my hand!” She cried out, causing Serena to open her eyes in shock.

“What? Why?”

“I can’t do it any other way! I’m too scared! I feel like crying!” Oh, now she had actually started to cry. She was trying her best! She could do it! She would be brave like Serena always was, confident and self-assured!

As long as Serena held her hand!

“You’re a very weird human, aren’t you?” Lord Yulan said, a sparkle in his eye. “Well, Serena? Your *friend* requests your assistance and I can’t keep my aura going all day!”

“... Fine. Fine!” Serena grabbed her hand, wrapping it in warmth and comfort. “Here. Don’t squeeze too tight! Remember to bend your legs when we land.”

“Oh, okay!” Amelia pushed down the knot in her throat. Everything would be okay as long as she held Serena’s hand.

“The wind will be loud as we fall. Oh, don’t scream or yell; it will draw more attention than we need.”

“O-okay!”

“Are you ready?”

“I... I think so!”

“Good. We’ll aim for the far side of the seating area. Old man, you aim for the side closest to us, alright?”

“You got it!” Lord Yulan rubbed his hands together eagerly.

“Amelia, in three?”

“Three?”

“Two!”

“Two!?”

“One! Jump!”

“Ah!”

They leapt from the building, and despite Serena’s stern instructions...

Amelia screamed.

Chapter Seventeen: Coffee Before The Storm

As they plummeted down, the wind roared in Serena's ears and Amelia's grip almost crushed her hand that was covered in second-level aura. Seven hells! The human was strong when she wanted to be! The ground rushed up to meet them and Serena smashed through a wooden table, denting the stone floor underneath and throwing up dust and splinters.

To her right, Amelia had somehow gone through the table head first, face-planting the stone floor. Her legs wiggled in the air and she was making weird whimpering noises. Serena removed her hand from Amelia's crushing grip and pulled the struggling human upwards by her ankle.

"That was amazing!" An upside-down Amelia exclaimed when her face appeared. "Can we do it again!? Oh my, the adrenaline rush! I feel wonderful!" Serena rolled her eyes and opened her hand, letting Amelia fall into a crumpled heap. At least the idiot was okay.

"Old man?" She called out, turning to see Lord Yulan clamber smoothly out of a bed of soil and plants. She wasn't sure how it was possible to look dignified in such a situation, but Lord Yulan managed it. He dusted his legs and adjusted his shoes before rubbing his knees.

"A little hard on my joints, but I still have it in me, Serena!" Lord Yulan's face broke out in a proud smile as he crossed his arms and straightened his posture. "These old horns still have some fight left in them! Hmm..." He narrowed his eyes at the pile of blond hair and limbs. "Is your human alright?"

“She’s fine,” answered Serena, climbing out of the wooden table. A crowd of market-goers had started to form. Amelia’s screaming certainly hadn’t helped reduce their attention.

“Dear, do you think they’re okay!?”

“Must be pretty skilled to survive a fall like that!”

“They didn’t fall, they jumped! I saw it!”

“Seven Hells! That’s Speaker Halen! The captain in the news!”

“Come on,” Serena said, helping Amelia stand. The trio pushed their way through the crowd, and after turning a few corners, they escaped from prying eyes. Behind them, the piercing sounds of whistles blown by the city guard could be heard. Serena guided the pair into a quieter part of the city before dipping into an empty cafe at the end of an alley. She shut the door behind them and turned the closed sign around.

Two young demons in work uniforms stood awkwardly behind the counter, watching Serena. One of them was casting a nervous look at her captain's uniform and marbled sword, while the other stared at her with wonder.

“It’s Captain Halen! The war hero!” The teenage demon spluttered. He gave a shoddy but enthusiastic salute. “It’s an honour to meet you! Bless the seven hells!”

“You are... students?” She asked, eyeing the both of them carefully.

“Yes, Captain! I’m trainee Yin, and this,” he elbowed his nervous-looking colleague, “Is trainee Meng! We’re second-years at the academy! You’re a legend amongst the officer staff, Captain!”

“Is that so? Well then, trainee Yin, would you be able to do me a favour?” The youthful face lit up as he beamed with sudden pride.

“Of course, Captain!”

“My friends and I require some privacy. Would you and trainee Meng make yourself scarce for the time being?”

“Y-Yes! We can do that!”

“Before you go, is there anyone else in the building?” Serena asked, noticing a door behind the two employees.

“No one else! The boss won’t be back until the end of the day.”

“Good. Now take this...” Serena fumbled about in the pockets of her uniform. She was looking for her family insignia but she had already given it out to the hotel employee. “Amelia,” she called out, “Do you have the Halen insignia on you?”

“Mmm! Of course! I’ll never take it off!”

“Well, take it off now. I need it.”

“Aww, alright.” Amelia pulled at her neck and removed the necklace she had fashioned from the insignia and a piece of string. Serena took it, pausing slightly at feeling how *warm* the metal was. Warm from Amelia’s body heat.

She cursed quietly. She needed to sort through this bizarre and unnatural attraction that was building. She let her eyes wander over the girl's face for a moment. Amelia was a friend, and that was all she needed to be. A beautiful and annoying friend... with soft pink lips that-

“Tsk! Idiot!” She muttered.

“I didn’t do anything!” Amelia protested, puffing her cheeks out.

“Not you,” she said, shaking her head. This time, she was the idiot for getting distracted and letting her mind think about such... inappropriate things.

“Trainee Yin. Take this and stand at the edge of the street. Hold it so it’s visible to the passing crowd. If you’re approached by somebody, ask them

if their accent is from Ichtaca, no matter what they sound like. If they answer yes, then point them to this cafe. Do you understand?"

"Understood, Captain!" Another shoddy salute.

"And sort your salute out, trainee. Like this," Serena saluted the youth with all the experience and practice of the seasoned captain she was. The boy looked like he could die happy.

"Yes, Captain! I'll practice all night!"

"Good, now go, the both of you."

After a pair of slightly-improved salutes, the two workers exited the shop and vanished from sight. Serena turned and inspected the room behind the work area. It was a storeroom filled with bags of beans and leaves. Satisfied they were alone in the building, she returned to the table and positioned herself so she could face the doorway.

"What's the Ichtaca thing about?" Amelia asked.

"An old intelligence trick for two agents to identify if they're both part of Centralis Intelligence," Serena explained, "It's not really used anymore as the war has forced intelligence techniques to become more sophisticated. However, I know there's an intelligence group monitoring us, and they know I know, it should be good enough."

She was overdue for a refresher course. New cryptographic methods had been invented, and some ships now had dedicated cryptographers to work alongside the sensors and communications officer. The only reason the *Vengeance* hadn't had its protocols modernised already was because it filled a unique role in the navy and did not participate in normal fleet operations.

"Why would Centralis be monitoring you?" Lord Yulan asked, "Because of the ship?"

"Because of this one," she gestured to Amelia who gave a small shrug. "Our meeting was unexpected and she entered a contract with me before I could

run things through the house proper. You can imagine why a human Speaker that specialises in healing is going to cause a few waves.”

“That is most unusual. I thought Cascadia had banned humans from the military. Even before I was bedridden they were blaring warnings throughout the city to be aware of human spies in the demon districts.” Lord Yulan turned towards Amelia, “Where do you hail from?”

“Karligard.” Serena answered before Amelia could say anything. “She’s a talented healer and has spent most her time travelling, not wanting to be sucked into the church’s grip. She was looking to settle down and I made an offer. I’m sure you can understand why.”

Lord Yulan nodded, seemingly satisfied with the explanation. Serena didn’t like lying to the old man but it was too dangerous to share the truth of the situation.

“Also, she’s not part of the military. Remember, she’s part of my personal retinue. She’s not in the chain of command.” Serena explained, making sure to drive the point home. As important as it was for Amelia to understand her place in the world it was equally important for everyone else to understand where she stood.

“I see,” Lord Yulan rubbed his chin thoughtfully before placing his hands on the table and standing up. “Would anybody like some coffee? Looks like this place has quite the collection.”

“You seem awfully relaxed,” she said, “Considering everything that just happened.”

“Oh, I’m thoroughly *furious*, but if it’s true that I’ve been bedridden for a year, then that means I’ve gone an entire year without coffee! This is a problem that I endeavour to fix immediately!” Lord Yulan began opening some cans and sniffing their contents. “Some good variety here! We have some Yameni beans and even some from Shiloh! If a little cafe like this has Shiloh beans then they must of fixed their processing issues they were having.”

“Do they have anything from Jimar?” Serena asked. A cup of coffee did seem appropriate, and it had been a while since she had tasted anything other than military-rationed coffee onboard the ship. Serena generally consumed the same things as the rest of the crew, with the only exception being an extra portion of sardis here and there.

“Let’s see...” Lord Yulan mumbled as he investigated further, “Ah! Here we go! What brand is this... Jimar Gold? Sounds familiar...”

“That’s a good one,” she said, perking up. “That’s what we used to serve you when you visited us at home.” She started to get up but stopped herself. It was better she kept an eye on the front of the shop. “Amelia, would you mind helping Lord Yulan grind some beans?”

“Okay! But I want a cup too!” Amelia bounced up and began helping Lord Yulan prepare three cups of coffee.

“So...” Serena said, “Why did you never share anything about this nephew?”

“Well, he *was* estranged,” Lord Yulan grumbled as he poured beans into a hand grinder, “He always had a selfish personality but I was always amenable to the idea of him working in the hotel. I figured a career servicing others would help sort him out. It seemed to be working too. Speaker Thornheart, my dear, would you put that kettle on?”

“Sure! You can just call me Amelia if you want!” Amelia said with a grin. “Uh, how do I turn this on?”

“It’s a gas stove, turn that knob, yes, that one. Turn that and use one of those matches to light it.” Instructed Lord Yulan before turning back to the topic at hand. “So the job seemed to be helping him, but then we had a tremendous... *snake* of a woman stay in the hotel. Some trumped up daughter of a Fengra Highlord. Well... the boy fell head over heels for her.”

“What was her name?” Serena asked.

“Haneul was her name. Haneul San. Her father was Manwese, and her mother was Ainese, hence her surname. She was ambitious and manipulative. I could see it from the start. She was using him to get to the hotel. I tried to get the man to see reason, but he always had a stubborn pair of horns.” Lord Yulan put the ground coffee in a coffee press and added hot water. A pleasant mouthwatering aroma filled the room.

“That smells *amazing*! Mmm!” Said Amelia, “I’ve never had coffee like this before!”

“See if they have any snacks around there, dear Amelia?” Lord Yulan gestured to the other end of the work area. “Any biscuits or small cakes will be fine! Anyway,” he turned back towards Serena, “Eventually the arguments got so bad I estranged the lad. He ran off to Fengra with his bride-to-be. I didn’t hear from him for the next fifteen years until he reappeared.”

“He seemed to have turned a new leaf. Haneul had died, and his Ainese family didn’t want much to do with him. I took it at face value, but now I wonder if that was all a lie...” Lord Yulan shrugged and began pouring out three cups of coffee. “I became weaker and weaker as the weeks went on. He helped get me treatment and while each vial of medicine seemed to help at first, I would become even worse afterwards. Now I realise he was just feeding me more Dust.”

“Dust and some kind of poison to wear away at your constitution.” Serena pointed out.

“I suppose so. Ah, excellent work, Amelia.” The blonde-haired girl reappeared with a bundle of wrapped biscuits and cakes. “On the table, if you could.” Amelia dumped everything onto the table. A dozen and a half packets of paper-wrapped biscuits and cakes formed a tempting pile.

“Ooh,” Amelia said, examining one of the biscuits. “Shortbread!”

Lord Yulan brought three cups to their table, gently placing them down. The steamy aroma made the atmosphere rather pleasant, and for a moment Serena took the time to relax and think of simpler times.

“Feels like we’re at House Halen, doesn’t it?” Lord Yulan asked, sipping from his cup. “Oh, how I’ve missed that taste.”

“Wow, it’s... so bitter!” Amelia exclaimed, scrunching up her nose.

“You get used to it,” Serena said with a smile. Everyone thought Jimari coffee was too bitter at first, and then they ask for another one and then another and soon it becomes their standard to measure all other coffees from. “Centralis cut coffee exports to the federation and their allies, sanctions for the human support to the republic,” she said to Lord Yulan, “So coffee has become cheaper within the empire”.

“I bet they didn’t like that...” Lord Yulan grumbled, sipping his coffee. The trio of them sat in silence drinking their coffee. After a minute Amelia piped up.

“So... what’s this darkblade thing everyone keeps thinking I am?”

“Ack!” Lord Yulan spluttered his coffee. “Ahem,” he said, using a napkin to clean himself. “You don’t know? Surely even in Karligrad those heretics have their grubby little fingers poking and prodding?” Amelia looked at Lord Yulan, and then at Serena with eyes that said *help me*.

“Darkblades are followers of *Anathema*, the chaos god whose armies were defeated by the Empress so long ago,” Serena said, coming to Amelia’s aid. “They are also called *lifecheaters* as they use heretical magic to unnaturally extend their lives. The upper echelons of their group have a way of transferring their souls into another body, which makes them hard to track and kill.”

Serena had originally thought Amelia was a darkblade, after she had so candidly admitted to being transported into a different body. Thankfully the truth-teller had helped calm things down, although she had panicked and almost Spoken on the ship. Of course, now she knew Amelia better, she was certain that no one this idiotic could be a part of that organization.

“I see...” Amelia said, looking thoughtful. “What’s their objective?”

“To win the war that they lost so long ago,” Serena said, shrugging. “To try and replicate the powers of Empress Elana.”

“Powers?”

“The Empress is immortal, forever young. She is powerful enough to ascend into the realm of godhood if she wants to. However, she stays here, guiding demonkind and Cascadia to prosperity.”

“Wow! I bet she’s really pretty! I can imagine her now...”

“Oh?” Serena said with a smile, “And what do you imagine Empress Elana, a shard of infinity, to look like?”

“You know... tall, with excellent posture. Horns like this,” Amelia motioned a familiar shape of horns on her head, “Black hair like this,” Amelia placed her hand palm down at a familiar level of hair. “Pretty crimson eyes that you could get lost in. Bet she struts about giving orders all the time as well.”

Serena felt herself grow hot. This damn idiot was really pushing her luck. She would definitely find a way to punish this kind of behaviour. After all, Amelia wasn’t subtle, and Serena was finding it harder and harder too...

Resist.

She sighed. “Well, look over there; that’s a painting of her.” She gestured to the wall where a depiction of the Empress stood, leaning over a table with several other subordinates looking at a map of the Eastern Terra Firma.

“That’s her!?” Amelia jumped up to examine the painting. “She looks... so normal! I thought her horns would be huge! I was right about the black hair, though!”

“Hmm...” Lord Yulan leaned in, reading the imperial tag on the painting. “Looks like this was three hundred years ago, when she came here to contain the monster waves after the Samino civil war. She takes a different form now.”

“She takes a different form?” Amelia turned, eyeing Lord Yulan in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Not only is she immortal, but our divine empress can change her appearance at will. She does so often, matching her figure to the people of the lands she visits. It is a generous and tactful reminder that our Elana embodies all of demonkind.”

“That... that...” Amelia waved her arm about... “That’s crazy! Does she actually change form? It’s not illusion magic?”

“Not illusion magic, my dear,” Lord Yulan said, shaking his head, “After she communed the Third Word, over the next few centuries, she communed even greater powers. It would be strange if she *couldn’t* change her form.”

“There’s also a rumour,” Serena said, jumping in, “That she semi-often visits random parts of the empire—a pub here, an inn there—in full disguise that no one can see through or detect”.

“It’s not just a rumour,” Lord Yulan said, “Cascadian officials have made enough comments about those activities that it’s more considered an *open secret* than a rumour.”

“So she could be anyone!? At any time?” Amelia asked, eyes open in surprise.

“That’s right,” Serena said, “This is why you need proper etiquette lessons. I don’t want you to be impolite to that bartender who is actually our divine deity on her night out! Ha!”

“Fine! I’ll take them seriously!” Amelia protested. “So what does she actually look like? Her original form?”

“Hmm...” Lord Yulan said, “She was originally born in Celle, and like all people of Cerulean heritage she would have...” His eyes suddenly narrowed as he looked at Amelia, “Golden hair and blue eyes. Just like you...”

A moment of silence enveloped the trio as Amelia looked more and more awkward.

“Don’t worry,” Serena said, “I’ve long since decided that if this idiot is the Empress in disguise then all hope is lost and we should surrender now.”

“Hey!” Amelia protested, “I’m very capable when I need to be!” Her cheeks were puffed out in that way that Serena had come to find very cute. Suddenly she wanted to ruffle that silky blonde hair. Messing Amelia’s hair up so it took on the appearance of bed hair did... strange things to Serena’s mind.

“The problem here is when you’re not capable, you’re a walking disaster!” She said, enjoying pushing the smug human’s buttons a little more.

“Well then!” Amelia huffed, hands on hips, “I *cannot* wait for our next martial arts lesson. I think it’s time I started to get serious! Hmm!? How about I tie you up like a knot and leave you hanging from the mast! Bet I can do it!”

“Idiot. If anyone’s tying anyone up, it’s me!” Serena glared at Amelia who for some reason gave a strange giggle and started to blush.

“Well, if you say so...” Amelia said quietly.

“You...” Serena trailed off, the blushing human suddenly made her feel like blushing. Damn it!

“Well I must say Serena,” Lord Yulan intoned smoothly, “I am thoroughly delighted to see you’ve made a friend you can be comfortable with. You used to be so cold and now your hearts warmed up, hasn’t it?”

“Tsk! Stop speaking nonsense old man,” Serena mumbled, looking to the side. After a moment, she looked back to see Amelia grinning smugly at her and so she was forced to look away again! Damn it, now she looked like a nervous idiot!

“You two lock horns like an old married couple. How envious I am of your youthful energy!” Lord Yulan cried out in an exaggerated manner. “Alas! What can an old set of bones like me do but guide the younger generations into happiness?”

“I think we get on great!” Amelia mused, “Serena pretends to be this serious, scary captain, but she actually has a big soft side! That’s my favourite part!”

“Stop saying unnecessary things... the both of you,” Serena muttered, feeling herself blushing even more. How was she supposed to deal with this two-sided attack!

Luckily, she was saved by a pair of figures entering the doorway. A pair of demons with their faces shrouded in masks stepped through. As the door swung open, one of them raised the insignia she had given the employee. “Is this yours?”

Serena stood up, gripping her marble sword. She stood in between the two groups. The demon that spoke carried a long hafted mace in his other hand, while his partner - who had a womanly figure - carried a short sword and shield. She could sense their aether frothing inside them and reflexively spooled up her own.

“Who are you?” She asked, already suspecting the answer. With her free hand she gestured behind her the military hand signals. *Prepare. Fight.* She didn’t know if either of them would understand. Another thing to teach Amelia.

“We found this hidden in the sock of a whimpering little rat,” the man said, dropping the insignia on the floor. “It was a nice plan you made, Captain Halen. Don’t worry; we’ve dealt with those interfering agents hovering about. Also,” the man removed his mask, revealing a thin mouth with scars running up both cheeks, forming a morbid smile. “We found a pair of teenagers at the end of this alley. They were so *eager* to help.”

Serena blinked, trying to stay calm. “Who are you?” She asked again.

“Does it matter? Can we just get started?” Said the female demon in annoyance, gripping her short sword tighter. Yellow aura spread across her body and her weapons. The male demon did the same, his long mace glowing yellow.

It was third-level aura, and skillfully done too.

Which meant...

“Amelia!” She yelled, not taking her eyes off the pair in front. “Ward Yulan! Now!” Serena forced her aura to match, glowing yellow.

“**Salinas,**” Spoke the man.

“**Taruna,**” Spoke the woman.

And everything exploded.

Chapter Eighteen: Mutual Confession

Serena was thrown back, smashing through the wall into the building beyond. Despite being wrapped in yellow-aura the shock caused her to bite through her tongue. She spat blood, raising an arm to protect herself as the ceiling collapsed on her. She hurried the Word to form, layering the aether upon itself, folding it into the required structure for communion with *Narean*.

Surprisingly, she found it formed with surprising *obedience*. Speaking *Narean* always included a brief battle of will, a demonstration that the Speaker still possessed the power and determination to demand the abilities of the demonic sword god. This time, *Narean* seemed almost *eager* to assist. Was this because she was so much stronger after crossing the boundary into blue-aura? Or did Amelia's ward help in some way?

Despite the aether going wild outside, and the wood and stone forming into sharp points that tried to piece her through, Serena was resolute. She wouldn't allow the skills of *Salinas*, the Earthlord, to cut her so easily.

“Narean.”

Her vision darkened for a moment and she felt like she had just been turned upside down as the power of the sword god flowed into her. Her stored aether was expelled forcefully - blowing away the rubble and the incoming attacks - and was replaced by the clean and pure aether from the divine realm. She slipped easily - almost too easily - into the fourth-level, her body glowing softly with green light. Hellfire ignited on her horns and the familiar tail formed from the base of her spine, a fifth limb she would make full use of.

She leapt back into the ruined cafe, swinging the marbled sword that she had never let go of. A testament to her training and instincts. The man with the scarred face formed shells of stone and earth that he flung at her at speeds that would blow apart any lesser warrior. She cut through one, two then deflected another before being intercepted by the female demon who swung her shield, throwing Serena towards the wall.

Serena didn't smash through, pulsing the aether strongly enough to produce enough of an anti-gravity effect to slow down. She cast a wary eye at the environment, taking in as much information as her accelerated mind could. The man stayed at the back, using his long-hafted mace as a staff, forming earth attacks that floated in a semi-circle above his head. The masked woman stood between them, her shield and short sword glowing green.

"An earthlord and a paladin," she said, maintaining awareness of her surroundings. Where was Amelia? Lord Yulan? "What secret lies in Highguard that you'll Speak to protect?"

They didn't respond and the man mumbled something under his breath. The wind picked up and a sandstorm engulfed the cafe, blinding her vision. No matter, Serena didn't need vision to fight. She closed her eyes and relied on her aether senses to identify attacks.

The woman unleashed a flurry of attacks on her, forcing Serena to adjust her stance to avoid being pushed back. She swung her katana in response, parrying and striking where she could. She couldn't afford to allow the paladin to get under her range, for they were experts in close-quarter combat.

Her senses detected the movement of aether in the rubble near her, and blades of stone and wood struck out, seeking to strike through her blind spots. Serena deflected or dodged these attacks, her senses giving her just enough warning. She put her tail of hellfire to work, striking out in opportune moments or defending against an attack that slipped through her defence.

"Stubborn," the woman said through gritted teeth. The paladin jumped back and raised her sword. "*Turana's Zeal!*" she yelled, and the rest of the

building's upper floors were blasted away as a bolt of red lightning struck the shortsword, wrapping it in crackling energy. Even though her eyes were closed, the lightning could be seen through her eyelids. In her senses, the aether was flowing around the sword like a storm.

Her instincts warned her of the new danger and she pushed her aether further, trying to breach the boundary into the next level. It wasn't easy, and the insurmountable wall that she had crossed only once before held firm. Undeterred, she threw her aether against it, chipping away at the metaphysical boundary as she sought new power. Surprisingly, *Narean* didn't appear to add any resistance like he usually would.

The pair attacked again. The man had changed tactics and instead of large shells of earth was favouring dozens upon dozens of smaller bullets. Too many for her to dodge. Each one could maim or kill a first-level warrior but as a hint of blue appeared within Serena's aura they only bruised her.

The woman's empowered short sword was the real problem, and it chipped Serena's marbled katana with every swing. Thankfully the speed hadn't increased, only the power. With each collision, lightning struck out from the point of impact, hitting the surroundings randomly.

"Hurry up," growled the man. "He'll arrive soon. Kill her!"

"Fucking trying," the woman spat between strikes. "Bitch's aura is tough." The woman tried to bash Serena again, but just as her foot stepped forward to shift the weight into the attack, Serena struck out with her hellfire tail knocking the woman momentarily off balance.

She swung as hard as she could, ignoring the flurry of bullets striking her. She missed the woman's neck but was able to cut through the skin of the shoulder, giving her a light wound. Damn paladins! This was the first time she'd fought one properly, and she found it true what she had been told; they could fight at a level above their aura. They were a tough nut to crack.

"Ah!" The woman backed away, recovering her stance. "Stop fucking about with magic and get in here," she commanded the man, who swore and with a spoken spell covered his body in earthen armour. Stone flowed up his

long-hafted mace and formed menacing spikes at the end. He approached cautiously as Serena tightened her grip and planted her feet.

How many seconds had passed since she Spoke? The heightened senses meant time slowed down for Speakers. They could fight, speak and comprehend faster than normal. Ten seconds? A dozen?

Something was coming, pushing its way through the rubble. A familiar aether signature.

Amelia.

Serena deflected a swung mace aiming to take her head off, while the woman's short sword cut her side. Serena kicked out, striking with her tail and twisting her katana to cut the man's armour. The frantic assault was beyond her current capabilities but as the wounds built up she felt that internal wall breakdown and her aura took on more and more blue.

"Bitch going blue," grumbled the woman as the paladin's aether flared and she unleashed a series of strikes that Serena couldn't fully defend against. The sword cut her and the woman flared her aether again and a bolt of lightning caused Serena's body to tense momentarily. Before she could recover, the mace slammed into her side, throwing her across the room.

She spat blood as she sensed a familiar aether signature standing over her.

"Is *Narean* behaving?" Amelia asked, head tilted. Warmth erupted throughout her body as Amelia healed her. Then her body glowed in hues of silver and gold as some kind of ward wrapped itself around her. Serena opened her eyes to find the sandstorm had died down. The cafe looked like a desert, and Amelia was looking at her with a concerned expression. The human looked no different than a minute ago.

"Amelia! Speak! They're a paladin and an earthlord! Get-" The earthlord appeared behind Amelia, swinging his massive mace with two hands against her head. The woman struck at Amelia's neck, the red lightening crackling with power. Serena leapt up, feeling her aether blast through the barrier as she stepped into the world of blue. She swung towards the woman

in desperation, but the huge mace slammed into Amelia's head and at the same time the woman's shortsword reached the delicate neck and-

Nothing.

"Oh?" Amelia said softly as the heavy weapon shattered against her head, ruffling her golden hair. "What's this?" She mumbled, the shortsword was held in her grip, its red lightning cracking uselessly. "*Turana's Zeal*

, is it? How nostalgic..." The woman tried to pull the sword free but Amelia's hand didn't budge an inch. Then - almost too fast for Serena to see - the human grabbed the wrists of both of the enemies.

"Amelia!" Serena exclaimed, "How...?"

"I've already Spoken," she said plainly. "Took a few seconds as I wanted to do it quietly. No point blasting away half the street." She turned a head towards Serena, ignoring the armoured first slamming into her head again and again. "Lord Yulan's fine, by the way. Made sure to get him safe. As for these two..." Amelia's eyes darkened, and Serena saw behind those eyes that glowed golden; there was a background of crimson.

It was terrifyingly beautiful.

"It's *Salinas* and *Turana*, then?" Amelia asked, her voice lacking its usual clumsy cheerfulness. The two demons cried out in pain as an audible snap came from their wrists. Amelia had broken them. "Did you fools not hear my warning?"

"Gah! Bitch! I don't even know you!" gasped the woman, as she tried to free herself.

"Not *you*," snapped Amelia. "I'll ask again... *did you not hear my warning?*" Serena involuntarily gulped. Amelia used some kind of spell when she asked that question. Something rippled in the aetherfield, and for the first time, she became aware of something else, another layer that formed underneath the aether. Whatever it was, it reacted strongly to Amelia's words.

The woman suddenly spewed blood from her mouth. She screamed in agony as her skin cracked and poured blood and aether. “*Turana!* Why!” she cried. The woman’s aura violently shifted from green to yellow, then it dimmed to orange and finally red before vanishing entirely. The woman was unconscious and entirely defenceless.

What in the seven hells had just happened? Serena’s mind raced at the scene before her. Did Amelia just... expel a Word from someone? She swallowed nervously. Amelia had said she had Spoken, but to do this... had she Spoken only one word? Spoken only the First Word?

“Amelia-” she began, interrupted by the sudden cry from the man.

“*Salinas!* I give you my soul! Bestow upon me the means to escape!” The scarred man roared.

For a moment, nothing happened.

“What an ambitious demon god you are...” Amelia mumbled as power and aether erupted from the man who ripped his arm away, leaving a bloodied hand behind.

The earth bent and buckled underneath their feet and then *opened*. The surrounding buildings above collapsed upon them, accelerated by some gravity spell. It slammed into the group, and they were flung down into the darkness. Serena spun this way and that before something reached out and pulled her close.

“Hold on!” Amelia yelled, pulling her into an embrace. Aether flowed about them as some kind of defensive spell was cast, and they slammed into the ground. As the building fell upon them, her ears were bombarded with a violent array of noise and sound, but Amelia’s magic formed an invulnerable pocket.

And then, as quickly as it happened, it all stopped.

Silence.

Serena could hear her rapid heartbeat in her ears, she could hear her fast breath. Amelia lay in her embrace, her face nested in Serena's chest. Slow, delicate breaths came from the human. For a few moments, all Serena listened to were the sounds of their breathing. Slowly, the awkwardness of the situation grew on her as the continued intimacy threatened to make her blush.

“G-get off me, idiot!”

“Mmm... so comfy,” Amelia mumbled, rubbing her head a bit, before thankfully pulling away with a familiar smug grin. “You alright?” she asked, as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

“I think so...” Serena looked at Amelia, who was sitting there looking nonchalant. The glow from her body gave her enough light to make out their cramped surroundings. “So... you can hide the aether release? I didn’t sense you Speaking.”

“Well,” Amelia looked down at her thumbs, playing with them nervously. “I only recently remembered how to do it... it’s not that big of a deal, right?”

“It’s rare, but not impossibly so,” Serena said. “The grandmaster at the academy I learned the sword could do it. I think some Highlords and most Greatlords can Speak silently.” She sat up and examined the human, noting the previously golden eyes with a hint of crimson had returned to their normal shining blue.

That was interesting. All Speakers underwent some physical change when Speaking the First Word. Serena embraced hellfire when she Spoke *Narean* but she had known another Speaker who Spoke the same Word but would instead be covered with a chilling frost.

As for Amelia, those golden crimson eyes had looked a little like demon eyes. It seemed the human's disposition towards demonkind had a knock-on effect on her appearance.

All the more reason to get her citizenship as soon as possible and protect her under Cascadia’s watch. If the human nations found out that the

physical traits of demons had corrupted *Aseco's* gold, armies would march and navies would sail.

“Can I ask you something else?” She asked Amelia.

“I suppose so...” Amelia muttered, “... but I can't promise I'll answer.”

“What did you do to that *Turana* Speaker?” She ran the scene in her mind again. It was something she had never seen before. It wasn't something she could just let go either. Answers were needed.

“I...” Amelia opened her mouth and then closed it. She tried again to no avail. A few seconds later and Serena could see her mouth start to quiver and then...

“Are you... crying?” She asked, unsure of what to do.

“I can't keep pretending! I never asked to be like this!” Amelia cried out, blubbering the words through a sudden torrent of tears. “I never asked to be Speaker! I didn't-” Amelia sniffed and wiped her eyes as best she could. “I didn't think it was *real*!” She sobbed into her hands.

Serena didn't understand what Amelia was saying, but seeing her friend cry so intensely caused a pang of sympathy. She wasn't sure exactly what was troubling Amelia, so she shuffled closer and put an arm around her. Amelia responded, tilting her body and head to rest against her chest as she cried.

“What do you mean?” She asked, “What didn't you think was real?”

Amelia was quiet before the answer came, almost whispered. “Speaking...”

“Speaking?”

“It was just a *game* where I came from! Magic wasn't real! Aether wasn't real! We... we...” Amelia's hands gestured aimlessly, “We just *pretended*. For entertainment!”

Serena frowned at that. A game? Entertainment?

“I don’t understand, how can you Speak without aether?”

“We didn’t Speak! The idea of Speaking was just an abstract concept!” Amelia sniffed, calming down slightly. “Imagine... umm... are there any military games you teach the trainees to prepare them for... battle?”

“There is... Captain’s Chess. It’s used to teach the basics of fleet command,” Serena said, thinking of the popular academy game. Variations of it were dominant in civilian life, and there were even grand competitions hosted every year.

“Right! I don’t know how it’s played, but imagine each player picks a character that they have as their captain, right? Some would give bonuses to fleet movement, some would give more damage from shellfire?”

“I can imagine that...” Serena said. What Amelia had described wasn’t all that different from the real thing.

“Alright, so imagine as you win games, you win points that you can spend to upgrade your fleet and captain permanently, which would carry over into all the games you played?”

“That would be most unfair, it-”

“Just *imagine!*” Amelia exclaimed, lifting her head and looking at Serena with glistening blue eyes, dirt and tears covering her cheeks.

“I... understand the concept.”

“Okay, so there’s this game, but you’re not actually a captain, and you don’t actually have a real fleet; the game and its rules just represent it, right?”

“Right.”

“Now imagine the last thing you remember is you’re playing a game, with your fleet and captain that you’ve spent thousands of games spending points making really strong. Imagine you’re doing that, and the next thing you know, you’re somehow thrown into a different world, a different *realm*

where suddenly you've become that captain, and you have all the abilities and strength of your captain character you upgraded!"

Serena opened her mouth and then closed it. She looked at Amelia with a questioning gaze. "Is that... what happened to you?" She asked softly. Amelia nodded, the movement prompting another tear to roll down her cheek.

"Yes... only my game wasn't about captains and ships. It was about Speaking! Spending points so that my character which I *designed*," Amelia gestured to her body, "To look like this, to learn all kinds of Words. I don't know how it happened but somehow I'm in the body of my character and I'm pretty sure I have all the abilities I gave her!" Amelia sniffed, "And I'm so scared! I have all this power and I'm afraid to use it! I could hurt so many people without meaning to!" Amelia started crying again, so Serena pulled her into a desperate hug.

It didn't make complete sense, but suddenly a significant part of the puzzle had fallen into place. An impossible human with impossible healing powers. It shouldn't have been possible, but it was. A game that had trained her through *entertainment* rather than the years and decades of determination and suffering it took most others.

"This... isn't a game," Serena said softly, running a hand through Amelia's golden hair. "I'm not a character you played with... right?"

"No," Amelia awkwardly shook her head, which was pressed into her chest. "Only the Speaking thing and the name of the gods are familiar. Everything else... flying ships, the empire, floating islands, and moon crystals are completely new..."

"I see..." They sat in silence for a moment as Serena ran the conversation they just had through her head several times. She didn't want to bombard Amelia with questions but...

"How many Words did your character learn?" She asked quietly.

"I don't know... most of them, I suppose."

Most of them! Serena felt her eyes go wide and took a deep breath. “You know... most of the human Words?”

“No...”

“No?”

“My character didn’t always look like this,” Amelia said, pulling away and holding out her blond hair. “Before I used to play with a character that was a demonic mage. In the years I spent in the hospital, I must have put in thousands upon thousands of hours training her up! She knew... basically all of the demon Words...” Amelia fiddled with her hair, “For a joke I made my character look like this, and then I became her but... I feel that I can still Speak all the demon words... if I wanted to.”

Serena quietly absorbed this information. She thought back to a conversation between her and Anathor. A blessing from the gods couldn't make someone a Speaker, but what if Amelia had received a blessing from an entity greater than the gods? There were myths, talked about only half-seriously, that spoke of *things* living in the mists, and other realms of unimaginable power.

Amelia kept her eyes low, seemingly afraid to meet Serena’s. “You don’t... hate me, do you?” She whispered.

“Why would I hate you?”

“Because I kept this from you... kept it hidden. Speaking is such a big deal here and look at how everyone reacts when they find out I can speak just *one Word*. I’m sorry...” Amelia trailed, “I didn’t want to scare you off! I really like being around you, and I don’t want that to change...”

Serena sighed, and pulled Amelia closer. “I don’t hate you, idiot.” Serena rested her head against the top of Amelia’s. “I’m glad we have somewhat of an explanation. It doesn’t answer everything, but I don’t think you’re lying. Besides, I like you being around as well...”

“Really?” Came a small voice.

“You’re an annoying idiot, but you’re my annoying idiot,” Serena ruffled the golden hair. “I admit, I’m tired of playing the obedient daughter or the strict captain all the time. I can’t remember when I could last speak so comfortably to someone, but somehow I can do that with you.”

“So, can I stay with you? Is the contract still valid?”

“Of course, I swear on my horns.”

“Then... can I... get a raise?”

“Pfft!” They both laughed at that, a much-needed release. “Once we speak to my father, we can sort something out,” Serena explained. “So, would you be able to explain what you did to that *Turana* bitch? It felt like you used some power when you asked her a question, and then she lost all her abilities.”

“I um... last time when you fought Korvus and *Narean* took control, I kinda threatened them all...”

“Threatened who?”

“The demon gods... told them to behave themselves around you.”

“Please tell me you’re joking,” Serena said, “Because that’s insane”.

“Then I’m insane,” came the reply. “Although, I only yelled a bit at the lesser gods. They’re really not that tough, just arrogant children flailing about trying to get the higher god’s attention.”

A few seconds passed as Serena digested that information. “When you talked about the warning earlier, I felt something ripple, but it was weird. It was like there was something underpinning the aetherfield that reacted.”

“I think that’s the mistlands. I spoke to *Turana* directly, so I had to send my words through the mists to reach his realm. At least, that’s what I feel I did on an instinctive level. I don’t have that much comprehension of how it all works, you know? When a trainee moves their fleet to attack in a game of

Captain's Chess that wouldn't give them much understanding of what it's like to actually command a fleet, right?"

"Right..." So what she had felt was the mists themselves. Was it because she had finally reached blue-level aura again? Serena realised she was idly stroking Amelia's hair. So soft. "You really spoke to *Turana* directly? A god?"

"Yeah, and did you see how he ran away from his vessel with his tail tucked behind his legs?"

"I did... speaking of! Where are they!" She had forgotten entirely about her adversaries!

"They fled, I thought about stopping them but..." Amelia trailed off.

"But?"

"But I was so comfortable... being held by you."

Serena felt heat rise in her cheeks. Well, if Amelia was spilling everything out it might as well be time to address the arcwhale in the room.

"Amelia... how do you feel... about me?" She asked cautiously, feeling her heartbeat speed up and Amelia reflexively tense. The human was quiet for a dozen seconds before she finally answered.

"... Isn't it obvious?" She whispered.

"Amelia, I'm a demon. You're a human... I think."

"I told you when we first met, didn't I? I like demons."

So she had. Serena suddenly found herself smiling. Why was she suddenly so happy? Damn it, she knew why. She knew exactly why. She opened her mouth to say something. What should she say? What would the right thing be to do? Should she prioritise House Halen, or herself?

"I-" She began.

“It doesn’t matter what you say, my feelings aren’t going away. And besides...” Amelia raised her head and met her eyes. The human’s cheeks were so red and hot Serena could probably fry an egg on them. “Besides, I saw you checking out my arse when I was doing my *katas*. So don’t pretend it’s not mutual... unless it really isn’t, alright?”

She had been caught! “I...” She struggled to meet Amelia’s eyes. Where had the human gotten this confidence!? “I suppose...” she began, her eyes flickering to Amelia’s pink lips. “I suppose it is... mutual.” She whispered, and Amelia broke out with the happiest expression Serena had ever seen on anyone ever.

“That’s the best thing you could have said! So...” Amelia’s eyes flickered awkwardly downwards, towards Serena’s lips. “Umm... should we...” Amelia suddenly looked bashful, struggling to meet Serena’s eyes. “You know...” she muttered, looking to the side.

Serena swallowed nervously, her heart pounding so loud in her ears that she could barely hear what Amelia was saying. She didn’t need to hear her, she could see her intention. Serena had told herself she needed to address her feelings and her attraction for this human.

And that was exactly what she was doing.

Serena reached out, wrapping a hand around the back of Amelia’s head. “Come here, idiot,” she whispered, pulling her close.

Until their lips met.

Chapter Nineteen: The Greatlord of Kenhoro

Amelia gripped the handhold Serena had created and pulled herself up before seeking the next one. Serena was just in front, using her magic to create little holes in the earth and stone. Together they ascended up the hole the *Salinas* Speaker had desperately created to escape.

Amelia could have jumped out easily, or used earth magic herself to bring the both of them to the surface. Instead, she was glad they had silently agreed to this slow ascent. It gave each of them valuable time to think and Amelia had plenty to think about.

Her mind raced between the sheer embarrassment of breaking down and crying in front of Serena, and the celebratory feeling of delight and satisfaction she felt over the most amazing kiss anyone had ever experienced!

Best of all, Serena had initiated! Nothing else could have assured Amelia her feelings were reciprocated as much as Serena's hand wrapping around her head and pulling her in so gently and so boldly!

As she adjusted her limbs into the next set of handholds, Amelia ran her tongue over her lips. She could still feel that soft, sweet and yet somehow firm pressure from Serena's lips. A phantom feeling of the kiss lay at the edge of her senses and that alone caused warmth and joy to ripple through her heart. If it were possible, she would have quite literally melted into a puddle of bliss.

Luckily she hadn't melted, although if she had she would just have healed herself back up! The one thing she couldn't heal away was the lingering

embarrassment of spilling everything in such an ugly way. The emotional outburst took Amelia by surprise, and she hadn't realised quite how scared she was of everything, despite how safe and powerful she was.

Most of all, she had been terrified of Serena being scared of her. She dreaded to imagine those crimson eyes looking at her in fear or apprehension. How happy she was when those eyes looked at her with only surprise and sympathy and in the end, when their lips broke apart, with desire.

Amelia ran the memory of the kiss over and over again in her head as she ascended the last few meters out of the hole towards the powerful beings that had been waiting for them all this time.

Serena swallowed nervously. Clenching her fist against an open palm, she bowed deeply to the trio, who were waiting for them. She did not recognise two of them, but the third was unmistakable. Dressed in traditional silk Manwese clothing, the man hovered above the sandy cafe floor, crackling with blue energy that saturated the atmosphere with tension. Lei Gong the Stormlord, Greatlord and ruler of Kenhoro had arrived.

"Stormlord," she began, using the man's preferred title while trying to keep her voice at the right tone. "I apologise for this disturbance that has befallen your city. May I explain what has happened here?" Serena stayed bowed, waiting for the reply.

"Look at this Lord-prospect!" Exclaimed one of the men she did not recognise. He had an arrogant posture and a long white beard. His clothes were expensive, but his hands were those of a fighter. "Do they not teach manners over in the Three Sisters? Hrmph! I told you, a native would not have caused this!"

"You are correct, Highlord Qiang," said the other man, who was unknown to her. He had a noticeably slim build, sharp features, and narrow eyes. A single thick horn extruded from his forehead to the base of his skull,

forming a kind of mohawk. “This one is Highlord Halen’s daughter? Is that correct?”

“Correct,” uttered Serena, maintaining her bow.

“And this one? Is this the human Speaker?”

Serena turned her head slightly to see Amelia had joined her in her act of submission. At least she could read the room. The golden hair was now dirty with sand, dust, sweat and blood and had clumped together awkwardly. Through a gap in the hair, Serena could make out those pink lips that not so long ago she had...

No. Now wasn’t the time.

“This is Amelia Thornheart,” Serena said. “Speaker Thornheart is a native of Karligard, a travelling healer that I have secured for House Halen.” A few moments lapsed, the only sound being the imposing crackling of the Stormlord’s energy as little bolts of blue lightning whipped up miniature sandstorms.

“Lord-prospect Halen, a word of advice,” said the unknown man who she was certain was another Highlord. “When in the presence of other Cascadian Lords, especially *a Greatlord*, it is seen impolite to hold onto *Narean*. Some of us might even take it as a threat.”

“Ah! My sincere apologies!” Serena had forgotten she was still holding onto the Word. It had cooled down, the hellfire on her horns and flaming tail had vanished inside the hole, but she had still maintained a grip on the divine aether inside her. She was in a state known as *simmering*. A battle state allowing Speakers to react quickly without expending too much effort.

Serena released her will on the aether inside her and felt it escape as it crossed the boundary into the realm of the gods. In its place, her aether reserves recovered as she absorbed the normal atmospheric aether. It was happening faster than usual; the atmosphere was saturated with aether with the Stormlord's presence.

“Forgive me, but I don’t recall your name, Highlord,” Serena said, trying to sound apologetic.

“Ha! This is what happens when you lock yourself away year after year, my friend!” Highlord Qiang laughed softly. “What’s the point in having so many great achievements if those who use them don’t know your face!?”

“My dear friend Qiang,” the man said in mirth, “Isn’t the achievement greater if it is done without the expectation of fame and glory?” In reply, Highlord Qiang smashed his two fists together. Serena could see they had seen battle many times.

“Fame and glory make the achievement, and the achievement makes fame and glory! Can’t have one without the other!” Highlord Qiang punctuated his statement by bringing his fists together once again.

“Nevertheless...” the man turned his attention back to Serena and Amelia. “I am Highlord Ru. I don’t expect you to recognise my face. I rarely leave my laboratory. Stand up straight, both of you. Too much bowing is impolite.”

Serena and Amelia both straightened. Serena examined Highlord Ru’s face. His face didn’t ring any bells, but his name did. She had definitely heard of it before. She turned the name over in her mind. With a glance at Amelia, she saw that she wasn’t looking at any of the trio in front of them at all.

Instead, she had a puzzled expression on her face and was looking at some unidentifiable spot in the sky behind the Greatlord and two Highlords. Serena glanced in the direction Amelia was looking at, but seeing nothing, turned her eyes back to Highlord Ru. Hopefully they would forgive the human for being a little rude. As she thought about pre-emptively apologising, the name *Ru* suddenly triggered a memory.

“Highlord Ru, are you perhaps the same Ru of the *Ru-Barfield* equation?”

“The very same! See, friend? Sometimes a name is all you need!” Highlord Ru said with a smile of pride on his sharp face.

“You invented the lifting engine! The equation that took demonkind to the skies!” Despite the tension in the atmosphere and the absolute monster crackling with energy at the back, Serena couldn’t help but blurt out the statement. “You’re the Aetherlord!”

“Ha! This one even knows my title! Yes, together with Highlord Barfield, the lord of the lumina, we discovered the equation. It was a joint effort, and so I cannot take all the credit. We only did the mathematics; it was the Centralis engineers that put it to the test!” Highlord Ru held a fan to his mouth. “Although if you ever meet with Barfield, and he pretends he did most of the work, give him a good smack for me, would you?”

Serena smiled nervously. “I wouldn’t dare, Highlord Ru.... Is it true the Empress herself gave you a Golden Eagle for the achievement?”

“Oh yes, I think it’s in some box somewhere. Hmm... I might have melted it down for an experiment... Oh well.”

She felt herself involuntarily gulp at that. Surely the highlord was jesting. He couldn’t have done that, right? Melt down a *Golden Eagle* for an experiment?

“Turning to the matter at hand...” energy lashed out in the atmosphere, vaporising small rocks near the Stormlord’s feet. Just the act of him speaking oversaturated the air with aether, causing an uncomfortable pressure to build up in Serena’s ears. The Greatlord’s eyes shone white with power, and when he spoke his breath was misted with dense aether. “Lord-prospect, I have seven dead and more injured. Explain the events that transpired here.”

Serena took a breath and glanced at Amelia. The human had stopped being fixated on the sky and was paying attention to the Stormlord, although her eyes kept flicking back to that nondescript location above. Serena began explaining the events of that day, starting with her arrival at the Highguard. She detailed her investigation and suspicions and how she had come to the cafe to plan their next move when two Speakers attacked them.

The highlords occasionally interrupted, seemingly very interested in the descriptions and behaviour of the *Salinas* and *Turana* Speakers. Serena did not hide Amelia's part, explaining how she healed Serena and protected the both of them as the building collapsed.

What happened in the little pocket of rubble, she didn't share.

"Qiang, thoughts?" The Stormlord asked at the end of her explanation. He hadn't shown much changes in expression or emotion and Serena was thankful for that. The constant knot of tension his presence caused her put her in an uneasy state. This man could probably overwhelm her in a second.

Unless Amelia had something to say about it.

"It's strange, Greatlord." Qiang turned, bowing a little as he addressed the ruler of Kenhoro. "These groups generally prefer not to smuggle their goods through a business in central, often preferring an operation in the outer rings, or on ground level. For them to send two Speakers to fight in the city limits? To kill someone the papers referred to as a *war hero*

this very morning?" The highlord cast an eye in her direction. "There is something more here than mere drugs or weapons."

"Bigger than these *Crimson Reapers* as well," Highlord Ru added. "Their leader isn't a Speaker. The two attackers, as described, don't match any of the rogue Speakers we know about in the East. These mercenaries have involved themselves in something too big for their boots. I'll have the seismic stations keep an eye out. Perhaps we will pick up the movements of this escaping Earthlord."

"Do that now, Highlord Ru," The Stormlord commanded. Highlord Ru gave a deep bow to his master, and a smaller polite one to Serena and Amelia before smoothly exiting. "Secure the Highguard, Highlord Qiang. Arrest and interrogate them all." Highlord Qiang gave his own deep bow and turned to leave.

"Highlord Qiang!" Serena called out, bowing again. She was too nervous to ask the Stormlord himself a question. The highlord turned towards her with

a neutral expression.

“Yes, Lord-prospect?” He asked.

“Among the intelligence agents that were attacked...” Serena swallowed, “Were any of them... a male officer?” Highlord Qiang stared at her for a few moments.

“Officer Adachi was not among the dead.” The Highlord said, prompting Serena to breathe out a sigh of relief.

“And... forgive me, but there were two cafe workers. Two trainees of the academy here. I-”

“They are dead.”

“Oh.” A knot rose in her throat.

“Now excuse me, Lord-prospect, I am the commander of the city's security, and I have a part of the city to secure.” Highlord Qiang left, leaving the pair of them and the crackling Greatlord.

“To cause such trouble in my city.” The Stormlord said coldly. “You are both under house arrest. You will follow me to my estate. You-” the man suddenly stopped talking. A frown appeared on his face. The greatlord turned, facing away from them with his face tilted up to some invisible point in the sky.

“I do not understand, Father,” the greatlord said. He was quiet for a moment. Serena couldn’t hear or see who the man was talking to. She strained her senses, looking to the sky, trying to detect anything out of the ordinary.

“Who told you this?” The Stormlord questioned the sky, a note of confusion in his voice. A full half minute passed before he spoke again. “I understand, Father.” The greatlord turned to them. “Speaker Halen, Speaker Thornheart.” The shining white eyes seemed to linger on Amelia. “You are free to go by decree of my Overlord.”

“*The Overlord?*” Serena couldn’t help but exclaim. She frantically cast her eyes to the sky again but failed once more to detect anything other than clouds. Was the Overlord so powerful he was outside her ability to perceive him? Was he really there? Watching them?

“Thanks!” Amelia exclaimed, smiling. “Would you like me to heal the injured?”

“That will not be necessary,” intoned the Stormlord. “Lord Yulan is down the street. I suggest you find somewhere to reside outside of Central for a few days.” He turned his eyes to Serena. “I hope your stay at Kenhoro has no more surprises and that you leave when the repairs to your ship are done. I will send more workers to assist.”

“I... Thank you, Stormlord,” Serena clasped her hand and bowed deeply. Amelia did the same. Without replying, a bolt of lightning struck the man, and he travelled upwards at great speed before flying to somewhere else in the city outside of her vision and senses.

For a moment, all was silent.

“Bye!” Amelia was waving to a point in the sky. Serena looked at her with a mouth open.

“Did you just... wave *bye* to the Overlord?”

“Yeah! He’s super interesting!”

Seven hells! What next, tea with the Empress!? Serena rested her head against the palm of her hand for a moment, gathering herself. “Let’s go. Lord Yulan should be just down the street. Uh... we don’t look great, do we? Here...” Serena found some paper towels that had survived the fight. “Use these,” She said, offering some to Amelia.

“No need! Come here!” Amelia reached out a hand, and when Serena touched it some spell was activated. All the dirt, sweat and blood vanished from their hair, clothes and bodies.

“I thought you knew a cleaning spell...” Serena murmured, examining how pristine she was suddenly. “Is this what you used on me in the medical bay on the ship?”

“That’s right!” Amelia grinned happily, “If you ever want to skip a shower, let me know! Although...” She wrinkled her nose, “Even though it makes you perfectly clean, I still feel like having a wash, you know? Can we find another hotel, one that doesn’t hate humans?”

“Sure...” Serena nodded, “Let’s find Lord Yulan. He has all kinds of friends in the industry.”

Together they made their way down the street, and as the Greatlord had said, they found Lord Yulan pacing frantically, looking worried.

“Serena! Miss Thornheart!” Lord Yulan exclaimed, relief written on his face. “You’re alright! What happened!? Did you see the Greatlord!? What power!”

“Glad to see you’re alright, old man,” Serena said, giving him a hug. “There’s a lot to talk about. Highlord Qiang is in the process of raiding the Highguard, so I don’t know if you’ll be able to go back there for a while.”

“This is going to be *terrible* for business,” sighed Lord Yulan. “So, what’s happening with you two?” He eyed them both.

“Are there any hotels outside of the city centre that would be happy to have us stay? Any friends owing you favours?”

“Hmm...” Lord Yulan scratched his jaw. “I can think of a few. Actually, I know just the place. Let’s jump a tram, and then it’s a short walk.”

The three of them left the area. A crowd had formed, but the city guards were massed in great numbers and were keeping the situation under control. They slipped through a side alley, guided by a guard, before jumping on a tram.

The three of them rode in silence, not wanting to speak in public about the events that transpired. When they jumped off and began walking through quieter streets, Lord Yulan bombarded her with questions and she did her best to answer. Of certain matters that occurred in the hole as well as the part about the Overlord she kept secret. No need to complicate things further.

They soon arrived at a large inn on the outskirts. Where Highguard was tall, this place was stocky and wide. Serena found out that in the centre was a private garden, and the building and its two floors were wrapped around it. It was a modest, quiet inn. Perfect for their needs.

Lord Yulan was welcomed by the owner with a smile of joy, and the two nattered about all kinds of irrelevant things before Yulan broached the subject of them staying.

“I am Mister Weng, the owner of this establishment.” Mister Weng bowed to Serena and Amelia. “It is a great honour to have not only two Speakers stay here, but ones who saved my friend Lord Yulan from such a troubling situation. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.” Weng prostrated himself even further.

“Mister Weng, I take it you have a room for us, then?” Serena asked.

“Of course, Speaker Halen. You are lucky that we still have a room remaining. The rest are occupied by festival-goers. I shall make it available to you free of charge, for as long as you wish.”

“No need. House Halen will pay the invoice. We won’t impose on you that much, Mister Weng.”

“Your generosity knows no bounds, Speaker.” Weng had a pleasing smile on his face. “Here are the keys. My receptionist will guide you to your room.” He handed Serena a large brass key.

“I’ll let you two kids get on with it, then!” Said Lord Yulan cheerfully.

“Where are you going, old man?”

“Home, of course! I don’t live in the Highguard! Need to make sure my house is still standing!” Lord Yulan gave her a wave, “I’ll impose upon you two in a few days, I imagine I have a dreadful amount of paperwork to go over!” With that, Lord Yulan vanished, leaving Serena and Amelia alone with the owner and receptionist.

“Speaker Halen, Speaker Thornheart. If you could follow me.” The receptionist - a short, neatly dressed human - bowed to them.

“Enjoy your stay!” Weng called out as they were led up a flight of stairs.

The receptionist led them around the terrace that surrounded the garden before coming to a stop at a door. The human bowed politely. “Here we are. There is a bell you can ring inside. It's connected to the reception. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, that’s all for now,” Serena said, and the receptionist left them alone.

She placed the key in the lock and opened the door. Looking inside, she swept her eyes over the room before closing the door and turning to Amelia awkwardly.

“Umm...” She muttered, not knowing what to say.

“What is it?” Amelia asked, pushing open the door and looking inside herself. “Oh my!” She exclaimed, flashing a look at Serena, cheeks going red.

The room was beautiful and luxurious, but one thing stood out among the luxuries that caused heat to rise in both Serena’s and Amelia’s bodies.

The lone bed that lay teasingly in the centre of the room.

Chapter Twenty: Two Girlfriends And Many Drinks

The door swung shut behind them - leaving them in silence - staring at the bed whose very existence made Amelia's heart race. Amelia cast an eye sideways to see Serena with a nervous expression on her face. The demon was chewing her lips.

"Well!" Amelia exclaimed as cheerfully as she could. "It looks very... cosy, doesn't it?"

"I will return to reception. Have them bring another bed," said Serena, turning to the door. Amelia intercepted her, throwing her arms wide and blocking her passage.

"You can't!" Amelia cried, "We've already imposed so much on Mister Weng! We can't bother him any more!"

"We're paying customers; it's his job to be bothered." Serena crossed her arms and tried to look stern, although her flushed cheeks somewhat spoiled the act.

"It's the last room, Mister Weng must be very busy running a full establishment! We can bother him tomorrow!" Amelia wasn't going to let this gift from the gods go unused. This was something to fight over!

"Don't be silly. We're *Speakers*. It's probably an oversight. They'll be delighted to fix it..." Serena trailed off slightly at the end, the conviction in her voice fading, which was all Amelia needed to go on the attack.

"It's not a problem, so it doesn't need to be fixed! Right!?"

“W-what are you suggesting!? We *sleep* together!?” Serena’s cheeks had gone fully red, and her voice was wavering. Now was the time to be strong, to strike the finishing blows!

“Of course! We like each other, don’t we!? And besides...” Amelia puffed her cheeks out and shuffled her feet while trying to maximise her cute appearance. “... When you hold me, I feel so *warm* and *safe*. Like nothing could ever hurt me...”

A critical strike! Serena took a half-step back and her right hand went to her chest. “Y-you... you... ah!” It was all too much for Serena and she turned away from Amelia. “You can’t say such shameless things so easily!” Serena seemed to find her voice when she wasn’t looking directly at her.

Amelia took the chance and shuffled up behind her. “Can I... put my arms around you?” She asked quietly.

“Why?”

“Do I need a reason to embrace the person I like? Mmm?” Serena was quiet for a few seconds before the whispered response came.

“Do... as you like...”

Amelia slipped her arms around Serena’s waist. Unfortunately, the captain’s outfit prevented her from being as close as she wanted, but this level of intimacy was still satisfying. Serena was just a bit too tall for her to rest her chin on her shoulder, so she turned her head to the side and rested her cheek against Serena's upper back.

“I’m sorry if I pushed things too fast...” Amelia whispered, squeezing Serena a little. “I just, really, *really* like you. I think I have from the moment we first met. Not just romantically... but physically as well.” Oh my, it was so much easier to say embarrassing things in this position! She would have to make this a habit.

“The thought of cuddling with you makes me so happy, and we can’t exactly do it in the hammocks on the ship, right? So I want to make the

most of it while we can. That's all I want! Just cuddling! We don't have to do anything else..." She was blabbering now, "... but if we could kiss some more that would be perfect, if you're still, you know... into me..."

Serena let out an audible sigh. "You really don't know when to stop, do you?" the demon said. Amelia felt Serena place her hands on her own.

"No! And I don't want to stop!" Amelia gave Serena another squeeze.

"It's just... there's supposed to be a period of courting. Because I'm a Lord-prospect, and daughter of a Highlord. At least, um... three moons, I believe it was? It's supposed to take time, so the two families can iron out any problems..."

"But, I don't have any family, in this world or the other one. It's just me!" Amelia exclaimed, trying not to let the atmosphere drop too much. "I don't think anybody did *courting* where I'm from. We just went on dates and got to know each other!"

"Dates?"

"Like going out and doing something together - eating a meal, watching a play - something like that."

Serena pried Amelia's arms off and turned to face her. The demon was smiling, and coupled with the flush cheeks and crimson eyes, Amelia once again found herself taken back by how *attracted* she was to Serena.

"We can do that..." Serena said, holding hands with Amelia, interlocking their fingers. "I just want you to understand that... same-sex relationships are frowned upon. The Holy Demon Bible, of which the Empress *herself* compiled from the ancient scripture, strongly discourages them."

"Why?"

"Well," Serena suddenly looked bashful, "The scripture has a heavy emphasis of... multiplying demonkind, and I guess us being two women

would make that... difficult.” Serena closed her eyes for a few seconds before opening them.

“Okay, but that won’t stop us from trying, right?” Another critical blow! Serena released their hands and pulled Amelia into a tight embrace. The demon sure did give great hugs!

“Stupid idiot,” Serena said, ruffling her golden hair. “I can’t look at you when you say such awfully forward things, idiot!” Amelia had her cheeks pressed against Serena’s collar, which meant if she rotated her head just a little she was in the perfect position too...

“I’m sorry,” Amelia said, giving Serena a small kiss on the neck. “There must be something wrong with me, because I’m actually addicted to making you flustered.” Another peck against the skin. “I must be a pervert or something because I love seeing that stern captain act break down. It honestly excites me...” Another kiss.

“This is going to be so much trouble...” Serena mumbled, pulling Amelia off and looking into her eyes. The demon placed one hand on Amelia’s waist and another behind her head and, like before, pulled their lips together.

“Mmm”

“Ahh”

“Mmm”

“Ow!”

“Sorry!” Amelia exclaimed, pulling away. “I wasn’t expecting your tongue!” She giggled at the annoyed-looking demon. “See,” Amelia said, “It’s much easier to look at each other if we keep doing things like this, right!?”

“Tsk! That logic is...” Serena paused, rolling her eyes. “I suppose it makes some sense.” Serena placed a hand on each of Amelia’s shoulders. “Look,

our relationship isn't *illegal*. But there are many who would be opposed. My father included. He's-" Serena was cut off as Amelia pulled her into hug.

"You said *our relationship!*" Amelia exclaimed before looking into those crimson eyes. "So we're definitely dating or courting or whatever? You're my girlfriend? I can call you that?"

"I... suppose so."

"Serena Halen," Amelia said, grinning wildly, "My girlfriend!". She tilted her head and gave Serena a kiss on the cheeks. "So what's this about our relationship? People aren't going to throw rocks at us or anything?"

"Uh, no," Serena's eyes narrowed. "And if they did, I'd collect those hands and decorate the ship with them." Those crimson eyes didn't seem to be joking. "The point is, I won't deny we're... together if I'm directly asked. I won't disrespect either you or myself by pretending otherwise. It's just that we should avoid public displays of affection. Such things are unbecoming of nobility, and double so that I'm a Speaker, and triple so that I'm a commissioned officer."

"Alright, that makes sense. I won't go screaming about it from the rooftops then, even if I want to!"

"Thank you," Serena looked relieved. "Even when it does become known, whether as an open secret or formally announced - we would still be immune from most public criticism as we are, after all, two powerful Speakers. But you will hear things said behind our backs. Most people aren't quite aware of how good a Speaker's hearing is. Some of the more... passionate people will use rather... unkind words when they think you cannot hear them."

"And I should, what? Let them be?" Amelia frowned. She didn't want to go around starting fights and picking battles all the time, but it felt wrong to just... let it happen.

“If things are said behind your back, best to report it back to me, and we can start figuring out our allies and enemies. If it’s said to your face...”

Serena sighed. “I know you don’t like fighting, but if you break a few noses when it happens, it’ll stop it from continuing. As long as you don’t break another Speaker’s nose, it’s unlikely it’ll cause any real problems. You are a *Speaker* after all, and once you’ve been granted citizenship, you’ll have the *Speaker’s Privilege*. You’ll be permitted to take the law into your own hands, to an extent.”

“Insulting a Speaker is against the law?”

“To a small degree. Speakers have a right to seek retribution against a slight against them. It’s an old law but still used today. Think about it, Speakers are worthy of divine communion with the gods. Society treats us a step higher than others, for the gods themselves have sanctioned and chosen us. You will also have the right to fine people up to ten denarii if they cause you problems, although don’t use that against any nobility.”

Well, the more Serena told her about Speakers, the more excited Amelia became! “When will I become a citizen?” She asked.

“There’s an old friend of mine from the academy here in Kenhoro. His name is Aiden Adachi and he was sent by Centralis Intelligence to do a personality profile on you. You’re supposed to meet him during the festival. Although...” Serena looked thoughtful, “We might as well meet him earlier, given the drama that just transpired.”

“Personality profile?”

“Yes. He’ll be chatting with you and making a report on your temperament and other personality traits. It’s mostly to make sure you’re not crazy, which you obviously are-”

“Hey!”

“Well, crazy in bad ways. Obviously, you’re crazy about *me*, right?” Serena gave her a smile bordering on arrogance. Where had this demon gotten this

confidence? Well, Amelia couldn't refute it. Serena was correct after all, Amelia was crazy about her.

"Fine, fine. So if I pass this test, they make me a citizen?"

"An offer will be made. Honestly, I can't see why they wouldn't. They'll probably make it either before we leave Kenhoro or shortly after we see my father in Shimashina."

"Your father... he's a Highlord, right?" Amelia asked, remembering the comment from Highlord Ru from earlier.

"That's right. Highlord Halen would be his title."

"So, do you rule over..." Amelia spread her arms wide, "loads of territory of something?" Serena shook her head.

"Not quite; remember how I told your Highlords can be put in charge of important areas, like a port or important industries? We have some estates sprinkled about, but it's industry which made my father into a Highlord."

"Industry... what do you do?"

"We, uh..." Serena looked at Amelia, a touch of worry in her eyes. "We make shells."

"Shells?"

"Munitions. Gun barrels. Explosives," Serena clenched her jaw, "Weapons of war. This conflict has propelled House Halen's wealth. It's what made father a Highlord, and will soon likely be what confers me full Cascadian Lordship." Serena swallowed nervously. "Does that... bother you? It bothers many people..."

"I... don't know," Amelia said honestly. Did it bother her? "Maybe. I think so? But..." She added as Serena's face fell. "Don't think for a second this changes how I feel about you!" Amelia darted in, giving her another kiss on the cheek. "I don't care what people say about you because I," Amelia

motioned to herself with a thumb, “I know what a beautiful, caring, and *easily flustered* demon you really are! I’m with you till the end!”

“... Thank you. That was something that I was worried about. It means a lot... for you to say that.” Serena ruffled her golden hair a bit, the demon’s face returning to that familiar sly smile.

“Not a problem! So... what should we do now? I don’t want to be cooped up all day! Is there a washroom here?” Amelia examined the room and found there was a sliding door that revealed a modest room that looked like a washroom. There was a bamboo tub and an array of bamboo tubes that poked out the walls. At first look, it was very confusing.

“This is a traditional Manwese set-up. The bamboo is used to carry water from a stream or lake into the homes of the citizens. In this case I imagine there’s a water tank somewhere which is pumped full from a steam engine. Here,” Serena rotated a part of one of the bamboo pieces, and suddenly cold water came raining from the bamboo tube above the tub. The end of it had been carved to work like a shower head, sprinkling the water down. “This is for cold water, and this one is for hot water. You can adjust it as needed. Look, they have soap here, as well as skin scrubs.” Serena started opening a few cabinets and chests. “Here’s the towels.”

Ah! It was all so *old fashioned*

but also so practical and cool! Amelia flashed Serena a grin. “I’m so happy!” She exclaimed. Serena looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“Over some towels?”

“No, all of this!” Amelia gestured to the room. “It’s so... cultured! All I remember is washrooms of bland ceramic and chrome metal. This is like being on holiday! I’m just so happy I get to experience this! And with you!”

“Don’t push your luck,” Serena said with a smile, “I’m not getting in with you, not yet.”

“I meant experiencing everything, the whole world, with you!”

“I know what you meant, idiot.”

Serena turned, showing Amelia something on the door. “This is the latch, it works like this, see? Although I’m not going to be barging in on you, don’t you worry.”

“I wish you would,” Amelia said, not being able to resist sticking her tongue out.

“Idiot. Anyway, I’m going to the reception. I need to send a message to Tomes, to update him on everything. I think this inn should be able to provide me with a change of clothes. I need to get out of this captain's uniform. If someone comes in, then throw the soap at them or something, I imagine you can throw hard enough to put a hole in someone,” an amused smile crept up Serena’s face, “Then we can go get something to eat, although I don’t feel that hungry...”

“That’s *Aseco*’s healing. It helps stave off hunger. But I think it’s still good to eat when you can!”

“Alright,” Serena nodded. “I’ll introduce you to some local cuisine. I’ll get us some menus and make sure their kitchen is still open.”

“Okay, thanks!” Amelia started unbuttoning her top, and as she began removing the articles of clothing, she saw Serena still hadn’t left and was watching her silently. “You want to stay, after all?” Amelia said, giving Serena a twirl.

“Empress, save me from this crazy human...” Serena muttered, before taking one final look and leaving the washroom, shutting the door behind her. Amelia heard her mutter to herself to focus before hearing her open the main door and head towards reception.

“Serena Halen, *my girlfriend!*” Amelia said to herself as she finished undressing. Every time she said those words her heart leapt with joy. “My girlfriend. My girlfriend. Ahhhh!” She brought both hands to her cheeks, wobbling on the spot in barely contained ecstasy.

It took her a while to find the right balance of hot and cold water that felt perfect. Her resistances were strong enough that she could probably handle swimming in magma, or being frozen in ice, but that didn't stop the existence of the perfect ratio of cold and hot water for a shower.

After she was satisfied with the water, she climbed in and let the water fall on her head. Her first shower since coming to this world! The washroom in the captain's quarters was only a tub with a towel to help wipe down the body. But this was a proper shower! Amelia moaned in satisfaction at the experience.

She examined the soaps one after another. They were all smells completely new to her although some of them smelled suspiciously familiar to lavender. She had seen a documentary once on artificial smells, which explained that every combination of smells identifiable to the human nose had been discovered and replicated synthetically. It turned out all perfume companies did was rotate existing smells, changing them slightly and giving them new names!

It did explain why so many of these fragrances smelled familiar. Did lavender exist in this world? Amelia had seen something in the market that looked exactly like apples, and there were also fruits that looked familiar to pineapples. Anathor had once made a comment to her about human colonists arriving in this world thousands of years ago. She was certain her world was the origin of humanity, but had her ancestors somehow found a way to move to other worlds through magical means?

Consumed in her thoughts, Amelia washed her body and soon she heard the familiar footsteps of Serena returning. She stopped the flow of water and dried herself with a towel. Slipping back into her clothes, Amelia spent an awkward amount of time trying to tighten it just like the tailor did. Satisfied, she found a comb and began coming through her hair as she stepped back into the bedroom.

Serena was sitting on a chair with a bundle of clothes and a pair of menus. "I forgot you can't read Imperial yet, so I got two." She said, standing up. "I'll wash and change, and then we'll head down. Mister Weng seems intent on providing us the best spot in the inn to eat.."

“Okay!” Amelia sat down, combing through her hair more furiously. “I wish I had a spell to unknot hair, but I don’t think there is one!”

“Ah, knots in the hair, finally something too powerful to be defeated by you,” Serena said, smirking. She gathered her clothes and strode into the washroom. “Seven hells, it smells nice in here. How much soap did you use?”

“All of them! They smelled *so good!*”

“Hope they don’t charge us for burning through their stockpiles...” Serena closed the door and a moment later the noise of the shower could be heard. Amelia busied herself with her hair while trying her very hardest not to imagine the scene beyond the door. What would Serena do if she barged in?

Best not to risk it, not yet anyway. She’d already won so many victories lately. She shouldn’t push her luck too far. A few minutes later and as Amelia finally coaxed the last knot out of her hair and wrapped it into a ponytail, Serena emerged wearing a smart set of pants and shirt. She looked like a businesswoman going about her day from one meeting to the next. Amelia wasn’t sure if she preferred this or the military uniform.

“Ready?” Serena asked, slipping her shoes on.

“Yup!”

They left their room and Serena guided them downstairs to a large open area where several guests were eating. Mister Weng greeted them with a smile and led them to a raised section draped in a light cloth that allowed them to easily see outside but would give them privacy inside. On the table was a clear bottle with a light blue liquid inside, alongside a bucket of ice and a pair of highball glasses.

“Please, it’s on the house.” Mister Weng bowed. “Ring the bell when you’re ready to make your order. Speaker Halen, Speaker Thornheart. Once again, it’s a pleasure to have you reside with us.” The owner backed away and they were left alone. Amelia examined the bottle of blue liquid.

“What’s this, wine?” She asked.

“Something much better,” Serena said, taking the bottle and wriggling the cork free. “This is *loqua*. The best drink in all of demon and humankind. It comes from loqua berries and can be drunk as either a juice or an alcoholic beverage. The latter being the most popular, of course.” Serena placed a few cubes of ice in both of the glasses and poured the loqua into them. “It comes in three main varieties. Blue, red and green. The colour comes from the type of moon crystal used in their production. That method is, of course, a secret.”

Serena brought her glass to her nose and a satisfied smile erupted on her face. “There is yellow loqua, made from the yellow moon crystals from the moon that lingers only over Centralis, but that’s a royal drink and even Lords only drink it during official events.” She took a sip and a small groan of satisfaction came from the demon. “Blue is considered best when drunk cold, but some prefer it room temperature. Red is best hot, and green goes either way.”

Amelia took her own sip, and the richness of the flavour filled her mouth. When she swallowed the taste lingered and transformed into a satisfying aftertaste that just encouraged her to take another sip. “Is it worth a lot?” She asked.

“Yes, for the common worker. This bottle is...” Serena glanced at the menu. “Ten denarii. More than a month's salary for a soldier.”

“So much!”

“Of course, it’s manufactured in the Western Terra Firma and shipped all the way here. It’s the main export of the far West; the loqua berries will only grow under the light of the green moon.”

“Are the moons always in the same spot? Don’t they orbit the planet?”

“No, the moons are magical in nature. They follow a cyclical pattern, moving closer to the land where they rain down moon crystals before pulling back high in the sky. They deviate a little, but the movements can be

predicted mathematically. There is a non-magical moon that orbits the world at a greater distance, I'll point it out to you when we see it."

"And the upcoming festival, you said that it was to do with the moons?"

"Right," Serena said, taking emptying her glass and refilling it. "At this time in the cycle, the moon is at its

apogee. The furthest away from the planet it can go. The festival is an act of celebration and worship, to make sure it remembers to come back again."

"Is it dangerous when the moon crystals fall?"

"Yes, but not terribly so. The crystals react with the lumina as they fall so they sort of float down. Some of the crystals have more rocks embedded in them so they don't slow down as much. Normally everyone stays indoors for the period of moonrain when it comes."

Amelia finished her glass of loqua and poured another one. The bottle was almost half empty already! She would definitely be ordering some more. After all, she could afford it.

"So the blue moon is here, red is in the south, yellow is Centralis and green is in the west. What's in the north? What about the human territories?"

"The north is covered by the cold light of the purple moon. Most of Cascadia is warm or tropical, but the north is frigid and cold. Something about the cold makes purple loqua impossible to manufacture, which is why that colour of drink doesn't exist. As for the human territories, the federation has an orange moon. Karligard and the Republic share a white one, and there's one more... I can't remember."

"Is there a black moon?" Amelia asked. If there was a white one, surely there was a black one.

"No," Serena said, shaking her head. "No black one." Those crimson eyes looked at her for a while.

"What?" Amelia asked.

“The next moonrain in the east will take place while we’re in Shimashina, but the morning after a moonrain, when the blue moon is at its closest...” Serena cast her arms about, imitating a sweeping landscape. “It’s beautiful. The forest is cloaked in a blanket of blue light, and it sparkles! From thousands of freshly fallen crystals. You only have an hour or so to enjoy it before the harvesters get their grubby hands on it all. Even so...” Serena looked to the side awkwardly, “I would like to see the next one with you, if you’d like.”

“I’d love that!” Amelia grinned. Already another date was planned! This couldn’t be going any better!

“Good... good. It’ll be a sight to remember,” Serena said before ringing the bell on the table. “Let’s order, I know the perfect thing to get.” A moment later an employee appeared, Serena gave them the order, including a request for a bottle of blue and green loqua.

“Why not red?” Amelia asked once the employee had withdrawn.

“Red crystal is in shortage at the moment, due to the war.”

“What has the war got to do with it?”

“It’s a key component in the manufacture of explosives,” Serena said with a shrug. “It’s very expensive these days due to demand and export controls. It’s why it was so expensive when you ordered the mask.”

“The mask!” Amelia’s eyes widened, remembering the bag she had left behind in the Highguard. She had completely forgotten! “I left the gift bag behind in Lord Yulan’s room!”

“Not to worry, I’ll send a message to Lord Yulan in the morning. I’m sure we can get it back.” Serena shrugged. “And if not, I’ll buy you another one.” Oh my, what a reliable and pragmatic girlfriend she had found!

“Okay!” Amelia said cheerfully. The cloth curtain opened and the employee brought two bottles of loqua, one blue and one green to the table. After

verifying there wasn't anything else he could do for them he withdrew with a bow.

"Green loqua," Serena said as she poured two glasses, "Is sweeter than blue. It's also higher in alcoholic content so be careful. Although, as a Speaker it's pretty hard to get drunk."

Amelia took a sip, noting the sweetness of the green liquid. Like blue, it was delicious and left a collection of flavours in her mouth that changed as time went on. Serena wasn't wrong, it was much stronger than the blue loqua. She felt the fumes of the alcohol go to her head. She wouldn't be a lightweight right? Not in this body?

They spent a few minutes drinking quietly, chatting about random topics. Amelia found out about Serena's younger sisters. One of them was called Nina, and was some genius engineer working in Centralis, and the other was the youngest called Lani, who was still in school and in Serena's words was a *teenage brat*.

Then the food came and a dozen small bowls were placed in front of them. They were each provided with a larger empty bowl, as well as several pairs of chopsticks. After the employees had left Amelia raised an eyebrow at Serena.

"How the hell do I eat this?" She asked.

Serena laughed, her cheeks flushed with alcohol. "Here, place the large bowl in front of you. Now, sit up straight and maintain good posture. Don't let your back touch the wall or seat behind you. Okay, now take the chopsticks, like this... no like this..." Eventually, Amelia was able to mimic Serena's holding of the chopsticks.

"So, this is a traditional Manwese set-up. You see how all the meats and vegetables are a similar size?" Serena said, pointing to the many bowls sprinkled around the table. "The goal is you take a rice patty like this," Serena lifted the thin circular piece of rice before placing it neatly in the centre of the large bowl. "And then you build your mouthful. Typically you want one vegetable and one meat." Serena demonstrated neatly. "And then,

if you haven't put too much, you can close it easily with the chopsticks like so." With a flourish of her wrist, Serena wrapped the meat and vegetable in the rice covering before picking the entire thing up and placing it in her mouth.

She made it look so easy.

"There's a concept in the East," Serena said, "About knowing yourself. Part of that is knowing how much you can fit in your mouth, and it is about controlling gluttony." She laughed, watching Amelia's attempts at folding the rice around the meat that kept falling out. "See it as your first test of etiquette, okay?"

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Amelia muttered, stabbing the meat with her chopstick and biting it like a kebab. When the taste hit her mouth her eyes widened! She hurriedly swallowed. "This is chicken!" She said.

"No, it's *choco*. Anathor said choco is a descendant species of chicken that went extinct long ago. It's mostly popular in Centralis and the north. I had to request they made this especially for us."

"It tastes exactly the same! Well," Amelia took another bite of the choco. "I think it does, at least!" The meat was tender and perfectly cooked. Despite not being hungry, she couldn't resist another bite.

"Stop stabbing the food, try again. Rice patty first. Follow me," Serena said, guiding Amelia through the process of constructing her little wrap. This time she was able to build something that survived the trip into her mouth.

"It's good!" Amelia said after she had swallowed. "I'm getting used to the chopsticks!" She took another drink of green loqua, the flavour pairing well with the choco meat.

"I'm glad you enjoy it. It's not as good as sardis, but we have other fish here to try. Look at this," Serena guided Amelia through another recommendation and as the minutes ticked by the two of them were busy with trying out different combinations and drinking through both bottles of loqua.

Seeing they were empty of both food and drink, Amelia took the initiative and rang the tablebell. When the employee appeared, she ordered another bottle of blue and green loqua. Once the employees had removed the empty bottles and bowls, Serena cast a sly smile at her.

“Trying to get me drunk, are you?”

“Obviously,” Amelia threw back. “But I’m also interested in how much I can drink. I used to be such a lightweight but now I feel I can handle so much more.” She clenched her hands together, feeling more tipsy than she was letting on. By her estimates, the blue loqua was similar to a strong wine, and the green was equivalent to a strong spirit. If so, in her old world she would have long passed out. Now? Now she felt *good*.

The bottles came and the two wasted no time in opening it. Serena shared stories from the academy that made Amelia giggle and on more than one occasion, splutter loqua onto the table. Amelia spent a long time trying to explain to Serena how in her world they had - without the aid of magic - travelled to their moon and constructed a flourishing base on it.

Soon those two bottles were empty, and Amelia could no longer deny she was close to being drunk. She was sure she could heal the feeling away, but she didn’t want to. When she had drunk this much, it was so easy to stare lovingly into Serena’s eyes, who returned the look with no hesitation. At some point they even started holding hands, only remembering to separate when the employee came to take the bottles away.

They both looked at the empty bottles longingly before turning to look at each other.

“One more bottle, before bed?” Amelia asked, trying not to tip over.

“One more bottle,” Serena affirmed, gesturing to the employee. “Green, please.”

After all, one more bottle couldn’t hurt, could it?

Chapter Twenty-One: The Kenhoro Officer Academy

“You’re here,” grumbled the grizzled captain as Serena once again found herself standing in an ethereal fog that stretched endlessly into the darkness. “You’ve committed a cardinal sin,” the captain said, his voice muffled in the unnatural expanse. “There will be a punishment.”

Serena’s thoughts were full of Amelia, and she felt anger rise within her. Was she still drunk? She was probably still drunk. “For falling for a woman? A human?” She snapped at the illusive man, who didn’t react at all to her outburst.

“Too late... you must protect the girl...” the captain grumbled, removing his captain’s hat to reveal messy grey hair and the edges of an aged face. Serena paused, realising this dream figure was *human*.

“I’m heading to the ice-lands to do my part. As for you...” The human battered the side of his hat, knocking dirt and dust loose. The rhythmic beating of his palm against the brown leather sent shockwaves throughout the space. “... the pair of you must go to the desert. The old temple...”

“Why!? What if I refuse?” She challenged the old captain’s ramblings.

“I wish there were another way, but you must. To keep her safe...” The captain turned into white mist and vanished, leaving only the frothing fog that covered Serena’s vision and wrenched her into the waking world.

As she became conscious, she peeled open one eye before closing it in pain. What a terrible hangover! What a thoroughly idiotic demon she was to drink so much! She tried to remember how much she’d drank, but just

imagining more alcohol made her feel queasy. Serena groaned before forcing herself back to unconsciousness where hopefully the next time she woke her head wouldn't be throbbing like it was.

When she once again stirred awake, she realised there was something warm and soft wrapped in her arms. This felt a lot nicer than her own head and if she focused on it, it helped distract herself from her hangover. She squeezed the thing in her arms, and it made a squeak.

How amusing.

She squeezed it again and it made another cute noise. Serena felt a warm hand hold hers.

“Mmm... morning,” Amelia whispered.

“Hungover,” muttered Serena, not liking the aftertaste in her mouth. “Heal me, please... before I throw up.” She didn't have to ask twice, and soon magical warmth rippled through her body, wiping away the awful pressure in her head. She no longer felt parched or tired. The general ache throughout her body vanished, and Serena felt like she could run a hundred clicks.

“Your magic is truly wonderful,” Serena said, blinking her eyes open. Now she saw why Amelia felt so warm. Both their upper bodies were devoid of all clothing, and Serena was wrapped around the girl. Serena snapped her eyes down, breathing a sigh of relief when she saw they still had their trousers on.

What had happened? With her head no longer splitting, she could cast her mind back to the night before. She started counting the bottles of loqua they had drunk. Two... four... six... seven hells, how much had they spent!? The pair of them had gotten one last bottle and then stumbled back to their room, only just keeping up appearances until the door was shut behind them, after which they had thrown themselves at each other in drunken passion.

Kissing. There was a lot of kissing.

When had the clothes come off?

Serena couldn't quite remember. She propped herself up on one arm and ran a hand over Amelia's stomach. "How are you doing?" She asked, surprising herself at how smooth she sounded. With a bitter realisation she noticed she felt pride at the events that had transpired. There was something so validating about having someone throw themselves at her with passion and desire.

To make things even more satisfying, this wasn't just a fling, it was *Amelia*. It was her *girlfriend*. Serena internally cringed at the next thought but couldn't deny it was a part of how she felt about the situation.

Her *conquest*.

"Mmm..." groaned Amelia, rolling onto her back, her left arm covering her eyes and her right was under the blanket, placed ontop of Serena's. "I smell of alcohol..." she mumbled.

"So do I," Serena said, turning her head and smelling herself. "When you drink so much, you sweat it out when you sleep. We'll probably have to get new sheets and wash up..."

"Uh, no need. Here," Amelia said before casting a spell Serena had seen the day before. It was Amelia's cleaning spell. Immediately, Serena felt *clean* as every iota of dried sweat, dirt, and alcohol was magically cleansed from her body. She ran her tongue around inside her mouth and found the spell also cleaned her teeth. She no longer felt the urge to go to the toilet.

"That's... ridiculously helpful. With that and your healing, would you ever need to eat, sleep, or change clothes?" She asked as the utility of such a powerful cleaning spell popped up in her mind. The normal cleaning spells she knew about were more of an assistance towards normal cleaning rather than a complete replacement.

"Maybe... even so, I want to keep eating delicious things, sleep in comfy beds, and try out pretty dresses," Amelia said, her voice sounding more

wakeful. “Also, look what you did!” Before Serena could say anything, Amelia threw the blanket down, exposing her naked chest and...

The teeth marks that had bruised one of her breasts.

Oops. Serena felt herself swallow nervously. Was that her? It must have been her, right?

“Was that me?” She asked, cupping Amelia’s breast and lightly rubbing it.

“Yes, it was you,” Amelia said with a sigh, but the corners of her mouth teased upwards as she removed her arm and made eye contact with Serena. “The tongue was nice, but you were too tipsy to control your teeth, stupid demon.” Amelia put both hands behind her head and gave Serena a sly grin. “Are you enjoying groping me? I won’t lie; it’s kind of relaxing.”

“Ah, sorry,” Serena said, removing her hand as a small amount of golden light with blue flecks healed the bruise away. That was a shame, she was going to ask if she could kiss it better. Before she could do anything else, Amelia turned to her front and exposed her back.

“Make it up to me,” she said.

“How?”

“Give me a massage,” Amelia said, her voice muffled by the pillow. “Not too firm but not too soft.” Serena obliged, running her hands up and down Amelia’s back. The human wasn’t muscular, but she was slim enough Serena could identify the different muscle groups and begin to massage them with varying levels of pressure while making adjustments based upon the cute noises coming from Amelia.

“Mmm...”

“Ah...”

“Right there...”

“Ahhh!”

The last was squeaked out while Amelia violently wriggled underneath her. It turned out that Amelia's sides were ticklish. How adorable! Serena filed that bit of knowledge away for future use before apologising and resuming the massage in a more acceptable way.

Five then ten minutes passed, and Amelia's breathing became slow and soft. Another five minutes and Serena was sure she had just massaged her girlfriend back to sleep. That was a good thing, right? She leaned in and gave her a soft kiss on the base of her neck.

"I'm going to wash up," she whispered before carefully clambering off the bed and heading to the washroom. With Amelia's magic she didn't need to clean herself, but that still didn't stop the satisfaction of a hot shower and the smell of the fancy soaps the inn had provided them.

As the hot water rained down on her back, and the room steamed up, Serena ran the events of the night over and over again in her head. Things they had spoken about, the stories and jokes they had both shared. The warmth of each other's bodies when they returned. On more than one occasion, Serena caught herself smiling happily to herself like an idiot.

You've become a rather smitten demon, haven't you? She thought to herself.

Her thoughts then turned to her dream. She ran it over in her head again and again. Something was so *familiar* about that human captain. Had she seen him in a book somewhere? Perhaps during a lesson in the academy? Was he the embodiment of the ship itself reaching out to her or something else? She would have to bring it up again with Anathor. This wasn't something she could just ignore.

She finished up, drying and dressing herself before returning to the bedroom to find Amelia propped up on the side of the bed, hugging a towel that covered her chest.

"Morning," Amelia said with a smile. She hopped off the bed and passed Serena. "You smell good," Amelia said, before opening the door, "You've made it so warm and steamy for me! Thank you!" The blond hair vanished

through the doorway and not long after the sounds of a sweet melody could be heard.

Serena listened for a moment, appreciating the talents of her girlfriend before collecting herself. She had a few things she wanted to get done today. Serena tidied up the bedroom, before arranging some spare blankets and pillows into an impromptu futon. For now, she wanted to make it look like they hadn't slept in the same bed. After she had finished redecorating, she pulled the cord to get the receptionist's attention.

A minute later, there was a polite knock on the door. "Reception," a voice sounded from outside. Serena opened the door, making sure to swing it wide enough that the attendant would see the futon. She stepped outside, closing the door behind her.

"We'd like some coffee for the room and something simple for breakfast. Does the kitchen have any soup prepared?" Even though Serena was fully healed, she still felt uncomfortable eating something too harsh on her stomach. It was probably a psychological thing, her mind was used to treating the stomach delicately after a night of heavy drinking.

"Ah, the cook has prepared a choco broth that should be ideal for hangovers. Would two portions be sufficient?"

"Yes, and some bread and butter to go with it."

"Of course. We've just had our morning delivery. We have some fine sourdough with a traditional honey glaze that would pair well."

"Good, and coffee?" Serena was wide awake without a glimmer of tiredness. Even so, if she could start the morning with a decent coffee she would.

"We have beans from the mountains of Shiloh, and the fields of Yamen. We also have a brand of Dacian coffee, although many of our customers find it too harsh."

"Nothing from Jimar?"

“I’m afraid we’ve run dry, Speaker Halen,” said the attendant, his voice sounding sympathetic, “The next delivery is scheduled for the weekend. We could find some on the market, if you’re willing to wait?”

“No need, Shiloh is fine. Bring a pot and two cups. Some biscuits as well.” Serena much preferred the bitterness of Jimari coffee, especially for handling hangovers. This time however, she wasn’t actually hungover, so the smoothness of Shiloh coffee would be acceptable.

“Very well. I’ll return in fifteen minutes.” The attendant clasped his hands together and bowed before walking away.

Serena watched him go before returning to the room and relaxing on a chair. Amelia appeared from the steamy bathroom, combing her wet hair. “Help me with these tassel things,” Amelia said, turning her back to Serena, who stood up and helped tighten the clothing properly. “What’s that about?” Amelia said, gesturing to the impromptu futon.

“Don’t want the attendants thinking we shared a bed, for now at least. It’s best to at least *try* and pretend we’re two Speaker friends.”

“Ah, sure,” Amelia said, a moment in silence passing before she spoke again, “Do you really think we can keep it a secret for long?”

“Seven hells, no,” Serena finished helping dress Amelia and rotated the human to face her. “But it would help to warm them to the idea somewhat slowly. I figure people like Tomes will figure it out pretty quickly.”

“Will the crew take it alright? It won’t cause any problems with the uh, ship command?”

“No,” Serena shook her head. Her officers and crew were better than that. “Their loyalty is greater than any bias they may have. As long as I don’t try and sail off to join the Karligard Navy they won’t mention it much.”

“But I’m not even from Karligard!” Amelia protested.

“Best you pretend to be. This morning I’ll take you over everything I know about the country, so you should somewhat be able to pass as coming from there. Although if you’re ever asked anything you don’t know but feel like you should, you can brush off your ignorance as a result of you spending most of your time travelling.”

“Right, but won’t the Karligard authorities eventually look into it?”

“By then, you’ll hopefully be a citizen of Cascadia and a sanctioned Speaker.”

“Mmm, alright! So, what’s the plan for today?”

“First, breakfast and coffee,” Serena began, and as if on cue a polite knock sounded at the door. Serena opened it to find the attendant with a tray of food and coffee. “Ah, thank you,” She said, taking it from him. She closed the door and set the tray on the table.

“Is that *butter*!?” Amelia whispered excitedly.

“Yes, now let’s eat.” They both sat at the table and Serena poured them both a cup of coffee from the pot. “These are beans from Shiloh. They’re considered far more smooth and less bitter than Jimari coffee. I think you might find it more pleasant.” Amelia took a sip, and Serena made a few adjustments to the human’s posture and the way she was handling the cup.

“Purse your lips and take a small sip; it’s important to be able to drink like this without making any slurping noises. At least, in polite company.” Serena demonstrated, and Amelia spent a moment copying her, eventually being able to drink the coffee without any noise.

“Well, I feel like a proper noble lady now!” Amelia exclaimed. “What about the soup? Is there a fancy way to eat that I need to learn?”

“Normally, soup wouldn’t be served to ladies in high society. If it ever is, it’s only consumed a spoonful at a time. Dipping bread and butter would be shocking to the stuck-up bitches you find around some tables.” Serena shrugged, buttering a piece of bread and dipping it into the choco soup.

“Given we’re in private and meant to be hungover, we can be excused.” She bit into the bread, enjoying the flavours of the butter and choco melding together in her mouth.

Amelia copied her, and a very unnoble moan of happiness erupted from the human as she munched on the bread. “Oh my,” Amelia said between mouthfuls, “I’d forgotten how good butter is. Please tell me you also have cheese...”

“Yes, but it’s not common in the East. You’ll find that it’s popular in Centralis and the North.”

“Mmm...” murmured Amelia, and the both of them continued eating and sipping coffee. Serena did her best to give Amelia a rundown of Karligard. Its government, people and culture. She missed plenty of areas, but if Amelia tactfully slipped in a tidbit or a reference here or there, she could plausibly pass as a native who spent most of her time travelling. After a few minutes, the bowls and cups were empty, and they both sat back, satisfied.

“Right,” Said Serena after taking a moment, “We’re going to the Kenhoro Officer Academy.”

“Why?”

“I need to speak to someone there, and we can make use of their private training rooms to give you another lesson. Time to have you swinging a wooden sword.”

Amelia’s eyes sparkled. “Really!?” She beamed, “I get to swing an actual weapon!?” Serena snorted at that. It was strange seeing the human get so excited over swinging a sword when Amelia was herself a walking weapon.

“Yes,” Serena replied, keeping her thoughts to herself. “We’ll go through your katas with the sword movements and introduce you to some basic three-step drills.”

“Is this the academy you graduated from?”

“No,” Serena said, shaking her head, “But as a Speaker, I’m entitled to use its facilities how I wish. My academy was based in the Three Sisters.”

“Three Sisters?”

“The sister cities of Asamoto, Asamaywa and Asamino. They’re right next to each other and are so connected they are basically one huge city. I grew up in Asamino and entered the Asamaywa Flight Academy for my officer training.”

“Will we ever go there?” Amelia asked, her eyes brimming with hope.

“Of course,” Serena said, nodding. “It’s where the main family holdings are. I’m sure we’ll visit there on many an occasion.”

“Cool! I can’t wait!”

Serena stood up, grabbing and sheathing her marble sword in her belt, an impromptu solution while she didn’t have a sheath for it. “Let’s go,” she said, and the pair of them went down to reception. She found Amelia a rainhat, courtesy of the inn, and also found herself one that fitted her horns. Serena had Amelia tie her hair up so her blond hair didn’t stand out from the native demons.

Before they left, Serena found that morning's broadsheets and cast an eye over the news. The main headline was again talking about Admiral Zhao’s progress, while in a corner of the paper was a small article titled *Highguard Hotel Raid*. Skimming through the text, Serena was relieved to find neither her nor Amelia were named, and the events of the cafe battle were not mentioned at all. Someone had put a blocker in the papers, forbidding them to report on it.

Leaving the inn they caught a tram into Central, and then hopped another one to get to the north side of the city where the academy was. The building was isolated, with a large expanse of green grass and a wall of trees protecting it from the busy city around it. It was an enormous square-shaped building similar to the inn. Unlike the inn, which had a garden in its centre, this building had an arena and training ground.

Each corner of the academy had a pagoda-like structure reaching upwards, where the faculty would reside. At the back, there was a raised structure between the two corners where the most important offices and libraries were located.

The gates were open and Serena and Amelia stepped through. They didn't get far before a pair of gate guards intercepted them.

"Hail!" They called, their neat black uniform with silver buttons giving them a rather formal look. "The public cannot bring weapons onto the ground; who are you?" The guards eyed them suspiciously, but not so much that their hands hovered on their weapons.

Serena raised the rainhat so they could see her face clearly. "I am Speaker Halen, here to meet the grandmaster and make use of your training facilities, if they are available." Serena reached over and tilted Amelia's hat. "This is Speaker Thornheart, employee of House Halen who I am teaching the sword."

The guards glanced at each other and had a hurried discussion. Serena heard one of them mutter, "That's really her, I saw her photo in the news." A few moments later, they turned back towards the pair.

"One of us will guide you to the grandmaster, but you'll need his permission for a human Speaker to enter the grounds."

For a moment Serena thought about challenging the guard but decided against it. It wasn't an unreasonable request and they were just doing their job. "Very well," she said as she turned to Amelia. "Wait outside. Don't run off. If anyone tries to make you go anywhere or do something use my name." Serena thought for a moment. "If that doesn't work beat them to a pulp, but avoid Speaking if you can help it."

"O-okay! I'll be waiting!" Amelia gave a quick thumbs up before skipping back outside the gates and sitting against the entryway.

"Keep an eye on her," she instructed the remaining guard, "Don't try anything funny. She's a capable Speaker."

“Y-yes, Speaker Halen!”

“Let’s go,” she said to her guide, and she was led through the grounds into the depths of the building. As she was guided, she saw trainee officers striding about, chattering and carrying heavy books. It wasn’t until she passed a few instructors who recognised her, with one or two giving her salutes, that the students started casting looks in her direction and whispering amongst themselves.

“Who’s that?”

“She must be important if Instructor Won saluted her...”

“Those horns are familiar...”

“Is she a new instructor?”

Soon they left the gossiping students behind and she was led up multiple flights of stairs and through several corridors before stopping at a large ironwood door. A brass plaque on the front simply read *Director*. The guard rapped his knuckles against the solid wood.

“It’s open,” came a gruff voice from within.

The guard opened the door, and Serena could make out an office that was best described as *chaotic-neatness*. It reminded her a little of Tome's quarters.

“Speaker Halen is here to meet with you, director,” the guard informed.

“Mmm? Is that so? Well then, let her in and return to your post.”

“Yes, director,” the guard bowed and left Serena to her own devices. She stepped into the office, greeting a pair of crimson eyes and large bull horns that looked terribly familiar.

“Grandmaster Gu, it’s a pleasure,” Serena greeted, clasping her hands together in a tidy bow. “I believe we last met at my graduation in Asamaywa?”

“Mmm... come here, Serena. Let’s have a look at your hands...” The grandmaster motioned for her to approach and Serena walked over to his desk. The old demon took her hands in his own and examined them with a thoughtful expression.

“Your military life has kept you busy...” He mumered, turning her hands this way and that. “I see you’ve kept your skills, even improved them. What aura can you manifest under *Narean*

now?”

“I... am just breaking into blue, grandmaster. I have reached it twice. Once under my control and the other... not.”

“Mmm... *Narean* can be demanding, can he not? You must train your will and determination as much as the sword itself.”

“Yes, grandmaster.”

“Still, to lose such an awful talent like yourself to my brother! A terrible tragedy! Can I not convince you to spend a few semesters here as an instructor?”

“I apologise, but my military duties take me elsewhere currently.”

“Gah! You’re wasted in the military, you know that, don’t you, Serena Halen?”

“I... I’m comfortable where I am.”

“Well then,” Grandmaster Gu sighed, reclining into his chair. “For what purpose have you visited me?”

“I-” Serena began but cut herself off. She organised her thoughts before beginning again. “There was a recent battle in the city centre, I trust you’re aware of it?” Someone of the grandmaster’s skill would easily detect the Spoken Words from yesterday. Grandmaster Gu nodded slowly.

“There were two trainee cadets that died. I believe it was one trainee Meng and one trainee Yin.” The Grandmaster stared at her for a moment before opening his mouth.

“Yes, two of ours.”

“They... died following my orders. They died doing their duty.” Serena took a breath, “Through you, I would like to use my Speakers privilege to communicate an official commendation for them both. I would like to recommend a bronze eagle each and, if possible, if you are amenable to it, for them to post-mortem graduate as a commissioned officer.”

The Grandmaster was silent for a dozen seconds and Serena had to make a conscious effort to avoid swallowing awkwardly.

“You... feel guilty over their deaths?” He asked her in a quiet voice.

“I cannot deny it... I do,” Serena muttered. The Grandmaster was quiet for another period before sighing. The demon reached into a pocket and put on a pair of spectacles. He fumbled around his desk, finding pen and paper.

“You really should consider becoming an instructor. The military isn’t for you, Speaker Halen. Now then... how would you like to word this? Best be polite; the Greatlord will be reading it.”

“Ah,” Serena felt a burden lift from her. She couldn’t resurrect the dead. No-one could. What she could do was give the fallen a little honour and something for their families to ease their grieving. Over the next few minutes, she worked with Grandmaster Gu to word the recommendation properly.

“Thank you for your assistance, grandmaster,” Serena said, standing up after signing the final version. “There is one other matter I wish to cover.”

“What is it?”

“Is the academy private training grounds for instructors, free for use? I have another Speaker with me, someone I’ve promised to teach the sword. With

your permission, I would like to make use of them.” Officially Serena didn’t need the grandmaster's permission. She even had the right to eject any non-Speakers from whatever training session they were in, but that was not a power she would abuse, especially in front of someone she respected so much.

“Another Speaker? This wouldn’t be a certain Miss Thornheart whose name I’ve been hearing here and there?”

“That... would be correct. I have employed her under my name for House Halen. She’s an excellent healer and has taken an interest in the sword.”

“Oh?” The grandmaster’s bushy eyebrow rose. “Does she have any talent?”

“It...” Serena thought about the question a little longer. “It’s hard, she’s an amateur in the sword, but being a Speaker, her constitution far outstrips even the most talented non-Speaker. It’s too early for me to tell if she has any real talent.”

“What’s her disposition?”

“She’s compassionate, excitable and optimistic. However, she is a little naive,” Serena said, giving a blunt and honest overview of Amelia’s personality.

“Mmm... so unsuited for the military?”

“That may be so, but she’s not in the chain of command. She’s merely under my employ.”

“Have you ever considered sponsoring her for the swordsmanship courses here? Being human, she won’t be able to become an officer. I’ll never turn down a soul that’s passionate about the sword, even if they’re a human Speaker.”

Serena gave the grandmaster a wirey smile. “You haven’t even met her, and you’re already trying to pull her into your tutelage?”

“Tsk!” The grandmaster clicked his tongue, “I’ve lost one talented Speaker to my brother! Before I know it, he’ll take another!”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to decline for now,” Serena said, inclining her head as she politely refused the man. She tried to imagine Amelia as a student; her blond hair bouncing in a sea of horns as she rushed to class. It was... surprisingly easy to picture, actually. Nevertheless, she couldn't envision a pathway that would end with Amelia attending an academy. Not yet, anyway.

“Stubborn...” mumbled the grandmaster. “Very well. I’ll let you use one of the private training halls. Only... I’d like to watch the session. You can’t get me excited over a prospective talent in my halls and then deny me the opportunity to witness it myself, right?”

Serena took a moment to think. It was a fair request and she had no real reason to deny it. “Alright,” she said, “What training hall is free?”

“Ah,” the grandmaster waved his hands dismissively. “I’ll come with you to get her, and then we’ll go together and find a hall. Where is she now?”

“I left her at the gate with the guard. They weren’t willing to let a human Speaker onto the grounds without your permission.”

“Damn straight,” the grandmaster snorted. “We’re at war. Can’t be too careful. Come on then, Speaker Halen. Let’s get these old bones moving.” The old demon clambered up. His clothing hid his body but Serena could tell from his movements that underneath he possessed an iron body that would rival any younger demon’s effort.

Together they left the office and returned to the gate. There they found the gate guard sweating nervously. Amelia stood nearby, idly kicking rocks and pebbles and whistling awkwardly.

“Uh, hello,” She said, “A little problem...”

Serena took a moment to mentally prepare herself. “What’s happened?” Amelia gestured to the side and Serena turned her head to see a demon

encased in the ground. Earth magic had been used to wrap him in stone, leaving only his head sticking out. Serena grinned before taking her time to pace over to the grumbling demon.

“Serena!” The trapped demon begged, “Tell her I’m not an assassin! This is very humiliating!”

“Hrmph!” Amelia folded her arms, looking away. “You might not be an assassin, but you’re definitely a weirdo! What kind of strange man tries to give a young, innocent girl like myself alcohol in broad daylight? Creep!”

Serena tapped her foot against the stone encasing the poor demon. “Why did I never think to do this myself?” She pondered out loud. “So, what can we do for you, Officer Adachi?”

Chapter Twenty-Two:

Grandmaster Grandpa

“How’d this happen, then?” Serena asked Amelia, lightly kicking the stone encasing the complaining demon.

“This *weirdo*,” Amelia made sure to emphasise that word for extra effect, “Came up to me like some homeless beggar and tried to get me to go with him to some *traveller’s bed* or whatever! Shameless!”

“Is that so?” Serena intoned, drawing her marbled sword, “Which bit do you want me to cut off first, *Aiden the Drunk*?” The blade glowed red as aura coursed through it, causing the trapped demon’s eyes to shake in panic. There was an older demon with Serena who was watching the events with an amused expression on his face. He looked old and gave her a grandfather vibe, but Amelia’s instincts told her he was on par if not more dangerous than Serena was.

A Speaker of at least one Word, for sure.

“T-traveller’s Rest!” The trapped demon cried, “Traveller’s Rest! It’s a new pale ale from the Sabanis Dominance! I thought we could get a drink while we waited for you to do whatever you were doing! And...” The trapped demon eyed the blade nervously. “It’s *Aiden The Drinker*, remember!? Unbeaten and unrivalled!?”

“Hmm...” Serena tilted her head, a mock expression of thoughtfulness painted on her face. “I’m not sure you’re deserving of that title anymore. Just last night, the pair of us put away one, two...” Serena counted on one hand, “... *three* bottles of *green* loqua, and the same amount of blue.” She

waved the three raised fingers in the face of the demon called Aiden The Drunk.

“You... you drank loqua? Without me!?” Aiden protested before flicking his eyes between Amelia and Serena. “But... how are you both not hungover? That should- oh.” He cut himself short, a moment of realisation as his eyes settled on Amelia, who strode over and crossed her arms as she towered over the encased demon.

It sure felt good to look down on others like this! Amelia made a mental decision to avoid positions of power when possible. Although... would it be so bad? A ruler who looked this cute would automatically do amazing, right?

“So you’re the one who’s supposed to be doing a profile on me, huh?” She said, trying to inject as much disapproval as possible into her voice. “*Well*, I’ll be sure to send Centralis my own report on the conduct of their employees! I even have a witness!” Amelia gestured to the sweating gate guard who looked like he was going to bolt at any moment.

“Wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Serena said with a smile. Amelia saw her looking with amusement at the nervous guard. “Did Officer Adachi mention he was with Intelligence? Mention my name?”

“Uh...” she mumbled.

“Yes!” exclaimed Aiden. “Yes, I did! I told her we were friends at the academy!”

“Alright, *fine!*” Amelia clicked her tongue. “He may have mentioned *something* along those lines, but you should have seen how he approached me! He was all so arrogant and confident! Like he’s never been rejected by a woman before! It pissed me off, so I...” She trailed off, realising this wasn’t making her sound very good at all. “... put him in the ground...” she mumbled.

“I see...” Serena said. Amelia watched her eyes feeling a hint of regret rising in her stomach. Thankfully, Serena seemed more amused by the

situation instead of being angered. It looked like Aiden The Drunk really was an old friend.

“Anyway,” Serena continued, “Amelia, this is Grandmaster Gu, Lord and Director of the Kenhoro Officer Academy. He has kindly allowed us to use the private training facilities for our lesson, and he will be observing our progress. His skill and insights will be invaluable to the both of us.”

Oh? This old demon was actually someone amazing! Amelia bounced up to him, giving him her best version of a traditional Manwese bow. “Nice to meet you, grandpa!”

“G-grandpa!?” Both Serena and Grandmaster Gu stuttered in unison.

“Thanks for letting us use your facilities! I can’t wait!” She flashed the old demon her second-best smile. The best one was, of course, only shown to Serena!

“Hrmph, well...” Grandmaster Gu mumbled, rubbing his beard and looking to the side. He murmured something strange about always wanting a granddaughter, but Amelia chose to ignore it. Everyone was a little weird, right? She was happy to forget an old demon’s idiosyncrasies if he could help teach both her and Serena!

“If you three are done becoming a family, could someone please *get me the hell out of here!*” The trapped demon cried in frustration. Amelia rolled her eyes. So dramatic! She agitated the aether inside her. The movement of her reserves and her ability to manifest spells was noticeably easier than when she had first arrived. Her intuition - backed by stats boosted by thousand-hour grinds - was becoming more reliable and more straightforward to understand by the day.

The aether obeyed her command and the stone flowed like liquid off Aiden. He rolled to his side, groaning in relief and Amelia made the extra effort to smooth the pavement. It didn’t look *quite* the same as before, but it was good enough. Maybe it would become a tourist spot! A place where the students would whisper stories in excited tones. Tales of when *Amelia Thornheart* - House Halen’s most powerful maid - defended *Serena Halen*

- Cascadia's prettiest demon - from a lecherous drunk and his antics!

Yup! That was how she would tell the story in the future!

Aiden gathered himself. His clothes were dusty and dirty, and it was *kind of* Amelia's fault so she reached out with a cleaning spell and made him look new. The demon looked over himself in wonder before turning his eyes to her. "That was your magic?" He asked, and Amelia nodded in reply.

"You're welcome!" She said before offering her hand to him. "Sorry about all that, I was... surprised, you know?" Amelia wiggled her outstretched hand. "We can be friends, right!?"

Aiden eyed the wiggling hand suspiciously. "You're not going to turn me into a fish or anything?" He asked with a raised eyebrow before shaking her hand.

Amelia giggled but didn't answer his question. Could she turn him into a fish? She ran her mind over the countless demonic spells she had memorised, trying to remember if there were any that could polymorph another person. Before she could find one, Serena interrupted her thoughts.

"Grandmaster Gu. As you may have gathered, this is Speaker Thornheart," Serena coughed lightly into her hand. "She can be a bit *forward*," for some reason, Serena glared at her when she emphasised that word. Weird. "But she's rather friendly. Shall we proceed? Officer Adachi, would you like to watch?"

"You're inviting me?" Aiden asked, looking surprised.

"Well, I was hoping to speak to you about yesterday's events, and I figured you might as well be introduced to Speaker Thornheart before the festival."

"Right... right. I'd be delighted to come along. If it's alright with Grandmaster Gu?"

Grandmaster Gu rubbed his beard. "I don't see why not," he said. In response, Aiden gave a quick bow and fell in line as they marched towards

the academy's front door leaving behind the fumbling gate guard.

The building was almost entirely made of wood, with only a stone foundation and paper windows. Above the enormous front door was a huge wooden beam that looked like someone had attacked it with a sword.

"What's that about?" She asked, pointing to the damaged wood.

Behind her, Aiden groaned, Serena snorted, and the Grandmaster chuckled. "I'll tell you later," Serena said, "It's a funny story."

"Sure!" Amelia responded, trying to think of reasons why someone would carve sword marks into wood.

The group of them entered the academy with its flowing students and wide corridors. The paper windows let in a large amount of natural light, although Amelia could see aetherlights had been installed throughout the building. Given that the building was one huge fire hazard, it made sense not to have gas lamps.

As they travelled, the passing students all bowed to the Grandmaster; even the older-looking demons who Amelia guessed were teachers bowed deeply. Students and teachers alike wore coloured belts. Many were gray but she often saw students with red belts and some with orange. All the teachers seemed to wear yellow belts.

"What do the belt colours mean?" She whispered.

"The highest rank aura they can manifest," Serena whispered back, "Red is the first and easiest, followed by orange and yellow. Yellow is the minimum requirement to become an academy instructor."

"None of the instructors can Speak?" She asked. All the instructors they had passed had yellow belts, but none had the telltale green signifying fourth-level aura.

"Some can," Serena answered, "But Speakers don't advertise their capabilities so freely. Yellow is the highest aura they'll admit to publicly." Amelia nodded at that reasoning. It was in line with what Serena had told

her about Speakers previously. Amelia reinforced the existing mental note she had made about not being forthcoming regarding her ability to Speak any Second Words. Serena had, on more than one occasion, *very* firmly explained how important it was to keep that secret until Cascasia had truly incorporated her as a citizen of the empire.

After a few minutes of walking, they eventually entered a large training hall. Half of the floor was sand, while the other half was a wooden platform raised a quarter step above the ground. The room had a high ceiling and no windows. It was lit by several rows of aetherlights circling the wooden walls.

“There is an enchantment on the room,” said Grandmaster Gu as he closed the door behind them. “Unless you break the walls themselves, no sound will escape.” He brought the group to one side, which was lined with racks of wooden swords and weights. “Well then, Speaker Halen. You are her instructor. I’ll observe... for now.”

“T-thank you, Grandmaster Gu,” Serena said. Amelia couldn’t help frowning at her stuttering. Was Serena nervous? Did she want to impress the Grandmaster herself? Well then! She would do her very best as a disciplined and hardworking student to make *Sensei Halen* look as good as possible! Sadly, she wouldn’t be able to openly flirt with her girlfriend, but she was sure the pair of them could catch up that very night.

“Take this,” Serena said, handing her a four-foot wooden sword with a small circular guard. “Hold it out like this,” Serena demonstrated by holding her arm out to her side as straight as an arrow. Amelia copied the motion obediently. “Does it feel light?” Serena asked, and Amelia nodded. Her sword was taken from her and Serena handed her another, slightly heavier sword.

Putting her arm out again, Amelia found she could barely feel any difference between this and the last one. “Still light,” She said to Serena, who took another wooden sword and swapped it out with her current one. This repeated for another five or six swords until Amelia started to feel the slightest stress on her shoulders when holding out the weapon.

“This one feels slightly heavy,” she said. Serena nodded, taking the sword from her. She looked thoughtful for a second and then took a previous sword Amelia had already determined to be too light and gave it to her.

“Christ... starting with the number eight,” Aiden muttered from the side.

“Use this one. It might feel light now, but when you’ve been swinging for an hour, it’ll put your untrained muscles to the test.” Serena flashed a glance at the pair observing them. “We’ll go through some stretches to warm up. Here’s how you should hold your sword in both hands,” Serena demonstrated, instructing Amelia how to move each finger individually to wrap the handle properly.

After her grip was sorted Serena had her hold the sword while moving through the katas she knew. This time she was instructed to exaggerate her stances so her tendons and muscles would stretch and relax as she progressed through the sequenced movements.

Amelia noted that unlike on the bridge of the *Vengeance*, Serena wasn’t barking orders at her. She was - if anything - speaking *softly* to her. Amelia wondered if that was because they were in a much more private setting or because there was a super important grandmaster watching.

Or was it because they slept together?

She hoped it was that reason.

“This is

shomen,” Serena demonstrated, striking down her sword in a perfect downward slash. “It’s the vertical strike. Try to perform it now while in *hachiji-dachi*, the natural stance.” Amelia attempted to copy the strike as instructed, but it was... messy. Her perception was incredibly high but all that meant was that she could see even more *clearly* how bad her rendition of *shomen* was.

Serena had her make another dozen strikes before she began correcting her. “Tense your lats when you make your strike; try again.” Amelia followed as

best she could, and the moment she got the hang of one change another adjustment was made.

“Your shoulders are raising upwards. This happens when the lats are relaxed at the start. They should always be slightly tensed.”

“Your grip is too tight. When you grip something too tightly, muscles in the forearm will hinder your movement.”

“Breath out a little when you strike; breathe in when you prepare.”

As the instructions came, Amelia sank deeper into her focus. Any urges to be cheeky or tease Serena vanished as Amelia became fully determined to master this one strike. With every suggestion Serena made, the path Amelia’s sword made looked steadier and steadier. Her game character knew Words regarding martial arts, but that was only because Amelia had spent spare points unlocking them. She had never actually geared out her demonic mage as a melee build to try it out.

Amelia had raw power. In the sword and especially in magic. What she didn’t have was *experience*. She was certain her focus on magic in the game had created a natural magical intuition regarding using aether in this world, but the same could not be said for swinging a sword. Every improvement she made to her swing was something she *earned* through focus and effort.

It was because of that Amelia - the demonic combat mage - was falling in love with the sword.

“Well done,” Serena said, a small smile on her lips. It seemed the previous nervousness had vanished and her girlfriend was in full *Sensei* mode. “Now we will cover *keisa-giri*. This is a diagonal cut from the shoulder to the kidney. It looks like this,” Serena demonstrated the strike and Amelia thought it looked perfect. Would she ever be able to duplicate that? To strike so cleanly with no wasted movement?

“You need to change how you move slightly when you make this strike,” Serena explained, guiding Amelia’s body through the motions slowly at first and then at increasing speed. Like before, Amelia would make several

dozen attempts before Serena would point out a single thing to fix, and then Amelia would focus on that until Serena was satisfied.

After an unknown amount of time, Serena took Amelia through her katas which she had used to practice her stances. This time she would swing the sword as she moved into each stance, making either *shomen*, the vertical cut, or *keisa-giri*, the diagonal one.

There were still movements in the kata that had sword movements Amelia hadn't learnt but she was instructed to skip them and continue on. After running through the movements a few more times, Serena taught her how to block an incoming vertical or diagonal attack. It took a while for Amelia to get used to the angle but eventually she became comfortable with it.

Next, Serena took her through *three-step* sparring, which were formalised ways of attacking and defending in pairs. One side would take three steps, striking in a pre-defined way while the other would back away, defending with their weapon. Then the roles would reverse and the defender would attack. At the end, both individuals would step back and bow to each other.

Amelia grinned as she blocked an incoming strike from Serena. This was fun! There was so much to learn and it was so tremendously *satisfying* to learn it! She would make her own stone sword when she got back to the inn that night and keep practising.

"Alright," Serena said after they had finished and bowed to each other. "Let's take a break and have some food. It's been two hours."

"Two hours!?"

"Yes. It's lunchtime. How do your arms feel?"

"They feel good. My shoulders are aching a little, though!"

Serena nodded, "The shoulder muscles are small and easily exhausted. I imagine they'll be sore tomorrow. Try and resist healing yourself. I think I remember that magical healing can reduce the efficiency of muscle training."

“O-okay!” Amelia didn’t want to heal away muscle soreness unless it was so bad she couldn’t move. She *wanted* to feel the soreness the next day. It meant she had worked hard and had improved! The pair of them joined the Grandmaster and Aiden who were nibbling on steaming buns that made her stomach rumble.

“This brings me back,” Serena said taking a bun and handing one to Amelia. They were hot but not so much they were uncomfortable to eat. Amelia figured she could probably eat lava and be okay but that didn’t mean she would be comfortable doing it. “I lived on these in the academy,” Serena mumbled with a dash of affection in her voice.

Amelia took a bite and found some meat inside. “They’re good but a bit bland. Could do with some spices, I think.” She said.

“They are intentionally bland,” the Grandmaster piped up. “It’s an old tradition. The idea is that all excitement and focus should come from the sword and the training. Delicious food would only distract the mind.”

Amelia nodded. “That makes sense, thanks grandpa!” She gave him a cheerful thumbs up.

“Ack! Ack!” Serena choked on her food before swallowing audibly. “Ahem, excuse me,” she said, patting her chest. “After we’ve eaten, we’ll go through some very light sparring before heading back to clean up,” Serena paused, “Although... we wouldn’t need to...”

“Sure!” Amelia chirped. She could just magically clean them of any dirt and sweat once the training was over. “I’d like to explore the city a bit more, if that’s okay?”

“We’ll go through the market on the way back to the docks. I need to see what’s going on with the repairs.” With that, the four of them ate in silence for a moment. Amelia tried to focus on the training, but her mind wandered to other things that had happened that day.

“So...” she began, “What’s the sword marks above the entrance about?” Her question caused a ripple of amusement and mirth in the group.

“It’s a joke,” Serena said as she swallowed her last bite. “It’s a jest played on the first-years by the seniors. Here and also in the academy back in Asamaywa.”

“A joke?”

“Right, so what happens is some fresh-faced trainee from Centralis earns their placement here or in another academy in the East, where all the best swordsmen and women are,” Serena nodded her head at the Grandmaster, who tilted his in response. “They arrive, and they see these mysterious sword marks on the wood. ‘What’s that?’ They ask.”

“Then a senior appears and tells them, ‘That’s the hidden technique of the ancient master who built this academy centuries ago. Only the person who truly understands the sword can decipher this ultimate technique said to strike down Speakers!’ Ha!” Serena laughed.

“Why’s that funny?” Amelia asked. “It sounds cool!”

“Because those sword marks are changed every year - often by the winner of that year’s academy tournament. The sword marks mean nothing! I added my own back when I won at the end of my third year, before graduation.”

“You added a smiley face, didn’t you?” Aiden said, grinning.

“That’s right! If you tilt your head like this,” Serena tilted her head awkwardly to the side, “It looks like a smiley face. I even added a little tongue! The Grandmaster made me change it a little as it was too obvious.”

Serena, Aiden, and Amelia all laughed at that, and even the Grandmaster gave a hearty chuckle.

“It has some value,” Serena explained. “It gets the first-years riled up and focused. Some of them go through the entire first year without it being explained to them! Sometimes we would take bets to see when a certain person would realise the joke or not. Ah... good times...” She leaned back on her hands, smiling.

"Took two semesters before somebody told me," grumbled Aiden.

"You were told earlier, but you were drinking so much you kept forgetting!" Serena said, laughing.

"You youngsters aren't the only ones having fun," Grandmaster Gu said, standing up. "When I last went to see my brother, I think this was two years ago now..." The old demon straightened his posture, looking dignified. "My brother was late returning from a trip, so I was met with all the instructors to welcome me to the academy. They led me to the front gate, and I stopped like this," The Grandmaster tilted his head up with a mock expression of surprise.

"By the fell gods, what heights has my brother's sword reached now? What next, will he split the very heavens apart?' Ha! And then I left the instructors there, and I swear they spent the entire evening second-guessing and arguing!"

The four of them burst out laughing. Amelia grinned in happiness. She loved this! A group of people just sitting about having a good time. One girlfriend, one grandpa, and possibly a drinking buddy. They made a good group and Amelia knew she would fondly remember this for a long time.

"Serena," said the Grandmaster as he sat back down. "How long will you be in Kenhoro?"

"Likely no longer than a month, maybe three weeks. The Greatlord is sending us extra pairs of horns to assist our ship repairs."

"The pair of you should make use of this hall daily. I'll make sure it's available."

"Ah - it's very kind of you but--"

"I will also personally give you daily training. Let's see if we can secure that blue aura."

“I happily accept,” Serena tilted her head, “Thank you, Grandmaster.” Amelia found the quick turn-around amusing. Private tutoring from a Grandmaster must be extremely valuable for Serena to change her mind so quickly. She was also delighted with this arrangement. She could train in the sword every day! How much better would she be in a month!?

“You broke into blue?” Aiden asked, his eyes widened in surprise.

“Just about,” answered Serena.

“That’s incredible. You always were an unbelievable talent, but to hit *blue*. I mean... well done, friend.” Aiden raised a cup of water as a toast.

“What about you? Ever thought you return to training?”

“Ah, I’m afraid not,” Aiden said, glancing awkwardly at the Grandmaster sitting next to him, “I was told there was an infinite number of ways to swing a sword, so I decided I would also prove there are as many variations of beer!”

“You idiot,” Serena said.

“Mister Adachi,” the Grandmaster intoned, “Although you may have lost your way, you’re welcome to attend our future sessions. Who knows, perhaps a sword will find its way into your hand again?”

“Ah... We’ll have to see, I guess...” Aiden rubbed his chin awkwardly.

“Shall we resume the lesson?” Serena asked, fixing her eyes on Amelia.

“Uh, sure!” Amelia jumped up. She was excited to continue, to experience that satisfying feeling of progress again!

“If it’s okay with you, Speaker Halen,” grumbled the Grandmaster as he clambered up. “I would like to take over the remainder of today’s session.” He cast his pair of eyes over Amelia. They were almost as crimson as Serena’s. Almost.

“Let’s see what you’re really capable of then, Speaker Thornheart,” said the Grandmaster, pulling a much heavier sword from the wall and gesturing for Amelia to join him. There was a glint of something in his eyes. Amelia swallowed, suddenly feeling nervous, before shuffling over obediently.

Maybe this grandpa was scary, after all.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Tea With The Empress

Amelia blocked the three-strike combination with ease. Now that she knew how to tense the muscles in the right places to avoid her guard collapsing, defending against the attacks that came in a half-second was becoming satisfyingly easy.

Another dozen swings came at her from the grandmaster. At first, it was a challenge, but then Amelia understood it was only a matter of figuring out how to move her body in a way that could keep up with her perception. She could *see* every attack and follow the sword's path through the air. Seeing, however, was very different from being able to do something about it.

A swing from an unfamiliar direction came at the end of the combination, and the strike broke through her improvised deflection before stopping at the centre of her chest.

“That was *mune-tsuki*, the chest thrust,” The grandmaster grumbled. “Here, this is how you deflect it.” Amelia was shown in ever-increasing detail how to defend against a thrust. She gave her utmost attention, not wanting to disappoint the old man.

Besides, he was a *little* intimidating. Amelia’s instincts reassured her that the defences of her layered wards would hold against anything he could throw at her, but that didn’t stop the sheer *presence* of the demon keeping her on edge. Every one of his movements felt, at a moment's notice, like it could snap into a deadly attack. Furthermore, having a sword swing at her face faster than her body could react often triggered a flinching reaction that she was trying her best to overcome.

Beyond that, Amelia had to admit the grandmaster was an exceptional *sensei*, far more skilled at tutoring than Serena was. Serena was great at identifying mistakes and slowly ironing them out, but this old demon was adjusting things at just the right time to prevent those mistakes from ever manifesting in the first place. Every instruction he gave came with it decades of experience that Serena had yet to overcome.

They began sparring again, which really just consisted of Amelia defending against an assault with no opportunity to counter-attack. She could *perceive* what she thought were openings, but she had no idea how to manoeuvre her body in such a way to make use of them. This time, the attacks against her included the occasional thrust and after an unknown amount of time, Amelia started to feel confident in defending against them even as her body grew tired and sweat dripped down her face.

Serena had been right. The sword she held no longer felt very light.

Again, another attack was thrown in that Amelia couldn't defend against. Sometimes it was a new strike or a variation of an existing strike that somehow slipped by her guard. With each addition, they would stop, and the grandmaster would carefully explain how she should adjust to the new threat. After he was satisfied she understood his explanation they would continue sparring.

Just as her confidence grew and she felt she was starting to piece things together, the grandmaster cloaked his body and weapon in red, the first aura. The speed and aggression suddenly increased drastically, and Amelia was only barely defending against each strike. Her blocks, which she felt had become controlled and firm, were now hastily formed one after another, only just fending off one strike before the next one came.

Her hands ached, and her shoulders felt weak. It wasn't long before her guard collapsed, and the wooden blade was once again at her throat.

"Ha... Ha..." Amelia breathed heavily. For someone untrained, relying on base stats and cloaked wards, her body had held out for a long time, but it could do no more. Without healing herself or Speaking, her strength was all but spent until she rested.

“That’s enough for today. Well done, Speaker Thornheart.” The grandmaster gave a neat bow, and Amelia reciprocated with her own, which was far more clumsy than she would have liked.

“Ah... T-thank you. Now if you excuse me...” Amelia flopped onto the wooden floor. “I’m just going to have a little nap here...” She heard a familiar click of Serena’s tongue and could imagine the shaking head of disapproval, but she didn’t care. The blood pounded in her ears, and she tasted iron in her mouth.

She would ask Serena to give her a nice long massage later.

“What do you think, Grandmaster?” Amelia heard Serena ask.

“Instructing Speakers is fundamentally different,” the grandmaster replied. “Their constitution, which they gain from just communing with the gods, allows them to train at a higher intensity for longer. This is the first time I’ve trained a Speaker mage...” he trailed off, and Amelia could sense the three of them had turned their heads in unison to look at her sprawled out on the floor. Well, let them look! She was busy resting.

“I hope she is an anomaly, for if all human mages are capable of what she just went through, then I dread to think what their dedicated swordsmen can do.”

“Is she talented?” Aiden asked.

“Maybe. The concentration is excellent, although her etiquette needs some work...”

“Working on that,” grumbled Serena.

“I train here every day. I start an hour before lunch. While the three of you are in Kenhoro, you should join me when you can. I’ll notify the front gate not to challenge any of you in the future.”

“It’s a generous offer,” Serena said, “I hope we’re not imposing.”

“Not at all!” The grandmaster said cheerfully. “I myself have some questions regarding the sword I have struggled to answer for many years. Perhaps tutoring two talents like yourself will give me the insight I’ve been looking for!”

“Thank you, Grandmaster.”

The trio of them chatted about various topics while Amelia had a power nap. In addition to her monstrous aether regeneration, she also had significant health regeneration that she suspected greatly improved her recovery from exercise and other stresses on her body. After a few minutes, she felt okay again and joined the group.

With the grandmaster’s permission, he allowed both her and Serena to take a practice weapon so Amelia could refine what she was taught in her own time. He had been intrigued by Serena’s weapon, which was made of marble, so they recounted the events of the Highguard affair to him from their perspective.

“I only know Lord Yulan by name. I didn’t know he was a friend of House Halen,” said the grandmaster while standing up. “Still, it gladdens me to hear he has recovered from his affliction, thanks to Speakers Thornheart’s magical healing.”

“Mmm, mmm!” Amelia said, nodding. “Would you like me to heal you? Serena said it healed her shoulder, which had been troubling her for years!”

“Oh? You would offer such a service to an old-timer like me?”

“Of course! Can’t have you keeling over on us mid-lesson, can we grandpa?” She flashed a cheeky grin. The old demon was only scary when he was instructing her. Outside of that he had an almost *homely* feel to him. Hopefully, Serena’s father was just as easygoing!

“If you wouldn’t mind...”

“Sure!” Amelia twisted the aether inside her, forming the spell and spreading golden light with blue hues that flowed into the old demon’s

body. She threw in a cleaning spell as an extra, ridding the demon of the small amount of sweat that had built up.

The grandmaster bathed in the light in an almost meditative state. He was silent for a long moment before a smile crept up on his face.

“Yes... this might be what I needed. It seems so clear now.” He gave a quick bow to the group. “I apologise, but I must continue my own training. Speaker Thornheart, may the fell gods be in your favour for your kindness in sharing this boon. Speaker Halen, Officer Aiden. Your company was a pleasure! Leave this old man and his sword now. I hope I’ll see you three tomorrow.”

“Uh...” Serena started before gathering herself. “Yes, Grandmaster. Thank you for your instruction. Let’s go, you two.” The group of them left the training hall and navigated their way back through the building. Thankfully, Serena seemed to remember the way; otherwise, Amelia was sure she would have gotten lost and stumbled upon some lecture instead!

“He seemed... eager,” Amelia said, thinking about the grandmaster's reaction.

Serena shook her head, keeping her voice low. “You must understand how *above-average* your healing is. When you healed me once, it felt like all the wear and tear of years of war had left me. I felt young again, even though, you know... I am young.”

“How old are you, anyway?” Amelia asked. She was twenty-five when she had her soul move into this new body, which she suspected was even younger.

“I...” Serena suddenly looked away, blushing slightly. “Hrmph! Does it matter?”

Aiden leaned into the pair, his face contorted into a serious expression. “That’s the noise that a thirty-year-old demon makes after they leave their twenties, Speaker Thornheart.” The man tried to dodge Serena’s backhand but failed spectacularly and was soon nursing a swollen forehead.

“Don’t you dare heal him, Amelia,” Serena commanded, her eyes still not meeting hers. “He deserved that.”

“O-okay!”

Serena bid Aiden goodbye, taking a last look to appreciate her handiwork on his forehead before taking Amelia on a walk to the nearby markets. Tsk! Men! Why were they always so tactless? Serena cast a side eye at her girlfriend, who was skipping along, humming to herself. Her age didn’t bother Amelia, did it? She was still young, right!?

Well, it was a question she would probably be too embarrassed ever to ask, so best to let it disappear from thought. Amelia’s smile made her want to smile, and the way the girl’s hand kept touching the wooden practice sword sheathed in her belt reminded her fondly of the enthusiasm with which she had entered the academy.

“Whoa! What’s that!?” Amelia exclaimed, pointing to a towering fountain that took the form of a dozen stone waterbirds. From their long beaks, spouts of water poured into the fountain basin.

“Waterbirds,” Serena said. She joined Amelia at the fountain’s edge, where hundreds of coins could be seen shining in the water’s bottom. “Look, each one is an offering to the kami. Each one a prayer or a wish.” She was sure the authorities must periodically remove the coins as they would eventually fill the fountain.

“Can I have a coin? Please!?” Amelia looked at her, eyes pleading. Serena dug out a small denomination from her purse and watched Amelia flick it into the water.

“What did you wish for?” She asked.

“Secret!” Amelia raised a finger to her lips. “It’s between me and the kami!”

Serena rolled her eyes. “Come on,” she said. “Market’s over here.” Together they moved to the crowd of haggling and bartering demons. There were significantly more humans around, many even running their own stalls. It seemed any discrimination manifested less here in the outer ring.

Unlike the Central market, this one had far fewer luxury goods and instead was more focused on homeware and food. “Here,” Serena said, purchasing the pair of them a large fruit with a paper straw sticking out. She handed one to Amelia before sipping her own, enjoying the sweet taste.

“What’s this?” Amelia asked, taking a sip. “It’s sugary!”

“Of course, it’s sugary; don’t you recognise these?”

“No,” Amelia tilted her head, looking a little too adorable with the straw poking her lips. “Should I?”

“Don’t you have sugar, where you come from?” Serena asked, keeping her voice a little quieter, although the noise of the crowd alleviated any real concerns of being overheard.

“Yeah... why?”

“Sugar comes from this, right?” Serena wriggled the fruit in her hand. “The sugarfruit?”

“Um... our sugar came from sugarcanes.”

“Sugarcane? What does that look like?”

“Like bamboo, I think. I remember reading about it at one point.”

“What a weird place you come from...” Serena muttered, trying to imagine how sugar could be meaningfully processed from a bamboo-like crop.

“Says the person who lives on a *floating continent*...” mumbled Amelia as she sipped her sugarfruit. “Tastes nice, though!”

“Moon crystal in the soil can affect the taste. Sugarfruit is grown across the empire, except the very far north.” Serena took another sip from her straw. “The liquid can be drank and the insides eaten if you can be bothered to open it up. The outer shell makes good fodder feed for animals.”

“That’s so cool! Every bit can be used, leaving no waste.”

Serena nodded. “I think Centralis can be more wasteful in their attitudes, but here in the East, it’s an important philosophy to use everything, whether it comes from a crop or an animal.”

“Mmm!” Amelia moaned, finishing her sugarfruit before darting off to a nearby stall. “Oh my! Buy two, please!” Serena couldn’t say no to the pleading eyes and handed the stall owner some coins. As they made their way along the crowd, Serena saw Amelia grinning wildly at her acquisition.

“I can’t believe you have toffee apples! I used to love eating these during festivals! Here, have one!” Amelia handed her one of the toffee apples, and they both disposed of their sugarfruits.

“What kind of festivals did you have?” Serena asked.

“Mmm...” Amelia raised a finger to her chin in thought. “We had *Halloween*, where everyone would dress up as scary monsters and ghosts, and we’d give the children sweets! Oh, and *everyone* celebrated *Christmas* every year, where we’d give and receive gifts with our families.”

“Finally, something familiar,” Serena said, “We also celebrate *Christmas* yearly, both here and in the human territories.”

“You have that Demon Bible, right? Eventually, I’d like to read it and see how it differs from our own. What does your one say?”

“I’m not a religious scholar, but it basically details the story of Christ. How he came down in human form to aid the human race in their original realm and then, thousands of years later, took demon form and did the same to us.” Serena shrugged. “I prefer to focus on the gods I know, the Empress and *Narean*.”

“So interesting...” Amelia trailed off, seemingly lost in thought.

They perused the market for a half hour, occasionally trying out foods here and there. Amelia had a sweet tooth and was complaining about feeling sick at the end, prompting Serena to call her girlfriend once again an idiot.

It was a term of affection, really.

Together they took the tramlines back to the docks where Serena found Allston the chief engineer overlooking the repairs. Several dozen workers clambered across the deck, operating steam grinders and overhead cranes. The noise was loud and she hoped Anathor wouldn't be too annoyed by it all.

“Allston,” she called as she approached the demon.

“Ah, captain!” He called before nodding to Amelia. “Miss Thornheart,” he said with respect. “We’re removing the patch job. Always slow work with the grinders, but the extra horns sent by the Greatlord should have us done in three weeks.” The engineer's voice lowered, only just audible over the sound of the tools and shouting workers. “You should have been here this morning, captain. The Stormlord himself came down to look at the ship.”

“Did he now?” Serena’s eyes narrowed. “Did he try and board?”

“Didn’t have a chance to. *Shin Yu* came out and told him to piss off!”

“*What!?*”

“I know, right? We’re all there while the Greatlord is introducing us to his new workers and giving out commands. We’re all nervous, of course. You know what the Greatlords are like to be around...” Allston shook his head. “Then Shin Yu comes out his officer and starts berating the man like he’s... he’s...” The chief engineer waved his hands in frustration, “I don’t know! But he just starts yelling about how the Stormlord’s... you know...” Allston made popping noises and motions with his hand, “... energy he was giving off was messing with the docks instruments.”

“Fucking hell...” Serena mumbled. “What happened then?”

“Well, by the time Shin Yu started threatening to write a letter to the *Overlord*, it looked like the Greatlord was going to vaporise him. I was saying my prayers, but Anathor piped up from the ship and somehow calmed everything down.”

“Where’s the dockmaster now?”

Allston shrugged. “Probably still in his office, writing that letter.” He chuckled, “Couldn’t believe it. That crazy guy has one hard set of horns.”

“Tell me about it,” Serena said, “So, three weeks for the repairs. Anything from Thorne regarding a new turret?” They couldn’t just leave the turret pod open to the elements. If they couldn’t find a replacement, they would need to cover it with armour.

“He’s working with one of the men the Greatlord brought with him. Apparently, there’s some stock hidden away for emergency repairs they’re making available. He should have a report on it soon, I think.”

“Alright. Good work, Allston,” She patted the demon on the shoulder. “Make sure to give your men some breaks, alright?”

“Hrmph, alright...”

“I need to talk to Anathor about something. Come on, Amelia.”

“Okay!” Amelia chirped, and the pair of them left the workers and headed deep into the ship. Even after closing the door to their quarters, the sounds of the stream grinders could be heard, their vibrations flowing through the ship's structure.

“Welcome back, captain,” Anathor said, the moose’s eyes glowing softly.

“Anathor, I’m still having this dream,” Serena began, detailing to Anathor the conversation she had with the grizzled human captain in the foggy dream world. It was hard to tell with the disembodied advisor, but when she

described the man from her dreams, she was sure something had changed in Anathor's behaviour.

"Hmm... I don't think the ship's talking directly to you, although I believe it shows you a memory."

"A memory?"

"Something it witnessed. Very long ago."

"Somethings going on, isn't it, Anathor?"

"Hmm... remember I told you the ship was fundamentally damaged?"

"Right, which is why we dip into the lumina every now and again."

"I'm starting to sense... it's becoming *less* damaged."

"What does that mean? What will happen, Anathor?" Serena resisted the urge to click her tongue. Sometimes getting a clear answer out of him was more challenging than getting blood out of stone.

"I... don't know. I didn't think this was possible. At least, not yet. I'll need to think about this matter for a while, captain. Apologies, but I cannot offer proper council just yet."

Serena sighed.

"Just... give me answers when you have them. I've already got enough on my hands with this one."

"Hey!" Amelia protested, puffing her cheeks out. "Look what I have to deal with, Anathor! This harassment!"

"Hmm..."

"Let's go, Amelia."

"Where are we going?"

“Back to the inn.”

“Oh! Okay!” A twinkle in Amelia’s eyes told Serena exactly what kind of thoughts had just gone through the human’s head. She couldn’t stop herself smiling.

“Goodbye, Anathor.”

“Hmm...”

Serena left him to his thoughts and took her girlfriend back to the inn. As they got closer, inappropriate thoughts kept creeping ever more to the forefront of her mind, and by the time they arrived at the door to the room, they were both so flushed that they only just managed to get inside before throwing themselves at each other.

By most people’s standards, the small office could be considered modest. Its extravagance paled in comparison to the rooms of most Cascadian Lords, although none would dare raise any objections over the simple decor. The wooden floor and furniture were primarily functional, with a bit of flair to give the room some character. On one wall was a map of the Cascadian Empire and on the other a woven tapestry depicted old memories long since forgotten by most.

At one end of the room, a sturdy desk stood upon which a small pile of documents stood, weighted down by a human skull. A half-full teacup delicately held in the hands of a woman with golden hair and blue eyes gave off the subtle scent of mint tea.

Upon her head, two very small horns sat.

She sipped the tea while pondering how to word her reply to the letter from the West. The Overlord in command of that territory had sent a rare correspondence, raising a troubling matter that was another piece in a growing set of problems the empire faced.

A set of problems she was starting to suspect were linked.

After settling on a wording that she felt communicated her thoughts on the matter appropriately, the young-looking woman scratched her reply onto the paper with a quill before gently inserting it into an envelope and using magic to melt some wax upon it. She pressed the stamp into the wax, leaving an imprint of a single letter that was written in the language of the Words.

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Placing it to the side, she lifted the skull and removed the following document that required her attention. It was a letter written in shining red ink on ash-coloured paper. Paper that was almost priceless, for it was sourced from the holy trees that only grew in the higher circles of hell. Looking at its author, she saw it was a message transcribed by her ambassador to the Upper Halls. The poor man had been dragged into a rather uncomfortable meeting with the higher gods and given a dressing down.

She allowed the smallest of sighs as she read the letter's contents. It was essentially a noise complaint regarding the events that transpired in the Lower Halls a week ago. The language used was aggressive, demanding an explanation. It *strongly* implied that without one, they could consider the event an act of war against the Seven Hells as it had originated from her territory.

The woman took a few breaths to think. The Hellords had been diplomatic in their wording not to demand it, but reading between the lines, they clearly expected her to cross realms and offer an explanation in person.

Whilst thinking about this, the woman decided the mint tea was wholly unsuitable for the mood.

“Theresa,” she called.

With a crack, the maid snapped into the realm, appearing from thin air beside the woman. It was a skill that would frighten even the Greatlords, if they even knew what the ability truly implied.

“Divine One?”

“I-” She was cut off. “Somethings approaching. Fast.” A slight frown appeared on her forehead as she identified the anomaly. “Ah. This will be a private conversation. Make yourself scarce, Theresa.”

After a moment of concentration, the maid shifted into another plane of reality, leaving behind the telltale sign of a hurried realmshift; the smell of burnt toast. The woman relaxed, sipping her mint tea while the anomaly swept into her office, ruffling the papers and causing a pleasant breeze.

A second passed, and the atmosphere died down. The hollow eyes of the skull glowed with a familiar crimson hue.

“Hail, Empress Elana of Cascadia! Shard of Infinity! Overlord of Overlords! A-” The skull suddenly cut off its salutations. “Am I being used as a paperweight?” It asked, its gruff voice suddenly taking on a tone of annoyance.

“If I had known you were coming, I would have placed you somewhere more suitable, Anathor,” Elana said. She gave the frustrated skull a small smile and took a slow, deliberate sip of tea. “I wish I could say I enjoy these rare moments you leave the ship. Unfortunately, you always seem to bring bad news when you do.”

“Hmm...”

“What troubles, then?”

“She is waking up. I am certain of this.”

Elana closed her eyes. A feeling of ancient guilt and a touch of sadness filled her heart. “How? It shouldn’t be happening so soon.”

“The human cast a healing spell. It has seeped into those torn and broken pieces of her and brought them a little closer together.”

“The human...” Elana murmured, her eyes flicking to the ash-coloured paper on the desk. “Tell me about the human, Anathor.”

“Hmm... I did not notice it until now, but the pair of you look similar.”

“In what way?”

“Blonde hair, blue eyes,” The skull’s red eyes flashed, “Both hiding another form...”

Elana was silent for a moment. “Anything else?”

“She has bonded with the captain.”

“Bonded?”

“Yes. I sense it in them both. A growing infatuation. It will eventually turn into love.”

“Oh?” Elana intoned, sipping the last of the bitter mint tea before swallowing audibly. “How sweet. I’m jealous, truly. I must find time to meet the human and this captain.”

“To what end, Princess Elana?”

Elana raised an eyebrow. She decided against chastising the formless, for his comment had raised an authentic smile upon her lips. For that alone, he could be forgiven. “Princess?” She asked the skull.

“So many centuries have passed, but you are still that same brazen princess I remember. Charging into the enemy, waving that flaming spear.” The gruff voice softened, and memories she had thought she had forgotten sprang up in her mind. “I remember now. I lectured you for your recklessness. Ha!”

“So long ago...” She murmured.

“So long ago,” echoed Anathor.

“Sometimes I still feel like I’m eighteen, you know? I thought I would grow to despise my long life, but as the centuries tick by...” She turned her head and stared directly into the skull's glowing eyes. “I find myself loving it more every day. How about you, my mentor?”

“Hmm... I haven’t given it much thought... You don’t think much of these things when you don’t have a body.”

“Would you like me to make you one?”

At her offer, the skull was silent for a long time. “Perhaps...” Anathor eventually said, “...Perhaps after my duty is done. Then I may request such a thing. If you are willing.”

“Of course,” Elana said, feeling a tinge of empathy at the long-suffering plight her mentor’s duty had caused him. “What will you do if that comes to pass?”

“Hmm... I would go home.”

“You’re a long way from home, Anathor.”

“So very far...”

The two of them fell into a lull of silence and self-reflection. Many memories flashed through Elana’s mind, and she was sure Anathor was having his own period of reflection. Eventually, the skull’s red eyes flashed as Anathor broke the silence.

“Are your shackles still holding firm?”

“... Yes,” Elana whispered.

“Our punishments were deserved.”

“I know.”

“It was a terrible thing we did. A great sin.”

“Yes.”

“A cardinal sin.”

“Damn it, Anathor. Why are you bringing it up now?” She gave the formless a pointed stare. He always knew how to drive a point home. “The human, how powerful do you think she is?” She asked, forcefully changing to a less sombre subject.

“Hmm... as with you, I sense no upper boundary to the powers she can draw.”

“Is she experienced?”

“... No.”

Elana sighed, taking a sip from the cup before remembering too late that no tea remained. Nevertheless, she kept the act up, pretending to drink politely as she organised her thoughts.

“Where do you think she came from?”

“The deepest depths of the Sixth Heaven. The souls there merged into something by chance and created her. Not knowing what to do, the Heavens placed the soul in a vessel and threw her into the mists where she stumbled upon our realm.”

She considered the possibility before mentally filing it away for further consideration later. “If the ship’s waking up, then we have no choice Anathor. We must find what was lost.”

“How?”

“... I’ll think about it.” She placed the cup delicately back down. “Go now, Anathor. You know how uncomfortable she becomes when you’re not there.”

“... Goodbye, princess.” The red eyes faded, and the formless began its flight back to the East, leaving only the noise of rustling papers.

“Goodbye, Anathor.” She whispered, losing herself in her thoughts.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Breaking Boundaries

The week building up to the festival was a blur of activities, new experiences and satisfying bedtime exercises that were slowly becoming increasingly risqué. As they became more comfortable with each other's bodies, Amelia felt their connection grow. When they were alone, she would sometimes sit on Serena's lap, interrupting her work. While the demon would click her tongue and roll her eyes, Serena would still embrace and kiss her before complaining about being distracted from her paperwork.

They kept up the appearance with the futon but otherwise cuddled each other to sleep. Serena seemed to like it when Amelia buried her head into her chest, so that became their typical sleeping position. They would talk about each other's lives and hold as little back as possible. Serena couldn't share everything as she was a commissioned officer, and so some things needed to remain secret.

"I suppose there's one thing I've been wondering..." Serena mumbled one night while Amelia was nestled into her chest. Amelia readjusted her position so she could look into the pair of crimson eyes. She had learned that when Serena mumbled like this, it was because she wanted to ask something that was troubling her.

"Wondering about what?"

"What did you look like in your original body?"

Ah. Amelia could see why that was a difficult question to ask. She supposed it made sense. Serena knew she was in a new body, and curiosity was only natural. Her original body was her authentic self, and she was still getting

used to it. At times she felt a little strange, especially when she looked at herself in the mirror, but those feelings faded as the days passed.

“I was a few inches shorter, and I had brown hair. Don’t worry, I wasn’t an old man or anything!” Amelia gave her girlfriend a reassuring smile. “I had blue eyes, but they weren’t as blue as these ones. Umm... I modelled the face after my own but made my features a little more sharp. Made my nose a little cuter as well!”

“So you looked similar?”

“Yeah! I imagined her as an adorable little sister when I made this body! I think I was pretty average in looks where I came from, but the chronic disease often had me looking gaunt, so...” Amelia shrugged, “I hope you don’t think you’re being deceived or anything like that.”

“No, of course not,” Serena said, pulling Amelia closer and giving her a kiss on the forehead. “I was just wondering.”

On occasion, Serena would ask a question about the game Amelia played. These conversations didn’t bore much fruit as so little of the game’s world reflected the reality she was now in. One theory they had was the game was designed by someone who had lived or visited this realm, but that didn’t explain how she had gained her character's abilities.

The most difficult thing to communicate was the neurolink device through which the game was played. After eventually getting the concept across, Serena asked if such technology could be recreated in Cascadia. After thinking about it, Amelia figured it would take many centuries of enormous investment to get even slightly close, even knowing the end product.

Besides, the noise interference of atmospheric aether and the lumina would tremendously complicate computer chip development. Apparently, despite the ethereal substance manifesting as literal *magic*, mathematicians modelled much of its behaviour and interactions. Amelia was looking forward to meeting Serena’s genius sister Nina and asking her about it.

Tomes started visiting them for a few hours every morning, during which time he would tutor her in the imperial script. The first time he met them at the inn, he was carrying a bundle of books in his hands. He only briefly glanced at the futon before settling the collection on the desk.

“Seven hells, these bring back memories,” Serena said, picking one up and flipping through the brightly coloured books.

“Are these... children’s books?” Amelia asked, flicking through the books with more pictures than words.

“That’s right. I raided a book market for these. Half a denarii for the lot!” Tomes said, looking proud of himself. “They’re all imperial, although they seem to focus on Manwese fables and stories. Loads of them seem to be about the kami.” He dug into the books and pulled out a red one with numbers on the cover. “Look here, elementary mathematics for demons aged uh...” He squinted at the back of the book, “Five to six!”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “Tomes, I know how to calculate the orbits of planets. I just need to figure out the symbols for different things.” She flicked through one of the maths books, seeing that she could do all this quickly with her limited knowledge of imperial numbers. “Can you get something more challenging?”

“Alright then...” Tomes grumbled. “I’ll see what I can find for tomorrow.”

After that, they sat down and Tomes took her through the twenty-eight letters of the imperial alphabet. She was sure she just needed to sound out the letters a few times and practice with simple words before it would all fall into place. By the end of the hour, she could already make decent attempts to pronounce the three and four letters that Tomes had written down.

After Tome’s lessons, Amelia and Serena would take an early lunch and make their way to the academy, where they would train alongside the instruction of Grandmaster Gu. Amelia was introduced to the full suite of what was deemed ‘basic strikes’ as well as a number of new katas to practice.

Half the time was spent teaching Amelia, but for the second half, she was left alone to focus on her individual training while Grandmaster Gu instructed Serena. Unlike her training, which involved a lot of movement and sparring, Serena seemed to spend a long time *meditating* with her sword under the grandmaster's instruction.

Aiden would be there, although he didn't train and preferred to watch and chat. "When did you leave Karligard to go travelling?" He asked one time they sat down to eat the bland buns.

"When I was sixteen," Amelia said, blowing on her hot bun, "After I realised I could keep myself in good condition from healing... I just set out and walked, you know? Sometimes I didn't eat for weeks, but my magic kept me going."

"Did you sell your services?"

"No," she shook her head, repeating the story she had gone over dozens of times with Serena. "I avoided cities and only healed any injuries I came across. Never stayed around for long. I knew the church would want me, and I didn't want the bother so..." she shrugged, "I just kept wandering."

"Until you met Captain Halen?"

"Until I met Captain Halen," she echoed.

"And how-"

"That's enough, Aiden," Serena interjected, looking nonchalant as she nibbled her food. "You're here for a profile, nothing more. I'm satisfied with her past, and that's what matters. Her secrets are hers to keep and share as she pleases."

"Officer Aiden," the grandmaster grumbled, "Although I don't attend their events much, I still am a Cascadian lord." The old demon pulled out a letter and handed it to Aiden. "A recommendation from me for you to attach to your report. I can vouch for the good character of Speaker Thornheart."

Aiden took the letter, eyeing the grandmaster with a puzzled expression on his face. "You've only known her for a few days," he said.

"True, but through our swordplay, I have seen enough of Speaker Thornheart's soul to make my judgement." The grandmaster gave her a grandfatherly smile. "She has done much for me already, so I am merely repaying the favour."

What a kind grandpa! Amelia had to rub her eyes before tears could form. "Thanks grandpa! You're amazing!" She beamed a smile at him, causing the man to rub his beard awkwardly and mumble something about a granddaughter.

After their daily training, Amelia would cast a cleaning spell on all of them and then they would explore some part of the city. Sometimes Aiden joined them, and sometimes not. On occasion, she would be stopped by a random guard who caught sight of her blonde hair. At first, a quick word from Serena would sort the situation and they'd be on their way. After a few days, they stopped approaching her at all. It seemed someone high up had distributed her description with instructions to leave her alone.

Serena took her to one of the pagoda temples, where the pair of them were encouraged to light incense sticks sticking out the mouths of statues of kami. Serena told her they were luck kami. They looked like funny imps from Amelia's point of view.

"How many types of kami are there?" She asked.

"Infinite, I suppose," answered Serena. "Quinto teaches that everything has a kami within them, even a stone."

"Even people?"

"Sure. As far as they're concerned, the demon soul is a kami," Serena frowned, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Or the human one, as well. I guess that makes us all secretly kami taking on different forms."

"Well, I don't feel like a kami!" Amelia declared.

“What do you feel like, then?”

“Your maid!”

“Shut up.”

Another time, Amelia was delighted to find a pet shop and inside discovered a whole range of fantasy creatures that all looked fluffy and adorable. Although she realised that these were just considered normal animals in Cascadia.

“Oh, my! Look at you! Serena! Look how cute it looks!” She dragged Serena to an enclosure where a small feline animal with large eyes and two fluffy trails was mewling at her through its confinement. “What is it!? It wants me to stroke it, doesn’t it!?”

“It’s a *peeka*. They’re domesticated felines,” Serena said with an amused expression. Seeing Amelia so enthralled by every animal must have been entertaining to her. “They’re very friendly, very uh... *licky*.”

“I have to hold it, or I’m going to die!” Amelia announced with determination. She hunted down a nearby demon worker and bullied the poor girl into opening the cage. She held the cat-like animal, and the moment it was in her arms it started purring with a deep satisfying rumble as it rubbed its neck all over her and tried to lick her to death.

“Can-”

“No,” Serena said. “No animals allowed on the ship.”

“But-”

“We have *peekas* at our home estate. My younger sister likes them. You can have your fill when we visit.”

“... Fine.” Amelia cuddled the animal with as much love as she could muster. She went to put the animal back, but Serena stopped her and gave it a few scratches. Her demon girlfriend really was a big softy, wasn’t she?

On the third day, Lord Yulan appeared at the inn. They caught up over coffee and biscuits. Apparently, he had been given the all-clear to re-open the Highguard for business, but it wouldn't happen immediately as he had to hire loads of new staff.

“Not only that,” Lord Yulan said in hushed tones, “Apparently, they were smuggling weapons and dust as you suspected. The *Crimson Reapers* were raiding the smuggler ships and using the hotel to distribute the loot to their customers. But get this; apparently, they came across something they shouldn't have. Something *really* valuable.”

“Like what?” Amelia asked, the mystery tingling her curiosity.

“Who knows? Something valuable enough for two Speakers to defend it,” Lord Yulan shrugged, “My contacts in the guard said some big shots who work directly under Greatlord came down and removed one particular crate from the loot the city guard had in their possession. It has something to do with crystals, but it isn't dust. Apparently, it got shipped back to Centralis with an armed escort.”

“Must be important for them to send an escort,” Serena said, taking a sip of her coffee.

“Important enough for the Greatlord to *personally* escort it himself.”

“He did? He's left Kenhoro?” Serena's eyes went wide in surprise.

“That's what my contact says. There were lots of encrypted communications going back and forth between Centralis and here, starting when the crate was seized. Whatever it is, someone very important wants it.”

“Sounds like your nephew got way in over his head. What's going to happen to him?”

“He'll be hung,” Lord Yulan said, his face suddenly looking solemn. “If his only crime was his poisoning of me, then I might have had an opportunity to ask for his sentence to be reduced...” The old demon sighed, sadness

filling his eyes. “But this smuggling business... Of drugs and weapons during a war? They’ll hang him for sure. He’s on his way to Centralis, along with the captured mercenaries. I imagine they’ll want their statements in person.”

“I’m sorry it came to this, old man,” Serena said as she squeezed her hand.

“It’s okay, really,” Lord Yulan muttered, taking out a handkerchief and wiping his eyes. “To change the subject, a bit of good news! Here, I was able to get your gift bag, Amelia!” Lord Yulan brought out a familiar neatly wrapped gift that Amelia had left behind in the penthouse suite.

“Thank you! Thank you!” Amelia hugged the gift bag close. “This is my mask for the festival!”

“Hmm... I wondered what it was. Are you both going?” Lord Yulan asked, eyeing them both.

“Thought we might soak up the atmosphere while we’re here,” Serena said, glancing at Amelia. “Hopefully, the war shortages won’t mean the firework display is smaller than usual. It’s the best part.”

“I can’t wait!” Amelia piped up, noting that she had avoided mentioning the excessive amount of drinking Aiden had planned for the three of them.

“To be young again...” mumbled Lord Yulan. “Well, I wish I could offer you a place to stay in the Highguard, but it’s going to be at least a month before we’re ready to reopen, and then you’ll be gone!”

“I’m afraid so. We’ll have to experience your hospitality next time we’re here, old man,” Serena said.

“Before I go, there is one thing...” He fished out a letter sealed with wax and handed it to Serena. “It’s just a few words from me vouching for Amelia’s character. You mentioned Centralis Intelligence was poking about. Thought this might possibly help avoid a fight...”

Another letter of recommendation! That was awesome! Or rather, she was awesome? “Thanks grandpa!” Amelia exclaimed with a smile and two thumbs up.

“G-grandpa!?” Lord Yulan stuttered.

“Stop calling every old man grandpa, idiot,” Serena said, pulling her cheeks. “You’ll give them heart attacks.”

“But they’re being so kind to me...” Amelia whimpered as her cheeks were gently pulled in circles. It sort of felt like a massage. Should she mention it felt nice to Serena? No, she shouldn’t. If she did, Serena might stop using it as a punishment.

“Idiot,” Serena said again, releasing her cheeks.

They bid Lord Yulan goodbye, and he promised to come back before they left Kenhoro.

On the fourth day, they visited the Central market again. The crowd was packed and they had to push their way through. Amelia noticed that more and more demon horns were decorated with crystal bands and earrings. Although Amelia figured they weren’t called *earrings*.

“They are *hornbands* and *hornlets*,” Serena explained when Amelia asked her. “There are also *horncaps* which are pretty self-explanatory. On the day of the festival, you’ll see a lot of demons painting their horns in all kinds of colours. There are often awards for the most impressively decorated set of horns. To some noble families, that prestige means a lot.”

As the festival drew close, it wasn’t just the horns that changed. Bunting, flags, and other decorations appeared along the walls and roofs of buildings. Statues of kami were being dressed up, and more and more people were wearing costumes.

“It’ll start in the outer districts, and there’ll be several groups moving in a circle around the city. They’ll all eventually meet up in the centre for the final events. I imagine Aiden won’t have us following it for long. The pubs

are going to be *packed*.” Serena sighed, giving Amelia a smile. “Try not to drink too much, alright?”

“But last time I drank loads, some really good things happened!”

“Shut up...” came the muttered response, joined by a slight blush.

Together they found the stall owner who sold the masks. He recognised them immediately and showed Amelia the red mask. It was similar to her own blue one, but the red glow gave it a mature allure that would fit Serena perfectly. Once she indicated she was happy with it, the stall owner wrapped it neatly, and the pair of them left the market with Amelia buzzing with happiness.

Their next destination was to check in on the tailor, who jumped from her seat when they walked in. “You’re finally here! I didn’t know how to contact you!”

“Hello!” Amelia said cheerfully. “How goes the, uh... tailoring?”

“I have one workset complete and two casual ones. Would you like to try them out?” The tailor immediately began buzzing around her, adjusting different parts of Amelia’s clothing as she talked.

“Mmm! Sure! Can you show me how to tie it all properly again?”

Amelia tried all the outfits on. The workset was particularly impressive as it had so many hidden pockets and pouches. It was also designed so it could be worn inverted in case it became dirty. Amelia kept quiet about her cleaning magic, as the tailor seemed proud of this feature.

After the work and casual clothes, she was thrown into a prototype of the red dress the tailor had been working on. In Amelia’s eyes, it was a perfect dress that balanced modesty and the allure of her body and cleavage. She felt it fit her form perfectly, but the tailor kept muttering about mistakes and adjustments that needed to be made.

“What do you think?” She said, unable to resist the sly smile she felt creeping up on her face as she stepped outside the changing room and did a twirl for Serena. Perhaps it was a mistake as the demon's mouth dropped open for a moment before Serena realised and closed it. Amelia didn't miss the look in her eyes, though. It was the same look she usually only saw in the bedroom.

“It's... uh, good. Fitting for an employee of House Halen. Your work is admirable.” Serena visibly swallowed and Amelia gave her a cheeky wink. She turned so her arse was facing her girlfriend.

“So, is it easy to put on and remove, or will I need assistance?” She asked innocently while squeezing her buttcheeks with both hands, out of sight of the tailor facing her but right in the eyesight of her girlfriend. She didn't quite hear the tailor's reply as she was focused on the sensation of Serena's gaze burning a hole through her dress.

Her girlfriend couldn't meet her gaze when she turned around, so it must have had the intended effect. Serena gave the tailor the inn's location to send the clothes and then made her excuses for the pair of them to leave. It started to rain, so they put on their brown raincoats and hats and jumped on a busy tram back to the inn.

Serena hadn't said anything during the ride, and Amelia was going to ask if she had upset her but was cut short when she felt her girlfriend's hand slip into her raincoat and feel her up. Amelia gave a small squeak before covering her mouth. She leaned into Serena, letting herself be groped before slipping her own hand through the layers of leather and paying Serena back in kind.

When they returned to the inn, they barely made it through the door before Serena quite literally threw her on the bed and climbed on top of her with eyes full of desire.

“You need to be taught a lesson,” Serena said, pinning Amelia's hands to the bed with her body weight.

“Oh no. I’m trapped and helpless!” She gave Serena her best *fuck me* eyes and made herself moan softly. “Whatever will my punishment be, I wonder? I-” She was cut off as her lips were stolen while Serena fumbled to undress her, almost ripping the clothes in the process.

The following events were quite possibly the most pleasurable Amelia had experienced in her entire life. She was stripped entirely naked, and Serena’s fingers and tongue went to places and crossed boundaries they never had before. Afterwards, as they caught their breath, one thought crossed Amelia’s mind.

So that’s what it feels like to be ravaged.

She turned and cuddled Serena, and when she was confident the demon had fallen asleep, she leaned in and whispered in her girlfriend's ear in the quietest voice she could muster.

“I love you.”

Chapter Twenty-Five: Breaking Bones

After an awkward exchange of morning greetings, Serena took a shower in the washroom. She sat down as the warm water rained down upon her, clutching both her horns in a mixture of embarrassment and frustration. Was it normal for her thoughts and emotions to be so *strong*? She knew she liked Amelia, but the magnitude of her urges and how often she gave into them was like nothing she had ever experienced before.

What she did to Amelia last night - what she *enjoyed* doing - were things she never thought she would ever do to another person, let alone a *human*. She'd lost herself in raw desire, and that smug idiot - her *girlfriend* - had only encouraged her!

Was everyone else this passionate behind closed doors? Or was their relationship different? The romance she had toyed with during her academy years was nothing like this. She let out a soft groan. Infatuation. That was the word that described her situation. Every time she had let her attraction to Amelia manifest into action, the human was right there to encourage it.

Worse of all, she was undeniably proud of what she had done. She didn't feel any regret, and knowing she could make those noises come out of her girlfriend from her fingers and her tongue was *satisfying*. When she-

Damn it.

Even thinking about it made her embarrassed.

She dried and dressed herself and returned to the bedroom. Amelia was sitting in her undergarments, sipping coffee at the table. A second cup was

waiting for Serena.

“I poured you a cup!” Amelia chirped as she began nibbling on a biscuit.

“Thanks,” Serena said, trying to sound normal to prevent the atmosphere from becoming awkward. She joined Amelia at the table and began drinking the coffee. Unfortunately, she found she didn’t know what to say, and a lingering silence weighed down upon them.

“I’m really starting to enjoy the coffee in Cascadia,” Amelia said idly.

“That’s good... It’s quality stuff,” Serena said quietly.

“Do you want to talk about last night?” Amelia asked.

“I do,” Serena said, taking a long sip of coffee to give her time to think. She would just power through this as if she were on a battlefield. “I guess, with how intense it was...” She glanced at Amelia and she was relieved to see they were both blushing. “I’m worried that I pushed too much too quickly. I hope you didn’t feel like I was... overpowering you?”

“Not at all!” Amelia smiled softly before hiding most of her face behind her cup. “I *really* like what you did. I promise you, if I’m ever uncomfortable about anything, I’ll let you know, alright?”

“Right. Thank you...” Serena felt what little guilt she had over last night evaporate. After all, if Amelia had enjoyed it as much as she did, then there was no point feeling bad. “I’ve been thinking, and I just think that our relationship is so... so...” She waved her hand, “*Irregular.*”

“Irregular?”

“That’s right. I’m the daughter of a Highlord. Any relationship I’m in should be something organised and sanctioned by both families. There would be a long period as the engagement slowly progressed. The meetings would always have attendants nearby, so any passion,” her eyes flicked to Amelia’s lips, “Wouldn’t have a chance to be acted on.”

“And... because what’s happened with *us* so quickly,” Amelia gestured to the pair of them, “You feel out of your depth?”

“I guess so,” A sigh escaped Serena’s lips. “It’s more than that. My emotions are so strong I don’t feel like I’m in control. It’s honestly frightening, but I also like it, I think.” At her words, Amelia put down her coffee cup and stood up. She approached Serena before sitting on her lap and placing an arm around her.

“Well, I’m delighted to hear you’re as crazy about me as I am about you! Sometimes, you make me so happy I feel like my heart’s going to explode!” Amelia gave her a peck on the forehead before running her hand through Serena’s hair and giving her a massage.

“Are you... massaging my head?” She raised an eyebrow, giving her girlfriend a sly smile.

“Yup! Do you like it?”

“... Yes, keep going.”

A minute passed, and Serena slowly relaxed. She realised she liked these quiet moments of intimacy as much as what happened last night. Sitting here with Amelia while receiving a massage felt so *right*. She nuzzled Amelia’s neck, lightly kissing her.

“It’s going to be difficult to keep my hands off you when we’re sailing,” Serena whispered.

“Not much room in those hammocks, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, we do have a few weeks to get it all out of our system,” Amelia said with a cheeky grin, “And I still need to repay last night’s favour!”

“Tsk!” Serena ruffled Amelia’s hair. “You’re trying to make me flustered again, aren’t you?”

“Obviously, and it’s working!” Came the reply behind the blond mop.

“That’s it!” Serena declared, “From now on, I refuse to be embarrassed or flustered by anything you say!” She leaned back in her chair, folding her arms and trying to look as serious as possible.

“Is that so?” Amelia asked, using her hands to make an opening in the blond curtain of hair. “How about a bet, then?”

“A bet?”

“I’ll ask you one question, and if you can maintain eye contact with me, I’ll tone down the teasing.” Two blue orbs gazed at her with an unidentifiable twinkle. “Deal?” Amelia asked.

“And if I can’t?” Serena narrowed her eyes.

“Then you have to promise me you’ll never hold back! Any time you want to kiss or hug me, then you have to do it! Unless the situation is completely inappropriate, of course!”

“Fine then, I’ll take that bet.”

“Great! Are you ready?”

“Was that the question?”

“No, you smart-ass demon!” Amelia stuck her tongue out, “It’s not going to be that easy.”

“Let’s hear it then. I’m ready.” Serena focused on their eye contact, feeling determination take over.

“Okay!” Amelia coughed lightly into a closed hand. “Ahem! Did you-” Her girlfriend broke eye contact and buried her head in her hands with a groan. “Hang on, hang on!” She made eye contact again. “Did you li-” Amelia stopped her question again, breaking out into an uncontrollable nervous giggle. “Damn it! It’s too crass, even for me.”

“Oh? So I win, then? If you can’t even ask the question?”

“No, no!” Amelia waved her hands before taking a few deep breaths.

“Okay, I’m really ready now. I just needed a moment to prepare,” Amelia wriggled on Serena’s lap, moving closer until their eyes were only six inches apart. The human’s face was as red as Serena’s crimson eyes.

“Did you like it when I used your horns as handles while your tongue was between my legs?”

Serena snapped her eyes closed as she pulled Amelia into a tight embrace so she wouldn’t have to look at her. As the heat erupted on her face, she made a mental note never again to make a bet with her girlfriend.

“Are you *sure* you don’t want Tomes to come with you?”

Amelia rolled her eyes. What did Serena think she would get up to!?

“What could I possibly get up to? I’m just going for my lesson with Grandpa Gu,” Amelia gestured with both arms to one side before switching to the other direction, “Then I’m coming back here. Easy.”

“Uh-huh,” Serena, Tomes, and Aiden said in unison.

Aiden had appeared at the inn during her morning lesson with Tomes. Apparently, his superiors wanted to question Serena about the Highguard incident and other matters. The timing meant those two would not be able to make that day’s swordsmanship training. Amelia had offered to go with them, but Serena immediately shot down that idea.

For some reason, the three of them seemed suspicious when she declared she would attend the academy training alone. Her girlfriend was initially against the idea but relented quickly. One thing Amelia liked about Serena was she was protective but not *over-protective*.

“Bye!” Amelia waved at them as she hopped on a tram. In less than a week she had become very adept at hopping on and off the steam-powered

transportation. When the conductor approached her she fumbled about counting the required copper coins but managed to pay for a ticket. Serena had given her a rundown of the imperial currency and its denominations.

After clambering onto the second tram Amelia spent her time sounding out the stop names as well as trying to read any passing imperial signage on shop fronts. Manwese was still impossible for her but imperial was slowly falling into place. She figured she would know enough to get by in a month.

Arriving at the academy, she skipped past the gate guards with a greeting before heading into the main building. She had appeared at the time students and instructors were moving between lessons and she was lost in the river of bodies. No one spoke to her, but her blond hair stood out and more than a few utterances were heard by her sharp ears.

“It’s that human again.”

“What do you think she does every day?”

“She’s alone this time.”

“Think she’s training? She has a wooden sword.”

Amelia hummed to herself as she navigated the now-memorised corridors and stairs before arriving at the private training hall. Slipping inside, she bowed politely to the Grandmaster swinging a sword. Her bows had also improved greatly. It was something Serena had been making her practice every evening.

“Hello, grandpa!”

“Hmm...” grumbled the old man, “Just you?”

“Serena and Aiden had a meeting they needed to go to. So it’s just me today!”

“Very well. Let’s get started.” Together they went through her stances, strikes and katas. After warming up, they went back into sparring, where the grandmaster would put her to the limits of her body's movements. Now he

would immediately invoke the first aura and begin attacking her. The aura-powered strikes were a magnitude more difficult than a normal attack and Amelia was soon sweating from exertion and focus.

After a while, the attacks slowed down and she was instructed how to exploit openings. The grandmaster would intentionally hesitate between attacks and she would do her best to manoeuvre her sword into a strike. Unlike before, when they would both aim to stop their blades short, she was instructed to actually hit the grandmaster with a decent amount of force.

“Are... are you sure?” Amelia asked.

“I know you’re strong, but that sword will break before my aura does. Have no fear.”

“O-okay!” Amelia parried an attack before swinging her sword around and colliding it with her opponent's shoulder. It was an attack that would surely break the bones of any normal person, but the grandmaster just grunted.

“Good.”

He spent some time explaining the aura of the warrior to her. Amelia was sure that if needed she could Speak the Words of the martial gods such as *Narean*. However when she had formed the Word as a test, it had felt *unnatural*. She was certain *Narean* would hold the communion true especially after she had yelled at him so much but there was definitely a feeling of *wrongness* with her aether which wasn’t there with her mage Words.

“It is more difficult for a Speaker of magic to discover the first aura,” the grandmaster explained when they stopped for food, “The simplest way is to gain an understanding of your own body through exhausting it again and again. The problem is your constitution means there are very few training partners that could keep up with you. Perhaps only myself and my brother...”

“So if I keep training with you, I could reach the first aura?”

“Mmm... I believe so. Alternatively, you could wear heavy weights when training. Then you might be able to progress on your own.”

“What does it feel like when you break the first boundary?”

“It is almost unexplainable,” said the grandmaster, “There is a feeling of a tremendous rush as your aether *changes*, and suddenly you’re able to structure it in a way you previously couldn’t. Visualisation is important, especially for the first boundary. Many students find that simply imagining themselves with red aura helped them reach it.”

“Is this visualisation stuff why you and Serena spend so much time meditating?”

“That’s correct. The higher auras are more and more difficult to break through and require a deeper understanding of their sword and the reasons why it is swung.”

“I’ll do my best!” She exclaimed. Amelia would start meditating when she found the time. She would imagine herself as a great warrior in shining steel - no, *red aether* - armour as she and Serena defended against a horde of monsters!

“There is one other thing I would like to address now that we are alone,” the grandmaster said solemnly while meeting her eyes with a serious gaze. “As you know, communing with the Words grants a permanent boost in the constitution of the Speaker.”

“... Right,” Amelia said softly. It was that boost, along with the rewards of countless game achievements, that allowed her perception to follow the sword swings so easily.

“A decent swordsman who spars with you, knowing that you cannot make the first aura, will be able to make an educated guess that you are a Speaker,” the old demon’s eyes narrowed and his gaze became sharp. “But an experienced master, like myself, can tell from how your eyes move and how you react that you, dear Speaker, have communed *far more* than just one First Word.”

Grandmaster Gu held her eyes, and Amelia swallowed nervously. She broke eye contact and rubbed the back of her head awkwardly. "I have unusual circumstances..." She mumbled.

"I'm sure you do," the grandmaster replied, his eyes softening and his posture relaxing. "Have you ever heard of Katalin of Driss?"

"Umm... no. Where's Driss?"

"Driss is located in the snow-capped mountains in the North. Katalin is a swordswoman, and like you, she is far beyond her peers. She has communed two Words of the martial gods, and rumour has it that she is on the threshold of a third. Some say she might become the youngest Greatlord ever," the grandmaster chuckled. "Only, she has no interest in politics and apparently does nothing but train behind closed doors day in and day out. She attends no balls and fights in no tournaments. She is reported as being beautiful, yet the letters of potential suitors are answered only by a polite refusal. The woman is married to the sword."

The grandmaster coughed lightly, "Ahem! Anyway. The point I'm getting at is that despite her lonely lifestyle and her complete absence from the public - Katalin of Driss is a name that every wielder of the sword aspires to. She is constantly talked about in this academy. Her fame carries her name from the Ishaq in the south all the way to the city of Navathe in the corner of the Sabanis Dominance."

"And that," the grandmaster jabbed a finger into the ground, "Is how famous she is when she has done nothing to encourage the public. But *you*," now the finger was pointing at Amelia, "Are an employee of a famous House, working under a famous captain boarding a famous ship. You'll see a lot of the empire, and where you go, everyone will not just hear the name of Amelia Thornheart but also see the person behind the name."

The grandmaster sighed, "I just want you to understand you will eventually become famous. Rumours of your healing have already reached many of my circles. It is only because someone is blocking your photograph from appearing in the papers you're not identified on the street by the general public. That will change, eventually."

“I... I understand,” Amelia nodded, thinking seriously about the advice. “I’ll be prepared, and besides, if it gets too much I’ll run away to this academy and train in secret!” She gave the old man a grin as his eyes widened in shock.

“W-well,” he said, “You’ll always be welcome while I’m the director of this place... I don’t know what Speaker Halen would make of such a turn of events.”

“Nah,” Amelia shook her head, “I’ll drag her along with me! She’s really enjoying the training, you know? She told me she can feel the rust falling off every day!”

“Hrmph! She should quit the military. It’s done her no good,” mumbled the grandmaster.

They both finished their food in silence before training some more. After an hour, Amelia bid the grandmaster farewell and headed back through the academy’s corridors. She was so lost in thought about her impending fame that she took a wrong turn and ended up standing at one of the entrances of the academy’s main training ground.

It was a massive open area of sand and packed dirt. The entire academy was built around it, and at any one time, you could be seen from hundreds of windows and balconies of the floors above. Dozens of students were using the space. Some were alone, and some were in groups. Some were paired up and sparring while others practiced katas. About half of the students had grey belts, and the other half had red. A small number had orange belts, although Amelia noted they seemed to be training alone.

At the rhythmic sound of dozens of swords being swung, she felt a sudden urge to join them. How would it feel to swing her sword in unison with a group?

Besides, the massive doors were open. That meant she was basically invited, right?

Telling herself this was definitely okay, Amelia walked a little into the training area. She was far too nervous to walk into the open space proper so she lingered around the edge. She resolved herself to just watch for a few minutes. She was interested in the differences in training of the grey, red, and orange students as well seeing if she could identify any mistakes the grey students were making.

Slowly, her presence was noted by more and more of the demon students and more and more eyes were glancing in her direction. As she started to pick up on muttered words, she decided coming here was perhaps not the best idea. Before she could turn to leave, a voice called out to her.

“Hello there! Never thought we would see a *human* here!” Amelia turned to see a demon from a nearby group had approached her with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. The girl looked to be about twenty, and had two neat horns that extruded from her head. She approached Amelia, flanked by a half dozen students behind her.

She wore a red belt.

The demon looked her up and down. “We’ve been seeing you come here every day. Many of us have been trying to figure out who you are and why you’re always here with the *war hero*.”

Right. Serena was a war hero. Unsurprisingly, many of the students here had a favourable opinion of her girlfriend. Amelia chose her *lets-be-friends* smile and tried to extrude an aura of friendliness.

“I’m her maid!” Amelia chirped, “What’s your name?”

“You’re a maid?” The demon narrowed her eyes. “You don’t look like a maid. Why do you have that sword?”

“Uh... because I’m learning how to use it?”

“The *hellfire captain* has taken a human as a maid and is teaching her the sword?” The student's face expressed disbelief.

“That’s right! And, uh... Grandmaster Gu is helping out!” That was apparently the wrong thing to say as the demon spat on the ground.

“Could you not come up with a more believable lie?” She said, venom seeping into her voice. “You really going to stand there and pretend the *grandmaster* is teaching a *human maid* in person?” A series of chuckles swept through the group as more and more students appeared. “What do you really do? Carry the food? Massage her feet?”

“Maybe she keeps her bed warm!” Another student called out, prompting the students to break out in laughter again. The one who had spoken was male and had an orange belt and a familiar set of horns to the other girl. Her brother, perhaps?

“How long have you been training, then?” The first girl asked, crossing her arms and sneering. Amelia resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Weren’t these supposed to be officers in training? They were acting like teenagers!

“About a week,” Amelia said, changing her *lets-be-friends* smile to a generic sly smile. She must have come across as confident or arrogant, as the student looked taken aback.

“What aura have you reached?”

“None,” Amelia shook her head, “But I’m working really hard at it! I think I can hit red in a few months!” She gave a not-so-enthusiastic thumbs up. Why did their eyes look so hostile? Was this a part of the discrimination humans were facing?

“None! Ha! The girl turned in a circle with her arms raised. Where did she think she was, in a theatre? “So we’re supposed to believe that *you*,” the student finished her performance and glared at Amelia, “A *maid*, who has only been training a week, who hasn’t reached any aura, is somehow receiving the personal instruction of both the hellfire captain and the grandmaster? Is that what you’re expecting us to believe? Huh?”

“... Now you say it like that, I suppose it sounds a little strange but-”

“What are you, some kind of spy?”

“A republican spy!” A voice called.

“Maybe she’s from The Federation!” Another student yelled.

“I’m not a spy!” Amelia protested.

“Come on then, pretty little *spy*,” The girl with the neat horns pulled out her training sword. Let’s see what you’re capable of. Don’t worry, I won’t hit you *too hard*,” she smirked. The students backed away, making an impromptu arena for the pair.

“I really would rather not, I have things to do, so if you excuse me…”

“Running back to keep your master's bed warm? I bet you massage more than just her feet, isn’t that right?” The girl teased to the laughter of the surrounding students. Amelia rolled her eyes again at the childish statement. Still, she felt a flame of anger begin to tickle her heart.

“You seem to spend a lot of your time being concerned about Lady Halen and her bedtime activities. Are you sure you're not compensating for something?” Amelia pulled her sword, gripping it in both hands. “What kind of hidden fantasies are you having about the *hellfire captain* that you’re too embarrassed to admit to?”

“Bah! You disgusting human,” the student spat on the ground again. “I don’t know how you tricked *Speaker Halen*, but I won’t let a spy like you shame her name any longer!”

“Sorry, I’m so confused, why-” Amelia didn’t finish her question as the woman swung her sword at her head which she blocked with ease. The students surrounding them erupted in cheers.

“Get her, Mel!”

“Show her what it means to wield a sword!”

“Punish that liar!”

“Make her bleed!”

Amelia saw behind the crowd two instructors were whispering frantically to each other, glancing in their direction. One of them ran out of the training hall while the other just stayed there and watched.

The student called Mel attacked her again and again. She threw out a flurry of strikes that Amelia could tell had been practised thousands of times. They were far more controlled than her own, executed with more confidence, and...

They were so

slow.

Amelia frowned as she internally recalculated her expectations. She moved her body to respond to strike after strike. Unlike the vicious assault by the grandmaster, she felt like she could have defended against this all day.

“Is this all you’ve got?” Amelia said between blocks. Ha! She bet she looked super cool saying that. If only Serena were there to see it! Her mocking had the intended effect, causing Mel’s face to contort with rage.

She would make a terrible officer.

“Let’s see how you handle this!” Amelia sensed the aether in Mel’s froth as her body took on a red hue. The attacks took on a speed that required Amelia to focus a little more.

Still, it was nothing like when Serena or the Grandmaster attacked her. In fact, she was sure Serena’s attacks without aura had far more speed and aggression. When the grandmaster used red aura, he could strike more than a dozen times a second. This student was managing about four.

Amelia waited until Mel tried another thrust before parrying it like she had been taught. She swung her sword around and struck Mel’s upper arm with about the same strength as she used against the grandmaster.

That was a mistake as Mel's red aura *collapsed* under her strike, and Amelia felt the bones in the upper arm shatter as her wooden sword slammed into her opponent.

"Argh! Ahhh!" Mel dropped her sword and collapsed onto the floor, screaming in pain.

"What did you do to my sister, you bitch!" A voice yelled from behind Amelia. She turned her head to see a blade - *a real blade* - covered in orange aura, carving a path towards her face.

Amelia felt her vision darken as her anger exploded at the attempt at her life. She flared the triple-wards she was running as hard as she could, and as the blade approached her nose, she leaned upwards and...

Bit down on the steel, shattering the sword with her teeth.

She swung her fist at Mel's brother, whose eyes had widened with shock. Amelia used all the speed she could muster without Speaking, slamming a fist into his ribs. She knew she could probably punch *through* the man's body if she wanted, so she simply aimed at the spot where his ribs were and then added another inch.

The effect was immediately felt as she could feel his ribs shatter under her blow. The man crumpled to the floor, gasping and trying to scream but not being able to produce anything more than a whimper.

For a moment, all was quiet apart from the noise of the defeated siblings. Amelia glanced at the instructor in the background and was surprised to see him take a step backwards. She must have had one hell of a look on her face because when she made eye contact with any of the students, their faces went pale and they cast their eyes down.

"D-did you see what happened?"

"I couldn't see anything!"

"She bit the sword! Bit it!"

“How did she move so fast!?”

Amelia turned to leave, and as the students parted, a familiar set of horns appeared. Grandmaster Gu had come, flanked by the instructor who had run off earlier.

“Speaker Thornheart, what happened here for your eyes to show such anger?”

At his voice, the surrounding students erupted into another flurry of hurried whispers.

“Speaker! He called her a Speaker!”

“Was she pretending all along?”

“But she didn’t use aura!”

“Who is she!?”

Amelia looked at the old man's crimson eyes, which held an unreadable expression. She swallowed before explaining her version of events. “I got lost leaving the academy. I found myself here and thought I would watch the students train. I wanted to see if I could see any of the mistakes in their training that you corrected in mine.”

She gestured to Mel, who was looking at her with a mixture of pain and horror. “This one disrespected me and Lady Halen. She accused me of being a spy and more. She wanted me to spar, and I broke her arm when I struck her back.” Amelia waved an arm at the gasping man on the floor. “This one tried to kill me. He swung at me with a steel weapon coated in orange aura at my face. As you can see,” She met the grandmaster’s eyes, “The sword lost.”

The old man was silent for a while, and it felt like everyone was holding their breath.

“What did you learn?” The grandmaster asked her.

“I learned... that there is more variation in the quality of aura than I thought. I counter-attacked with the same strength I use against you. That was a mistake,” Amelia shrugged. “I also learned that just because someone is a good swordsman,” she glanced at the man on the floor, “That doesn’t mean they have the temperament to be a good officer.”

“And what punishments do you think they deserve?”

“Umm...” Amelia thought for a few moments. She looked at Mel who swallowed nervously. “I agreed to spar with that one. So if anything...” Amelia bowed to the quiet student, “I apologise for breaking your arm. I am not a Speaker of the martial gods and am unfamiliar with controlling my strength.” She raised her body and kept her eyes on Mel. “After the festival, if she is willing to apologise to Lady Halen and me for her words, I will heal her arm.”

“Oh? Hmm...” The grandmaster turned to Mel, “Is that acceptable to you?”

Mel swallowed nervously before answering in a quiet voice. “Yes, grandmaster.”

“Don’t answer me, answer her!” He barked.

“Ah... Yes, Miss Thornheart...”

“*Speaker* Thornheart!” The grandmaster barked again.

“Yes! Yes, Speaker Thornheart! I will apologise...”

“As for her brother,” Amelia pointed at the quivering man who had caught his breath and was looking at her and the grandmaster with fear in his eyes. “My understanding of Cascadian law is that trying to murder a Speaker is punishable by death. I suppose he would normally be hung.” Amelia shrugged as the man’s eyes widened and his mouth opened, “Normally, that is. I’m not yet a citizen of the empire, so those laws probably don’t apply. I don’t know what should happen, but I won’t heal him for what he did. Maybe make him clean toilets for a year or something.”

The grandmaster rubbed his beard. “Damian, is it?” He asked the demon who was clutching his ribs.

“Y-yes, grandmaster.”

“You’re supposed to graduate at the end of this year?”

“Y-yes, grandmaster.”

“Not any more. I’ll delay your graduation by two years. You’ll spend the next year from now cleaning toilets, and then the year after, you will focus on tutoring first-years. Only then can you graduate. A small price to pay, to avoid the noose?”

“T-thank you! Thank you, grandmaster!”

“Don’t thank me, thank Speaker Thornheart, whose mercy has prevented so much shame from falling upon your family.”

“... Thank you, Speaker Thornheart.”

“Excellent!” The grandmaster clapped his hands. “Looks like everyone here has learned a few important lessons, and it didn’t cost any lives! Remember! When you’re on the battlefield, the cost of lessons becomes the lives of your soldiers and your friends! Make these mistakes now, in the safety of my halls, before you make them in war!”

The grandmaster turned to Amelia. “Speaker Thornheart, I trust you’ll return to training after tomorrow’s festival?”

“Y-yeah!” Amelia nodded, “I mean, yes, grandmaster!”

“Wonderful! Now run along,” He gave her a smile, “Try not to stumble into any other training halls on the way out.” He gave a deep bow, and she returned. With a last look at her defeated opponents, Amelia turned and walked out of the training ground.

The tram rides back were a blur as Amelia ran what happened repeatedly in her head. She kept second-guessing actions she had taken or things she had

said. What would have happened if she had done things differently? The possibilities kept creeping into her mind and occupied her thoughts all the way until she stepped through the door to the room at the inn.

“Welcome back,” Serena said idly, not looking up from her paperwork. “So, when should I expect the city guard to come knocking with your arrest warrant?”

“You... you! How did you find out so quickly!?” Amelia blurted out as Serena looked at her in surprise.

“Christ! Seven hells, I was only joking. You idiot! What have you done now!?”

Oops.

Chapter Twenty-Six: The Moonrain Festival

Announcement

I've set up a discord for Amelia Thornheart! The invite link is: I'll be posting maps and updates about the series there! I'm also considering streaming the writing process - see author notes at the bottom!

After having her hair ruffled and cheeks squeezed, Amelia was able to recount the tale of events to an annoyed-looking Serena. Her girlfriend's glare softened when Amelia explained Grandmaster Gu's reaction and the hair ruffling slowly changed into a gentle head massage.

"Mmm..." Amelia murmured, "I don't understand why they got so aggressive so fast. I would have thought trainee officers would be far more composed..."

"Idiot," Serena replied, running her hands through Amelia's golden hair. She sat Amelia down and began to comb through the ruffled mess. "Some of it was probably anti-human bias. They're trainee officers; you know the first thing that gets drilled into your head throughout your time at the academy?"

"What?"

"To watch out for human spies. That's the singular lesson that gets repeated constantly throughout the years. Then you turn up in their academy, poking your nose in their training. If you *were* a spy, think about the information you could get," Serena explained, slowly teasing out the knots in Amelia's hair, "Counts of how many students had reached red aura, counts and identities of those reaching orange."

“Oh, that makes sense... but surely they would have seen me enough to know both you and the grandmaster were okay with me?”

“Right,” Serena said, “If they had looked at the situation calmly, things might not have escalated. It turned out like it did because you insulted their egos.”

“I did? How?”

“Saying you were getting personal training from the grandmaster after only holding a sword for a few days,” Serena finished combing and began giving her a shoulder massage. “Getting instruction from a grandmaster is an incredible honour, and most students will never have the privilege. It would’ve angered them for you to speak about it so casually...” Serena paused as if in thought, and her hands became idle. “At least you didn’t call him grandpa in front of them, you idiot.”

“Don’t stop! It feels nice...” Once Serena’s hands had resumed massaging her shoulders, Amelia asked her if there was anything else that she had done to make the situation worse.

“You implied you could learn red aura in such a short period of time. Even if it’s true, most of those students have been training for a decade just to build the foundation to get into that academy. Half of them won’t ever reach red. You would have come across as arrogant.”

“There’s something else I don’t understand; They seemed to respect you as a war hero, but made jokes about me keeping your bed warm...” Amelia felt Serena’s hands grip her shoulders slightly harder. “It doesn’t add up. Why would they insult you if they respected you?”

Serena took a moment to answer. “It was an insult to you, really. Saying you serve me only as a... *paramour*. To say it to you - another female - is to imply you’ve accepted payment to engage in acts of homosexuality which most people consider... unnatural.”

“Nothing about how I feel about you feels unnatural!” Amelia gritted her teeth. “I hate that word. Our connection is as natural as anyone else’s!” Amelia tilted her head backwards to look at Serena. “Do you feel it, too?” she asked.

“Yes,” Serena bent down, giving her a kiss on the forehead and then on the lips, “I do.”

The pair then went downstairs for some food. Amelia was getting rather good at using chopsticks now and could neatly construct her little mouthfuls with what she thought was elegance and grace. Serena still pointed out flaws here and there but declared that she was approaching a level of etiquette that she deemed *passable*.

Mister Weng appeared and handed Serena a small box. It came from the tailor and was Amelia’s red festival dress. She wanted to open it right there and then but Serena made her wait until their meal was done and they were back in their room.

“It feels so... expensive!” Amelia exclaimed, lifting the dress out of the box. “Help me put it on!” She stripped down to her undergarments and slipped into the dress. Serena had to help her with a dozen small ties, but it was soon done and Amelia gave a twirl to her girlfriend, who couldn’t take her crimson eyes off her spinning body.

“You like me in red, I take it?” She asked with a sly smile.

“Obviously, idiot,” Serena approached her and pulled her into an embrace. “It’s so unfair...”

“What?”

“I spent all that time putting the dress on, and now I just want to rip it off you.”

“Ha!” Amelia grinned. Every time Serena vocalised her desires like this, her heart would leap joyfully. “If you think about it, I’m your present... and

you'll be unwrapping me!" She gave her girlfriend a wink and got a blush in response.

Amelia glanced at the clock on the wall. "Are the markets still open?"

"Should be, for another hour or so. Why?"

"That's not much time! Quick!" Amelia started removing the dress, and Serena happily helped her. "There's something I want to get before the festival!" Once she was undressed, she put on a set of casual clothes and headed to the door.

"Don't follow! It's a present for the festival!" Amelia declared, pointing at Serena who made to follow her.

"Every time you go somewhere alone, you get into trouble!" Serena huffed, crossing her arms. "If you're going to buy something at the market, I can just get a coffee nearby or something."

"Fine, but no looking! Promise?"

"Promise."

They donned their rainhats and raincoats and jumped the tram to Central. It was raining more often recently and the wind was stronger than usual.

"It's the storm season," Serena explained as her black hair was lifted by a gust of wind. "Soon, they'll shut down civilian transport for about a month. The storms hitting the continent cause enough turbulence to rip apart a wooden transport."

"Will it stop us from sailing?"

"No," Serena said while shaking her head, "The *Vengeance* can handle all but the most serious storms. However, if the winds are strong enough, the light craft and sails attached to the hull could be ripped off and destroyed."

As they neared their destination, Serena put an arm around Amelia's waist and hopped off the tram. She couldn't help but make a squeak of

satisfaction. Being manhandled like that excited her in ways she didn't quite understand. Besides, Serena seemed to enjoy manhandling her, so she would do anything she could to encourage the act.

They arrived at the central market, and despite it being late, it was still extremely busy. Everyone seemed to want to buy their last-minute festival items, and Amelia was no different.

"I'll be sitting over there," Serena gestured to a small cafe with outside seating at one edge of the marketplace. "Don't get into any fights. Don't Speak any Words. Don't get yourself arrested. Don-"

"Yes, *mother*," Amelia rolled her eyes. "Stop worrying! I'll be back soon. I just want to buy a few things!" She waved bye and vanished into the throng of shoppers. It didn't take her long to find the kind of stall she wanted and despite the choice being a little less than she would have liked, she spent over a hundred denarii on various items.

She made sure they were wrapped up in a small bag so Serena wouldn't see what they were before heading back and finding her girlfriend sipping coffee at a table. As she sat down Serena cast a questioning eye towards the bag.

"You'll find out tomorrow," Amelia said, reaching over and taking a sip of Serena's coffee. "Coffee this late?" She asked, enjoying the bitter aftertaste.

"I'm a captain," Serena explained, "We run on coffee much like an airship runs on crystal and aether." She took the drink back from Amelia and took a sip. "I think my tolerance is so high at this point it barely affects my sleep."

"Of course," Amelia said with a cheeky grin. "Now I'm the one keeping you awake, right?" She was delighted to see a tinge of redness appear on Serena's face. It wasn't as much as Serena would have blushed a few days ago. Like with the coffee, her girlfriend was becoming tolerant of her crass jokes.

Amelia would need to start stepping up her game.

“Tsk! We’ll have Aiden with us tomorrow, so we’ll need to keep our hands off each other while he’s with us.” Amelia puffed her cheeks out in response, prompting Serena to roll her eyes. Sure, they were *supposed* to keep their hands off each other in public, but once the pair of them had more than a few bottles of loqua how long would that rule last?

Besides, Aiden didn’t seem like the intolerant type.

“How long is the festival?” Amelia asked.

“The official start time is midday and it finishes at midnight. We’ll be joining the procession a little after lunch but won’t be following it for long. Aiden has a series of pubs he wants to visit as the day goes on. For many, the drinking will go on all night, but I’d rather retire a little after midnight. It wouldn’t do for a captain to get too drunk in public.”

“What about Tomes and Dagon?”

“A captain doesn’t drink with their subordinates. I imagine most of the crew will be attending the festival, but it’s a big city. It’s unlikely we’ll bump into any of them.”

“Okay!” Amelia said cheerfully. She stole another sip of Serena’s coffee. The demon didn’t seem to mind, but Serena kept stealing glances at Amelia’s bag.

“I’m getting worried; what is it?” Serena asked.

“Wait until tomorrow!” Amelia hugged the bag close. “You won’t regret it, don’t worry. By the way, are you wearing a dress tomorrow? We ordered a pair of red dresses, but only one was delivered?”

“Right, they’re both for you,” Serena said, nodding. “A spare. I have a black dress for rare occasions. The last time I wore it was at my graduation party. I had it delivered from the ship to the inn a few days ago.”

“Oh...” Amelia played around with the image of Serena in a black dress in her mind. “We’re going to look amazing, aren’t we? Black and red? With a

dash of blue..." Amelia thought about the blue and red masquerade masks. She couldn't wait to see Serena wear hers.

The pair finished the coffee before heading back to the inn. It was evening now and the city was winding down. On the tram back Amelia could see city guards placing down signs which seemed to indicate no-drinking zones as well as directions for public toilets and lost pedestrians. The entire city was preparing for tomorrow.

Once they returned to the inn, Amelia lazed around waiting until bedtime while Serena meditated with her sword. Bored, she eventually shuffled up to the demon and began massaging her shoulders. Ignoring the complaints she moved to kissing Serena's neck and as she felt the demon melt into her arms Amelia started groping her girlfriend and removing her clothes.

"What are you doing now?" Serena said, her breath getting heavy.

"We won't be able to touch each other much tomorrow? Half a day is far too long to expect me to resist." Amelia turned Serena's head towards her and gave her a deep kiss on the lips. "I think we should get as much of it out of our system as we can tonight, so tomorrow is bearable."

"You idiot," Serena mumbled before picking Amelia up and taking her to bed.

That night, they didn't get much sleep.

The morning of the festival came and like the previous mornings, Amelia started it by giving Serena and herself a generous blast of divine healing along with a touch of cleaning. Still, they both showered in the washroom as it felt weird not to.

Only this time, Amelia followed Serena and despite her girlfriend raising an eye at her she didn't say anything to stop her. The tub was an awkward size for two people so they took turns sitting on the ledge massaging the other's shoulders while they sat under the falling water.

They had slept in, only just catching breakfast before the kitchens closed. The inn was a flurry of activity as its inhabitants were all gearing up for the festival. A dozen guests had elaborate costumes, and some even seemed designed to be worn by multiple people. Serena explained that people would spend months making them not only to win competitions but also for the social aspect of doing an activity with friends and family.

That made sense to Amelia. In her world there was no end to access to entertainment. With a click of a button she could watch a show or listen to music and play a game. Here that convenience didn't exist, so she understood why a festival was such a big deal for the citizenry.

They had both donned casual clothes. Serena told Amelia that the plan was to give Aiden their dresses to look after. When it got dark they would change and equip their masks. Until then, they had a pub crawl to survive. While they were waiting for Aiden in their room Amelia took her recently acquired marketplace acquisition and poured out the contents on the bed.

"Really?" Serena asked, tilting her head with an amused smile.

"You have such *pretty* horns, it'll be a shame for them to go unadorned," Amelia explained pointedly, "Now let's start with these...." She motioned for Serena to sit down and her girlfriend obliged with a sigh. Amelia placed the two horncaps on Serena's horns. The tips were studded with glowing crystal and long tassels with gems woven into the fabric shone like little stars.

Amelia started wrapping the tassels around the horns in a spiral pattern. Once she was done she used a hornband to secure it in place. "See!?" Amelia handed Serena a hand mirror so she could appreciate the handy work.

"I look like one of those warning cones they put around heavy machinery," Serena said, meeting Amelia's gaze in the reflection.

"Shut up! You look amazing!" Amelia rolled her eyes and began attaching the remaining hornbands she had purchased. While she was doing that, Serena picked up the other items Amelia had purchased.

“Earrings?” She asked, holding up the gold jewellery encrusted with glowing blue moon crystals. “Two pairs? How much did this cost?”

“Enough that you’ll disapprove,” Amelia murmured as she secured the final hornbands. “But not as much as I was willing to spend if I found nicer ones!”

“Pfft!” Serena giggled, holding a hand to her mouth.

“What’s so funny?”

“One thing my father liked about me was how frugal I was with my allowance growing up. Unlike my youngest sister, who spends money as fast as she can be given it, I bought practical clothes and simple food.” Serena turned around to face Amelia. “Who knew to experience that lifestyle, all I needed to get was a girlfriend who’d spoil me?”

“Hmrph!” Amelia crossed her arms and moved her face closer to Serena’s. “Well, it’s basically your money anyway, right? You’re the one paying me! Besides,” she flicked her eyes to Serena’s lips, “You could pay me nothing, and I’ll stay by you. I don’t care about your money when I have your heart!” She felt her own cheeks flush at the last sentence but kept her composure. Her discipline was well rewarded as she got to once again enjoy an embarrassed Serena looking awkwardly away while trying not to smile too much.

“Idiot, saying such unnecessary things...” Serena mumbled. Amelia darted in for a quick kiss before pulling back with a cheeky grin.

“It’s *very necessary* for me, I assure you. Here, let me put these on,” She took the earrings from Serena’s hands and clipped them onto the demon's ears and Serena did the same back to her. It felt weird having the weight of wealth hang from her ears. She shook her head a few times, enjoying the weird feeling pulling on her ears.

A knock sounded at the door and the two glanced at each other before scrambling up. “Who is it?” Serena asked.

“Your best friend, carrying his best friend in his hands!” Aiden’s cheerful voice was slightly muffled through the door. “Can I come in?”

Serena strode over, opening the door to reveal a smart-looking Aiden. He wore black trousers and a white shirt. His horns were painted with the colours of the moon. In one hand, he held a bag, and in the other, a bottle of beer.

“Your best friend?” Serena asked, eyeing the bottle. “You need better friends, Aiden The Drunk”

“I have two wonderful,” he gestured to the room with a flourish, “And beautiful friends right here. However! Since you so *strongly* insisted I could not make our trio any bigger I am left with making *this* my third friend...” Aiden lifted the bottle, frowning as he examined the label, “... *Demon’s Delight*. How fruity and crisp you taste today, dear friend!”

Amelia giggled and Serena rolled her eyes. “Can I try it?” Amelia asked. She was able to smell the beer from here but couldn’t quite identify the familiar fragrance.

“Aha!” Aiden exclaimed. “I knew you wouldn’t be such a bore. Here,” he fished about in the bag and pulled out another bottle of *Demon’s Delight*

, “I brought another with me. Try it while we go over the plans I’ve made for today!” Aiden handed Amelia a bottle and she fiddled around with the top before opening it with a satisfying pop. The bottles she had seen all used flip-top style caps instead of the usual crown cork she was familiar with in her world.

“Where’s mine?” Serena said, crossing her arms in disapproval.

“I drank it on the way,” Aiden said with a shrug, “You know how it is.”

While Serena admonished Aiden, Amelia took a swig of her bottle. The beer was light and fruity, and there were hints of something similar to strawberry and banana. “Mmm!” She exclaimed, taking another sip. Aiden had picked something good to start the day off!

“Hic!” Amelia covered her mouth in embarrassment. Her noise caused the other two to stop arguing and stare at her. “It’s good!” She exclaimed, taking another sip. “Hic!”

“Give me that,” Serena said, striding over and taking the bottle from her hands. The demon took a swig, then another, before fetching two cups and decanting the beer into them. The three of them gathered around the table while Aiden took them through the day's plans.

“Right, we’re going to keep it simple,” Aiden explained, “We’ll follow one of the processions for an hour, then duck into beer lane until it gets dark-”

“Beer lane?” Amelia asked, suppressing another hiccup.

“Literally a street full of pubs,” Serena said, “Aiden’s dream come true.”

“We’ll work our way through that holy ground,” Aiden continued with a smile on his face, “And then we’ll get some food before heading to a pagoda viewing room I booked to witness the main ceremony.”

“You booked a pagoda room?” Serena asked with a raised eyebrow, “How’d you afford that?”

“Pulled some horns,” Aiden said with a grin, “Part of the expenses I can claim for this mission to profile our wonderful human friend,” Aiden tilted his head in her direction and tapped his horns. It was an action Amelia had seen a number of times now and she figured it was a similar mark of respect to tipping your hat.

Aiden stored their dress clothes in his bag and they finished the *Demon’s Delight* before leaving the inn. Aiden led them through the streets towards the main road. As they got closer, the sound of music and drums could be heard and when they turned the final corner Amelia was greeted by a kaleidoscope of colour and sound.

Hundreds of demons and humans walked, danced and skipped past them while laughing and drinking. Every other person wore an elaborate costume representing a kami, while the rest wore colourful jewelry on their horns

and ears. Many wore facepaint and some have even gone topless with their bodies painted with colourful patterns.

Most walked in small groups of friends but often there were those that were coordinated in their formation as they danced and twirled while waving flags and batons. People walked along playing trumpets and stringed instruments while others played large drums strapped to their bodies. The rhythmic sounding of the drums lifted the spirits of everyone as the atmosphere of the festival soaked into their senses.

“Let’s go, let’s go!” Amelia exclaimed, and before anyone responded, she skipped into the throng of festival goers and twirled about as she followed the hundreds of people progressing up the road. Her heart sang with joy as she felt her happiness grow as she saw how much fun everyone around her was having.

It didn’t matter how she came to this world, whether she died or was brought by something against her will. *This* made it all worth it. *This* was an experience she would remember for the rest of her life. Right now, she was doing everything she had wished she could do when she spent years lying in that hospital bed. She was dancing, twirling and drinking without a care in the world.

At least until her revelling was stopped by Serena grabbing her wrist.

“You’re making me dizzy,” Serena said with a gentle smile.

“Do you want to dance?” Amelia asked, “I can see everyone’s doing the same kind of skipping dance thing - I’m trying to learn it!”

“I’ll dance later,” Serena said, “I need to drink more before I can move like you do, and besides...” She trailed off, and Amelia tilted her head in confusion. “I’m enjoying just watching you for now...” The demon’s crimson eyes twinkled.

“Why’ve we stopped?” Aiden said, appearing from the side. “Look, there’s a stall over there doing face painting. Wanna get it done as a group? I might get a *shawa* face.”

“What’s that?” Amelia asked, “*Shawa?*”

“A bigger *peeka*,” Serena explained, holding her palm flat at about Amelia’s shoulders. “Very big, and instead of licking you, they eat you.”

“*Peeka!* Can I get a *peeka* face done? Please!? You as well!” Amelia pointed to Serena and then herself, “We can match! Come on!” Not caring if Aiden saw or not, she grabbed Serena’s hand and dragged her to the stall.

Tonight was all about *fun*.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Good Show

When Serena turned and showed Amelia her painted *peeka* face it was only the result of a titanic amount of self-control and the presence of Aiden that prevented her from blurting out something entirely inappropriate.

While she bit her tongue to stop giggling with enough force to crush a warrior wrapped in orange aura, Amelia was delighted to see that Serena seemed to be facing the same predicament.

“Look at you two,” Aiden said, as the finishing touches were made to his painted *shawa* face, “I’m king of the forest! You can be members of my pack! Here,” Aiden offered them another beer from his bag, “You can share some of my kill!”

“King of the drunks, more like,” Serena said, turning her mirth-filled gaze from Amelia’s face and towards Aiden before snatching the bottle.

“Do *shawas* and *peekas* hunt in packs?” Amelia asked, not quite able to imagine the lion-like *shawa* with a pack of *peekas*. The latter seemed even more friendly than the domesticated housecats from her world.

“No, they’ll get eaten,” Serena said, crossing her arms while a sly smile appeared. “I’d like to see this idiot try anything like that with either of us!” The cheerful threat was slightly dampened coming from a face with an adorable *peeka* painted on it, but it was enough to make Aiden throw his hands up in mock surrender.

They finished up and the three of them continued following the procession for a while. Amelia was getting the hang of the strange energetic dance that

everyone was doing and even managed to get Serena to briefly join in on the part where you link elbows and spin. She suspected Serena was a little shy to dance in public. Perhaps it was the lack of alcohol or the presence of Aiden that held her back.

The rhythmic beating of drums and the symphony of celebration carried them through the streets. There were stalls set up on the sides from which Aiden would constantly restock his bag of alcohol and would make sure neither her or Serena were lacking refreshment.

The air was humid and despite the constant breeze of storm season it was rather warm. Whenever Aiden handed out a beer she would agitate her aether and cool it down with a bit of ice magic, something him and Serena very much appreciated.

A few more minutes passed before Aiden pulled them out of the main procession and into a side street that seemed even more packed. "Welcome!" He announced, spinning and throwing his arms wide. "To the holy ground!"

The side street stretched into the distance as far as Amelia could see and on either side, waves of people - demon and human alike - flowed as they entered and exited the hundreds of establishments lining the street. Every few seconds, Amelia's enhanced hearing could make out the shattering of glass or someone falling over.

"Seven Hells," Serena muttered, "It's worse than I thought."

"Don't worry, dear friend!" Aiden bent forward in a traditional Manwese bow, "I have selected a dozen of the finest establishments in our path! You won't be disappointed; I can promise you that!"

And so, the pub crawl truly began.

Aiden led them from one pub to the next, spending no longer than half an hour in each one. To his credit, he had picked establishments where they often had their own cubical or private drinking area. It seemed he had thoroughly planned the night to the extent of booking ahead.

He took Serena and Amelia through a range of drinks. Beers, ales, lagers and stouts which Amelia was told were a particular favourite of demonkind. She lifted up the glass of dark liquid with a layer of foam, examining it before giving it a sip.

“I’m not sure how,” she said before taking another sip of the stout, “But it somehow tastes *heavy*. Is that a thing? It’s good, though!” She enjoyed the feeling of the cool liquid flowing down her throat.

“Aha!” Aiden exclaimed while bending over and digging through his bag. While he was distracted, Serena leaned over and wiped Amelia’s upper lip with her thumb.

“Foam,” Serena whispered with a smile and a twinkle in her eye before licking it off her thumb. Her eyes told Amelia everything she needed to know, and as Aiden straightened up, Amelia innocently reached under the table and squeezed Serena’s thigh.

“What’s that?” Amelia asked at the notebook Aiden had produced. Under the table Serena had placed her own hand on top of Amelia’s but made no attempt to remove it. Amelia kept her hand where it was, enjoying the contact. It wasn’t the first time they had gotten intimate while Aiden’s attention was elsewhere.

“This, my human friend, is the record of my life!” Aiden proudly declared while flicking through the notebook.

“You’re still writing that? Christ...” Serena rolled her eyes. “It’s his record of alcohol he’s tried,” She explained to Amelia, “Aiden wants to write a book about it one day. It was the goal he decided on when quitting the sword in the academy.”

“Yes, yes,” Aiden chirped, waving his hand dismissively, “Now, what was this called...” He examined the stout that Amelia was drinking, “...*Ironwood Forest*. Perfect.” He scribbled a few lines of imperial in his notebook before turning his eyes to Amelia. “You described it as *heavy*, yes? Anything else? The more descriptive, the better!”

“Umm...” Amelia took another sip of the stout. “It’s bitter, but not unpleasantly so. It has a strong aftertaste of iron that lingers for quite a while. It’s, uh... *rich* in flavour.” She struggled to be more colourful in her description. Mathematics was always her strong suit.

“And how would you rate it?”

“Four stars?” Amelia offered, thinking it over. “Maybe four-and-a-half stars? Out of five, that is. What?” She asked, noticing Aiden and Serena were looking at her in confusion.

“Stars?” Aiden asked.

“Umm... yeah?”

“Why would you rate something based on stars?” He asked with a frown. Amelia felt Serena squeeze her hand under the table.

“It’s just something that we did back in Karligard,” Amelia said nonchalantly. “I never thought about why. It’s probably some tradition or something,” she shrugged dismissively. “What do you usually use to rate things?”

“Well, the *moons*, obviously,” Aiden said, pointing upwards. “Five moons sit above Cascadian land so typically we would rate something out of *five moons*. Hmm...” He scratched his chin with a thoughtful expression. “Four-and-a-half moons it is.” Aiden scribbled her commentary into his notebook.

They finished up and headed to the next establishment and then the next. Amelia got to try a wide range of flavours and alcohol. There was *The Gravedigger’s Horns* which had strong, earthy tones while a pale ale called *Six Heavens*

tasted like peaches. It turned out cider was also popular in Cascadia although Amelia found that just like in her own world it wasn’t to her taste.

As the hours ticked by, the bottles of alcohol got stronger and stronger and as the night sky darkened they had moved on to fortified wine. Amelia felt

pleasantly drunk and she was sure Serena was becoming just a little wobbly as well. As the alcohol took hold of the pair, Amelia had slowly ignored their pre-arranged boundaries and sat closer and closer to Serena. Now, as the empty-bottle of fortified wine was replaced with another Amelia let herself lean ever so slightly against her girlfriend.

“Keeping warm?” Aiden asked with a grin.

“Tsk! She’s just-” Serena began, a note of panic in her voice.

“Right, I get you.” Aiden interrupted.

“It’s just the-”

“Yes yes, very much so.” Aiden said with a twinkle in his eye. An awkward silence descended for a moment and Amelia heard Serena swallow.

“Guess it’s not exactly a secret anymore, right?” Serena asked, “When did you... you know...”

“Figure it out? Hmm...” Aiden raised a finger, “Suspected it by the end of the first training session,” a second finger was raised, “Confirmed by the end of the third. Didn’t take amazing detective skills to watch you two undress each other with your eyes every time you looked at each other. And also...” Aiden lowered his voice until it was barely audible, “One of our agents saw you two groping each other on the tram. They said-” He was interrupted by Serena’s loud groan as she leaned forward and grabbed her horns in anguish.

Amelia giggled and began rubbing her girlfriend’s back sympathetically. “We thought we were being so careful!” She said cheerfully, “You don’t mind, do you Aiden?”

The demon shrugged. “I don’t care too much either way. It’s a bit unusual to see a demon and a human but it’s not unheard of. Happens all the time in the Sabanis Dominance. Serena was always one to make her own path through life. The only downside is I’ve lost my evening entertainment...”

“Evening entertainment? What do you mean?” Amelia asked.

“Watching you two drunk fools think you’re being subtle, feeling each other up under the table,” Aiden said with a grin, prompting Serena to groan loudly again and squeeze her horns tighter. In response, Amelia increased the back rubs tremendously. “Yeah, don’t think I haven’t noticed. I’m not a member of Cascadian intelligence for nothing!” He gestured to himself proudly with his thumb.

Amelia leaned over and embraced the crumbled heap of her girlfriend. She looked across the table at Aiden. “Doesn’t The Bible speak out against... you know?” She punctuated her statement by giving Serena a gentle squeeze.

“Sure,” Aiden said, looking amused. “But things were *very different* back then. The scripture the Empress constructed from the teachings of Christ himself - the greatest demon to ever walk the realms - was done when demonkind was facing an extinction event. How much do you know about how Cascadia was formed?”

“Tomes gave me a brief overview.”

“Who’s Tomes?”

“The quartermaster on the *Vengeance*.”

“Right. At the height of the long discordancy when human and demonkind were scrambling to survive on the plateaus and mountaintops, it was bad, *really bad*,” Aiden jabbed a finger into the table, “Historians argue about the exact number, but most settle on around two-hundred thousand.”

“Two-hundred thousand what?” Amelia asked.

“Two-hundred thousand demons remaining. Of our entire species. That’s how close we came to extinction in this realm. That’s why in most religious scripture, whether it’s the Quinto scrolls here in Kenhoro, the diaries of Sangoism, or the etchings made by the stone-worshippers in Honkanai, they *all* emphasise the need for demonkind to procreate.”

“Of course, such things matter less now. The Centralis Basin is home to some eighty million demons, and the rest of the territories have millions more. Still, the scriptures that prohibit or discourage same-sex relationships had good reason to do so,” Aiden shrugged as he opened the bottle of fortified wine, “Just many others like myself understand that reason no longer exists. Like I said, I don’t care either way. I think-”

“Can we keep drinking, please?” Serena mumbled from within Amelia’s arms.

“Ah! She’s resurrected!” Aiden said with a triumphant smile. “Look, Amelia! Her cheeks are as red as the red moon! Ah, young love!” Amelia gave her girlfriend a soft smile and she swore she could feel the heat radiating from those burning cheeks. “Look what I got!” Aiden pointed to the set of three strangely shaped glasses on the table.

“Oh dear,” Serena said.

“What are these?” Amelia asked, picking one up. The glass had no stem and only two small glass protrusions to balance itself on. At the bottom, a long hollow stem curved upwards from which the contents could easily spill out.

“These are *sipper* glasses,” Serena explained. “They’re designed to be easy to tip over, so the drinker is inclined to constantly hold them, and the long stem encourages spillage.”

“Okay... why?” Amelia asked, happy to see Serena functioning again.

“Because it encourages the holder to *keep drinking*,” Serena said, putting an arm around Amelia and pulling her close. “And I suddenly feel *very* determined to get *very* drunk. So come on then, *Aiden The Drunk*. Live up to your name!”

“It’s *Aiden The Drinker*...” Aiden mumbled before decanting the fortified wine into the sipper glasses. The three of them sat in silence for a minute, enjoying their alcohol. Amelia turned slightly and leaned against Serena. No longer needing to try and pretend that they weren’t in a relationship, Amelia felt like she could truly relax.

“Tell me a story,” Amelia asked the pair of demons.

“About what?” Aiden replied.

“About Serena at the academy! Was she always, you know...” Amelia made slashing and stabbing motions with her hand. She didn’t need to turn around to know Serena was rolling her eyes.

“You bet your pretty horns she was!” Aiden declared with a grin before frowning, “Uh, you don’t have horns... you know what I mean, though! There was that time she attacked an instructor...”

“I *did not* attack an instructor. It was a *mutual* duel!” Seren protested while Amelia giggled.

“And then there was that time she broke the nose of a poor boy who just wanted to dance with her...”

“Tsk! That idiot thought just because his father was a lord, I would fall head over heels with him. It was his fault for pushing it so much!”

“Well,” Amelia said, “I can see her etiquette lessons have been *consistent* in their nature throughout the years.” She tilted her head backwards to make out a red-faced Serena. Whether she was blushing from the alcohol or the stories, Amelia didn’t know.

“Remember what we did with Jorge of Jark?” Aiden piped up.

“Ha!” Amelia felt her body shift as Serena laughed, “That was a good one! He even thanked us at the end, didn’t he?”

“Who’s Jorge of Jark?” Amelia asked, “And what did you do to him? Oops,” A sudden feeling of wetness on her chest as she spilt some fortified wine from her sipper glass. A quick invocation of a cleaning spell and the stain was gone.

Amelia had been abusing the spell throughout the night to avoid the need for either her or Serena to visit the washroom. She hadn’t been casting it on

Aiden to create as many situations as possible where they would have a few minutes alone.

“Jorge was a swordsman from North,” Aiden explained, “He had talent but would paralyse himself with self-criticism, you see. The man came from humble beginnings and was hoping to graduate and earn enough to send some money back to his family.”

“That’s right,” Serena said, “Other than his lack of self-confidence, he was a decent demon. Seemed to treat everyone the same, which some of the sons and daughters of lords took exception to.”

“And not you?” Amelia asked.

“I didn’t care where anyone came from in the academy. Our group consisted of demons from all levels of society.”

“You had a friendship group?”

“It was more... a training group,” Serena said with a shrug, “It was only idiots like this,” she gestured to Aiden, spilling some of her fortified wine on the table, “Who were persistent enough to maybe be considered a friend...”

“I knew behind those crimson eyes and the trail of broken bones and bloodied noses that there was a caring demon!” Aiden exclaimed, “And look! Here we are!” He motioned to Amelia as she leaned against her girlfriend.

“I know, right!?” Amelia nodded enthusiastically, “She’s a big softy, isn’t she?”

“I’ll show you soft...” Serena mumbled quietly as she took another sip.

“So what did you do with Jorge, then?” Amelia asked.

“So he didn’t have much self-confidence but would hang around and train with us. Jorge seemed to struggle with pushing himself, despite wanting to. It was like a mental barrier was blocking him,” Aiden leaned in with a

mischievous glint in his eye, “We noticed he was using a variable training sword, you see.”

“What’s a variable training sword?”

“It’s just like the one you used with Grandmaster Gu, only the handle is hollow and removable,” with his hands Aiden made the shape of a small circular disc, “You can clip in weights about this size into the handle and reattach it.”

“Which is exactly what we did,” Serena continued, “Every week or so, when he wasn’t looking we’d open his sword up and make it *ever so slightly* heavier.”

“Did he notice?” Amelia asked.

“No! We were certain he would! Jorge was always too afraid to move up a weight by picking a heavier training sword, so we did it for him. Every week for two months! And then...”

“...Then it was the end-of-semester tournament,” Aiden said with a grin. “Guess what we did right before it was his turn?”

“What?”

“Distracted him and removed all the weights!” Aiden burst out laughing before catching himself, “I can still remember his face as he unsheathed his sword on the arena floor!”

“Ha! I remember the referee asking him if everything was alright! Pfft!” Serena giggled, and Amelia once again enjoyed the sensation of Serena’s chest moving as she laughed. “And when he swung it against his first opponent, his strike smashed right through the defence and knocked him out!”

Aiden laughed mid-drink and choked on his fortified alcohol. “Remember how he looked at his sword afterwards? Like he couldn’t understand what just happened? Good times!”

“Ah... I wonder what he’s doing now...” Serena mumbled.

“Last I heard, he was working as a convoy guard for some Sabanis company running spices.”

“Hmm. Good money,” Serena said.

The conversation naturally lulled, and the trio finished the bottle of fortified wine without any more spillage. By the time they got up to leave, Amelia was well and truly wobbling on her feet. Serena wasn’t far behind, although she still managed to walk with her usual dignity. Aiden seemed to be handling the alcohol the best, although his words were starting to slur ever so slightly.

“Right!” He declared, “It’s time for the final stop.”

“Another pub?” Serena asked.

“No, no...” Aiden gestured down the street. “Food! I paid for meals and rooms at one of the pagoda eateries overlooking the square. They should be expecting us around about now...”

They exited the street, and Aiden guided them back into the main procession which was now stuffed with thousands of demon and humans. As they pushed their way through the crowd Amelia was just started to feel like she was going to become lost when Serena grabbed hold of her hand with a firm and warm grip.

“So you don’t get lost,” She said with a smile.

“Sure, I- hic!” Amelia covered her mouth as a bout of hiccups took over her. Fighting to contain them by sheer willpower alone, they arrived at the entrance of a pagoda. The religious building was covered in bunting and colourful statues of kami burning incense out of their mouths.

“It’s technically not a shrine,” Serena whispered as they walked in. “Business isn’t allowed to be conducted on the premises of religious buildings, so this is more of a... temple-themed restaurant.”

Aiden led them up a central flight of stairs until they reached one of the upper floors. The space was split up into half a dozen sections, each with their own tables and couches. The sliding walls had been opened to reveal a sparkling and festive Kenhoro spread out as far as the eye could see.

Once they found their reserved section, Amelia all but collapsed on the couch. She announced she was going to close her eyes for a bit and to wake her up when the food was here.

“Make sure to get some chicken,” she mumbled.

“Chicken?” She heard Aiden ask.

“She means choco,” Serena explained.

“And some loqua!” She blurted out, suddenly remembering the delicious drink from the inn. Aiden had been generous enough to organise this entire night so she thought it would be fair to treat the group to a bottle of the stuff.

Or a few bottles, depending on how it went.

After assuring the others she would pay for it, Amelia heard Aiden walk off to find someone to order from. A few moments passed, and she felt a soft pair of lips press against her cheek.

“I’m heading down for a few minutes. There are some things I want to add to the order,” Serena whispered, “You feeling okay?”

“Yeah, just sleepy. I’ll stay here.” Amelia mumbled, burying her face into a cushion. The alcohol had hit her harder than she expected and all she wanted to do was have a nap. She could easily wipe all traces of alcohol from her body with a spell but she was rather enjoying the feeling of being drunk and wanted to avoid using magic for now.

She heard Serena’s footsteps fade and soon she could only hear the light chattering of other groups on the same floor backed by the deep drumming

of the festival. She was just about to drift off into a satisfying sleep when a nasal voice pierced her foggy mind.

“I *cannot* accept that this establishment does not have a room for someone of *my stature*! They should be bending over backwards to give me the entire floor!”

Amelia heard the arrogant and selfish tone in the boyish voice and felt herself frown. Well, she was sure this person and the group he was with would soon move onto another floor. Surely she wouldn’t be so unlucky to deal with this drama alone, right?

“Look here, lord-prospect! There’s an empty room here!”

“Ah, finally! It has a good view too! Now, go and get some drinks, will you?”

“Y-yes, lord-prospect!”

Amelie’s frown deepened when she heard the group’s footsteps come closer and she had to refrain from sighing when she heard the door to her area slide open. With her eyes closed her senses counted six men stumbling into the room.

“There’s someone in here!” One of the men cried out in surprise, his words slightly slurred.

Amelia groaned and turned around, burrowing her head into the side of the sofa. She would just wait until Serena came back, then she could watch her girlfriend kick ass and protect her.

Not that she *needed* protection, of course.

“Wha- what’s *this*!?” The nasal voice piped up again, “What is a *human* doing *here*!?”

“Maybe she’s a kitchen wench, lord-prospect?”

“Don’t be a fool, her clothes are too fine for that.”

“A working girl, then?”

“She can be our evening entertainment! Come here, you!”

Amelia scrunched up her face as she felt her anger flare. She could sense the approaching hand, threatening to grab her shoulders and turn her around.

“Piss off,” She said and the hand paused. Amelia rolled her eyes and with an awful lot of effort re-orientated herself so she was facing the room. She lifted and rested her jaw on one hand and opened her eyes.

Six shocked demons stared at her. At first glance, she thought they looked like clones of each other. Each wore traditional robes with the same black hair braided into a ponytail. Their cheeks were flushed red with drunkenness and their eyes wide with surprise. On closer inspection she found they varied by their horns. Some had only one pair, while others had two and the one in the most expensive-looking clothing sported three pairs of black horns sprouting from his head.

Of course, they didn’t come close to the magnificence of Serena’s horns.

“Y-you!” One of the men pointed at her, “What did you say to Lord Jin!?”

“What are you doing?” Amelia glared at the group. “My friends and I paid for this room. It’s not yours, so *piss off!*” Her repeated expletives seemed to send another wave of shock throughout the rabble.

“Human girl,” said the demon with three pairs of horns. “Before I decide upon your punishment, what is your name?”

Amelia yawned loudly, not bothering to cover her mouth. She could almost hear Serena nagging her about the breach of etiquette in her mind. “Amelia. What’s yours? Jin, right?”

“It’s *Lord* Jin, human!” The drunk lord’s eyes flashed with anger, “Who do you work for!?”

“Mmm... my master. I’m her maid.”

“You’re *a maid!*?” One of the men behind lord Jin exclaimed. “How dare you address our Lord with such impunity! Lord Jin, allow us to teach her a lesson! We’ll have her kissing your feet in no time!”

“Oh?” Amelia stifled another yawn, her intuition telling her these men were no threat to her whatsoever. “Is that the only way you can get close to a woman?” She formed the best snarky smile she could muster. “I guess you probably pay them. Although there’s not enough denarii in all of Cascadia to make me willingly come within six feet of you. Pfft!” Amelia giggled as the man went as red as a tomato. She could actually see his veins bulge as his blood pressure skyrocketed.

Well, if he actually had a heart attack she might step in, but until then...

“You... you have a death wish!” Lord Jin shouted, drawing a gleaming sword and pointing it at her, his drunken face contorting with rage. When did they have swords? Well, she was so drunk that she probably didn’t notice.

“That’s an awfully weak grip for such an impressive-looking sword,” Amelia continued. She knew she ought to stop, but the words kept flowing. “I suppose you’re compensating for something? What a tragic experience it must be for a woman to be bed by you!”

Lord Jin spat on the floor. “You’re pretty for a human; let’s see how smug you look once I’ve carved your face,” he pressed the sword’s tip into her cheek with enough force that would cut someone who hadn’t warded themselves. “You all saw it, right?” Lord Jin said to the room as a cruel smile formed on his face. “She attacked me in a drunken rage, right!? What a crazy woman...”

Just as her assailant's eyes took on a deadly glint that Amelia felt no threat from, the sliding door to the room opened and a familiar set of footsteps could be heard.

“Hello!” Amelia said cheerfully as Serena appeared in view. “I see you got the loqua!” Her girlfriend was carrying a bottle of blue loqua and just

seeing the liquid made Amelia lick her lips in anticipation, although the action was somewhat inhibited by the sword pressing into her cheek.

“Aiden’s bringing the food up now,” Serena said with a yawn. She sat down on a chair at the side of the room and rested her chin on her hand. “You going to do anything about that?” Serena asked, gesturing to the rabble that was souring the atmosphere.

“I’m *awfully* tired,” Amelia said, punctuating her statement with a yawn. “I was stalling for time until you got back. I thought it was only fair, you know?”

“Fair?”

“You got to watch me dancing earlier. I was hoping you’d put on a show for me!” She grinned at Serena, who sighed before slowly standing up.

“You! Are you the master of this *maid!*?” Lord Jin spat, “I demand compensation! I’m fining you both!”

“Can he do that?” Amelia asked.

“No, only Speakers can fine the public,” Serena sighed again before putting down the bottle of loqua and rolling her shoulders. “What do I get if I put on a good show?”

“Mmm...” Amelia grinned as the idea formed in her head. “If you can get them all on the floor *unconscious* in five seconds, I’ll do whatever you request *back at the inn*.”

Her voice had barely faded before Serena started moving, and as the violence erupted against the helpless group, Amelia couldn’t help but feel impressed.

After all, she had never seen Serena move so fast with so much determination!

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Merchant Girl From Tanhae

“And *how* did all this happen?” Aiden asked as he stepped into the room carrying a tray of food. The restaurant workers he was assisting let out little gasps of shock as they took in the scene of devastation and lust-driven violence.

“*She* happened,” Amelia said with a grin, gesturing to Serena standing proudly over a pile of unconscious demons. “The one with three pairs of horns put his blade against my throat so *Speaker* Halen protected me,” Amelia emphasised Serena’s title as a Speaker, which had the intended effect; the restaurant employees suddenly became very docile, and their eyes took on a mixture of fear and respect as they fixed their gaze upon Serena.

She figured that considering Serena’s status as both a lord-prospect, war hero, and Speaker, the establishment might be willing to avoid the hassle of kicking them out. Her prediction turned out to be correct as the owner soon appeared and after a quiet conversation with Serena and Aiden the unconscious rabble was taken away.

They even gave them another bottle of blue loqua on the house!

“When I become a citizen, will I be able to go around giving such *firm* etiquette lessons myself?” Amelia asked Serena after the employees had left.

“Stop calling them etiquette lessons, idiot,” Serena said while rolling her eyes. “You were *assaulted*. This was self-defence. Here,” She sat down and

poured the three of them a glass of blue loqua. Now awake, Amelia licked her lips in anticipation.

“A toast,” Serena said, raising her glass. Amelia and Aiden copied.

“To what?” Amelia asked.

“To...” Serena hesitated momentarily, “To the end of the war!”

“To the end of the war!” Amelia and Aiden echoed. They clinked their glasses and took a sip. Although the taste was every bit as delicious as she remembered, Amelia couldn’t help but catch the sombre look in Serena’s eyes. Her girlfriend had been at war for a long time and it had slowly taken its toll.

As long as the conflict went on, Amelia silently vowed to be Serena’s unyielding support. She would shower her girlfriend with as much love and affection during and after the war ended.

“Oh, sweet hells,” Aiden mumbled. “My sweet, delicious, *blue* friend! How I’ve missed your taste! Oh, and what’s this!” The demon’s eyes widened as he saw the extra bottle of blue and green Serena had bought. “You’ve brought your family along! Praise the fell gods!” While it looked like he was about to weep from happiness, Amelia asked Serena something that had been bothering her.

“I heard Lord Jin refer to himself as a lord-prospect, but everyone called him *lord*. Are both titles correct?”

“It depends. *Lord-prospect* is the correct title, but his lackeys were likely trying to appease him for their own benefit.” Serena shrugged, sipping her glass. “Employees of the house will refer to me as *lady*, a Cascadian Lord would refer to me as *lord-prospect*, while to anyone else, I would be *Speaker* or *Captain*.”

“So many titles! Will I become a lord?” Amelia asked. Instead of replying Serena gestured towards Aiden, who appeared to have recovered from his ecstasy enough to join in the conversation.

“With Lord Yulan and Grandmaster Gu’s recommendations, they’ll make you a citizen and a lord, I’m sure...” Aiden said, trying not to slur his words.

“So fast?” Serena asked with a raised eyebrow.

“They’ll want to lock her down. Remember, she’s a friendly Speaker of a *healing* branch.” Aiden leaned back, swirling the loqua in his glass,

“Demonkind has no gods of healing. Sure, aura helps recovery, and some of the support wards from the mages can do their part, but nothing like the human *Aseco* branch.”

“Still... a human lord...” Serena murmured.

“There are *some* human lords in the Centralis,” Aiden said with a thoughtful expression, “And the North. It’s only the eastern and southern overlords who prohibit it.”

“What about the West?” Amelia asked.

“Eh...” Aiden wobbled his hand in the air, “The West has their own way of doing things.”

“What’s their overlord like?” Amelia had long noticed the West was the least talked about empire territory.

“Who knows?” Aiden shrugged, “No one has ever seen him. Or her, for that matter. Well, I suppose the Empress knows who they are. Even their name is unknown. But get this,” Aiden leaned in with a mysterious glint in his eye, “The one singular fact that is public knowledge about the western overlord is that they are the strongest of the four. Quite the mystery, right?”

It *was* quite the mystery! Amelia suddenly felt an urge to explore the West. “Can we go there?” She asked Serena, who shook her head.

“The borders have been closed for centuries,” she explained, “You need a good reason and a visa to go there, whether by air or ground. It’s not like the rest of the empire. Things work differently there.”

“Look!” Aiden interjected as he pointed out the window, “The main procession is here!” Amelia followed his finger and saw the main square filling up with the festival goers. A large stage had been erected upon which important-looking people were taking seats.

“Those are the Highlords,” Serena explained as she peered below. “Looks like Highlord Ru is absent, but that’s expected. Guess what Lord Yulan said is true; the seat for the greatlord is empty.”

“What did Lord Yulan say?” Asked Aiden.

“That something important was being transferred to Centralis and the greatlord was personally guarding it,” Serena eyed Aiden with a suspicious eye, “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Aiden threw one hand up, “I’m not so high up on the ladder I get told what the *greatlords* get up to. It’s news to me.” Serena held her gaze for a moment before turning back to the square.

“The dancing will start soon,” Serena said, a hint of eagerness creeping into her voice, “We should change into our dresses, Amelia?”

“S-sure!” Amelia sprang up and fetched Aiden’s bag with their dresses. Serena adjusted a paper screen to block the view from Aiden or anyone else coming in and the pair of them set about undressing and dressing each other. They fumbled about, the alcohol taking its toll on their dexterity. Serena didn’t need any help with her black dress, but Amelia needed the extra pair of hands to assist her.

An extra pair of hands that didn’t miss the opportunity to grope her breasts.

“I can hear you giggling!” Aiden called out. “Don’t think I can’t guess what you’re getting up to!” Having been caught, the pair of them finished up and exited.

“Seven hells,” Aiden exclaimed as they appeared. “Don’t you look like quite the pair! This is the first time I’ve seen you in a dress since

graduation,” Aiden said, tilting his head towards Serena, “And of course, you look lovely in red, Speaker Thornheart.”

Amelia giggled at the compliment. “I wish we had dress shoes!” Both she and Serena were still wearing the practical work shoes they used on their day to day adventures.

“I’d rather have our feet in something we can move in if a fight breaks out,” Serena explained pointedly, tapping her shoes against the wooden floor.

“Who’s going to start a fight down there in front of all those Highlords?” Amelia asked.

“Who’s going to start a fight in a *cafe*?” Serena answered with a blank expression. “Who’s going to *Speak* in public? Who’s going to start a fight in here?” Serena reached out and slightly ruffled Amelia’s hair, “You’re a magnet for trouble, you know?”

“Hey! Don’t mess up my hair!” Amelia protested and began adjusting her braids. Serena rolled her eyes and dug out two rainhats for them.

“It’s drizzling, so wear these.”

Donning their hats and receiving the very strongest promise that Aiden wouldn’t drink all the loqua while they were gone, they proceeded downstairs and out into the main square. The space was packed with people who were dancing to the festival drums. Serena pulled her into the throng, and the pair of them began giggling as they tried to copy everyone else’s energetic movements.

Turned out, with enough alcohol in her, Serena was every bit of an enthusiastic dancer as she was.

Luckily, the tailor did an exceptional job, and the dresses were tailored to allow vigorous dancing. As the night stretched on and the tempo of the drums increased, Amelia felt herself fall into a trance-like state, much like she did while training. She wasn’t sure, but for a few moments she felt like

the connection she had with her girlfriend actually manifested into something tangible. Something in the aetherfield that she could sense.

Or maybe she was just terribly drunk.

“So, I did it, didn’t I?” Serena asked when the tempo slowed down and they could simply hold each other in an embrace while swaying from side to side.

“Did what?” Amelia asked, enjoying the close contact. Their hats had protected them from much of the rain, but enough had gotten through to cause parts of their dresses to stick to their skin, leaving little to the imagination.

“I knocked them all out within five seconds.”

“Oh... Oh!” Amelia grinned as she saw Serena begin to blush. She tried to meet Serena’s gaze but everytime their eyes would meet Serena would look away with a nervous smile.

“Stop grinning like an idiot, idiot.”

“I can’t help it!” Amelia felt her grin grow even wider. She removed her rainhat so she could nuzzle against Serena’s neck. “So what did you want me to do?” She whispered. “You’re so warm...” Amelia mumbled to herself.

“I...” Serena began before becoming quiet. As the silence stretched on, Amelia could imagine the inner battle that was taking place within her girlfriend's mind. She would never tire of how adorable Serena became at times like this. It was the *real* Serena, unlike the stern captain act she put on for the crew.

“Can I take a guess?” Amelia whispered. “If I’m right, you only need to say yes, and I’ll do it tonight.”

“... Fine,” came the quiet reply.

“Well,” Amelia began, giving Serena a soft kiss on the neck. “What you did the other night with your tongue... you know, *between my legs*?” She felt Serena freeze a little at her words.

Bullseye!

“I think it would only be fair if I could return the favour...” She whispered, giving Serena another kiss. “I don’t have any horns for you to hold, but I’d like it if you ran your hands through my hair. Would you like that?” For a moment, Serena didn’t reply. Eventually, she seemed to gather her courage.

“Yes...” Serena whispered, “I’d like that.”

“Wonderful!” Amelia pulled back and lifted Serena’s rainhat to give her a kiss on the lips before her girlfriend could protest. “You know what they say! You get what you ask for!”

“Shut up...” came the small reply. Still, Serena pulled her into an embrace and Amelia took the opportunity.

“You’re not going to *believe* how fast I can move my tongue,” she whispered.

“Damn you... let’s go,” Serena said quietly, pulling Amelia by the hand.

“Where?” Amelia asked.

“To get whatever loqua Aiden hasn’t drunk and then...” Serena paused, not turning back as she guided Amelia through the crowd. “... and then we go back to the inn.”

Amelia felt her face blossom with happiness as an atmosphere of anticipation fell upon them.

It would be another night with little sleep.

The following day, Amelia yawned as she exited the inn. She rolled her sore tongue around her mouth. Who knew tongues could get muscle soreness? Not only that but her jaw ached some, too. Serena wasn't with her. Her girlfriend was still passed out from the activities of the previous night. Amelia giggled at the memory and set about finding a cafe where she could get some morning coffee.

Serena's favourite coffee was made from beans from Jimar, a plateau city somewhere in the Southern Terra Firma. The delivery for the inn still hadn't come in yet, so Amelia thought she would go hunting before Serena woke up.

Navigating through the streets, Amelia found luck in her third cafe. Take-out cups didn't seem to be common in Cascadia so she was forced to purchase a large flask as well. After paying she exited the cafe to see a city guard arguing with a human woman dressed in simple work clothes.

"Look! I'm *just trying*-" The woman protested against the city guard who had grabbed her by the arm. She had an unusual accent that Amelia had never heard before.

"I saw you skulking about!" The guard barked, "What're you doing around here? Do you have a work permit?"

"I docked just the other day! I'm part of the convoy from Tanhae!"

"Is that so?"

"Yes! Yes, it is! Look I have my documents here!" The woman pulled out some papers and shoved them into guard's face. "See! I have a visa!" The guard let go of the woman's arm while glaring at her. After a moment he began sifting through the papers one by one, glancing up at the annoyed-looking woman every few seconds.

"The Mehta Group?" The guard asked, "That who you work for?"

"Yes! I help run the books!"

“And you are...” The guard flipped through the papers, “Tatiana Lebedev? What’s a federation girl like you working this far south?”

“I go where there’s money to hire me,” Tatiana said bluntly.

“Is that so...” The guard looked like he wanted to interrogate the poor woman further, but then he noticed Amelia spectating awkwardly to the side. He frowned at her momentarily before his eyes widened slightly in recognition. “Hrmph!” he said, handing back the papers to Tatiana. “Stay out of trouble. Don’t wander out of the human districts, or you’ll cause problems.”

“... Yes. I’m sorry,” Tatiana said with a defeated expression. The guard glanced between them before clicking his tongue and walking away. Tatiana walked over to a nearby table and collapsed with a weak groan.

“They don’t seem bothered by you,” Tatiana said with her face in her hands.

“Me?” Amelia pointed at herself.

“Yes.”

“Well, I guess they’ll get to know you eventually.”

“I was only sent to buy everyone some morning coffee... The human districts don’t have the good stuff...” Tatiana mumbled, rubbing her face before slamming her hands on the table. “Alright! Just a little setback. You can do it, Tatiana!”

Amelia couldn’t resist a soft chuckle at the woman’s determination. She reminded her a little of herself! “They do Jimari coffee here,” she said, shaking her newly-acquired flask. “It’s a favourite of demons if you have any in your group.”

“Just humans...” Tatiana said, “You don’t seem worried about being stopped. Why is that?”

“Well...” Amelia sat down opposite Tatiana, “I’m a maid for one of the noble houses, so if I get stopped, I can just wave this around!” She pulled

out the House Halen signature and wiggled it before Tatiana's face.

"House Halen..." the woman mumbled before her eyes suddenly went wide. "Sorry! We merchants need to know the important houses. House Halen employs you, then?"

"That's right! Well..." Amelia tilted her head to the side, looking up in thought, "I'm employed directly by Ser- I mean, Lady Halen."

"So lucky..." Tatiana said, her face filled with amazement. "I wish I could find employment at a proper house like that! No one wants to hire a *federation girl* down here, so I'm stuck bookkeeping for Sabanis merchants!"

"I suppose it must be difficult..." Amelia said, unsure of what to say to ease Tatiana's frustration. "Not all demons are bad, though! Many are really nice once they get to know you!"

"And the rest just harass and mock us for fun, I suppose... Sorry, I've had a rough week. I get airsick easily. Not a great trait for a merchant, is it?"

"That's okay! Here, have some coffee!" Amelia offered Tatiana some. There would be plenty left for both her and Serena, so she didn't mind being generous.

"Thanks... Uh, I'm Tatiana, by the way," Tatiana said as she poured some of the coffee into a small cup she had produced from her person. "What's your name?"

"I'm Amelia! Nice to meet you! Want to be friends?" She gave her best lets-be-friends smile. It hadn't worked on Mel at the academy, but it might work here!

"Umm... sure. We're not docked for long... but it's better if we humans stick together, right? Being around so many demons..." Tatiana rubbed her arms awkwardly, "Makes me uncomfortable. Having another human to walk around with would make me feel safer."

“Mmm! Sure! There’s so many amazing buildings to see! Oh, and there’s all kinds of tasty food at the marketplace! We can go there if you want?”

“Ha... You’re so kind,” Tatiana mumbled. “Where are you from, anyway? With that golden hair... are you from Christdom?”

“I’m from Karligard!” Amelia answered cheerfully.

“Hmm,” Tatiana sipped the coffee as the satisfying fragrance tickled Amelia’s senses. “You’re a long way from Karligard.”

“Well... I go where there’s money to hire me!” Amelia was happy to see a smile appear on Tatiana’s sullen face. It felt good to cheer someone up!

“What kind of services are you hired for?”

“I’m a healer of sorts!” Amelia briefly considered keeping it a secret, but she was already aware that the knowledge of her healing was spreading in all kinds of circles, so she didn’t see much point in hiding it. “I provide healing services under Lady Halen’s direction.”

“Amazing!” Tatiana’s eyes went wide in shock. “Are you a member of the church!?”

“Uh... no. I kind of avoided them. Took a different path, I guess...” Amelia rubbed her nose awkwardly.

“It’s no problem. We all take our own journeys in life,” Tatiana said, her eyes taking on a far-away look. “Would you like to meet up later in the week and walk around the market? I need to buy stationary and ink, and I would feel better if someone local was with me. The rest of my group doesn’t want to leave the human district.”

“Sure! We could do it today, if you like?”

“Sorry,” Tatiana shook her head, “I have so much work to do. Can we do it in three days? On the twenty-fourth?”

“Mmm! Can do!”

“Would it be okay to meet here? At midday?”

“Could we do two’o’clock? I have training midday.”

“Training?”

“I’m learning the sword at the academy. I train there every day at lunch!”

“A healer learning the sword? How strange...” There was a brief flash of confusion on Tatiana's face before it settled back into a smile. “Are you a student?”

“No, but the Grandmaster took an interest in teaching me 'cause I’m a-” Amelia caught herself. She shouldn’t go around telling everyone she’s a Speaker. It might make her new friend treat her differently! “Because I’m a mage,” She finished.

“So, two’o’clock here in three days?”

“Sounds good! Do you want me to come in while you buy your coffee?” Amelia noticed Tatiana had brought a large flask with her, a level of preparation that Amelia hadn’t thought of. Tatiana nodded, so the pair of them went inside and Amelia waited while Tatiana got her flask filled.

“This is the good stuff,” Tatiana said. She had cheered up a lot now. “Jimar coffee is hard to come by outside Cascadia. No better way to start your morning.” Amelia found herself nodding. She had grown to like the bitterness and lasting aftertaste of the Jimari beans.

“So, what kind of stuff does your merchant group... merchant?” She asked once they had exited the cafe.

“The group I’m with brings down spices from Vinay, stopping at Tanhae and then here. We take back silk and cloth. Although, there are other merchant ships taking part in the convoy. It’s safer to travel as a larger group. It’s also cheaper to pay for protection.”

“Have you visited much of the empire?” Amelia asked. Unfortunately her hopes of stories of adventure and pirates were dashed when Tatiana

informed her she had only ran the routes from the Sabanis Dominance down to the Eastern Terra Firma and back.

“Well, thanks for everything,” Tatiana said, “It’s really nice for you to stick yourself out for me... with the war and everything, I just don’t feel comfortable around demons...”

“Don’t worry! It’ll be just us! You can tell me about The Federation! I’ve never visited!”

“Ha... sure!” Tatiana gave her a friendly smile, her brown hair waving in the wind. “See you in a few days, Amelia!”

“See you in a few days!”

Amelia waved bye before skipping away, whistling cheerfully to herself. A new friend! How exciting! She would let Serena know, of course. Maybe they could eventually meet! Maybe... Serena *did* glare a lot at humans she didn’t know.

Ah, well. It’ll work out eventually!

Polina Volkova’s heart had only begun to settle down by the time she returned to the merchant ship. Boarding the deck, she navigated into its depths before stopping at a heavy wooden door. She gave the pre-arranged knock to indicate she wasn’t under duress and a moment passed before the sound of an iron bolt moving could be heard and the heavy door swung open.

“Coffee?” She offered the room, holding the flask. “It’s Jimari, the good stuff.”

“You’re back,” Natalia Marakova coolly intoned. “Close the door.” Polina shut the door behind her and approached the group of five; three men and two women. There were more embedded in roles in the city itself but Polina didn’t know anything about them.

Things like that were on a need-to-know basis.

“Well?” Marakova asked as Polina sat down.

“It went well,” Polina answered, placing the flask on the table. No one seemed to move to have some, so she busied herself by pouring some in her cup. “A guard started harassing me outside the cafe Ame- I mean, target one visited. But that turned into an opening to start a conversation.”

“Give us the rundown,” Marakova commanded.

“She’s really a maid employed by target two, or at the very least she believes she’s a maid. My blessing cannot distinguish between the truth and an honestly believed falsehood. Her name really is Amelia,” Polina took a sip of the coffee, finding it challenging to relax under the intense gaze of four experienced field agents.

“She claimed to be from Karligard, but that was a lie. She said she had never visited the federation. That was the truth. She claims not to be part of the church. That was also the truth.”

“Where in the six heavens did she come from...” one of the field agents muttered.

“What else?” Marakova questioned.

“She was telling the truth about providing healing services for target two. She admitted to being a mage, although we knew that already.” Polina took a moment to gather her thoughts, “She’s training at the academy under the grandmaster every day at lunchtime.”

“What!? Why?” Marakova’s eyes widened in shock.

“She’s learning the sword. I know, I found it weird too. Apparently, the grandmaster’s interested in teaching a mage.” Polina took another sip as the surrounding agents murmured for a moment amongst themselves.

“What academy is that?” Someone asked.

“It’ll be the Kenhoro Officer Academy. It’s the only one here with a grandmaster directing it.” Marakova explained. “Senior Polina. Recount the entire conversation from start to finish. Don’t miss anything out, no matter how trivial it seems.”

Polina swallowed her coffee and recounted the events of that morning in as much detail as she could remember. She was surprised to find Marakova wasn’t annoyed at Polina arranging to meet Amelia in a few days and actually congratulated her on the initiative.

“We’ll have agents tailing you for your little *date*,” Marakova said with a sly smile, “If target two appears, then you are to make your excuses and leave as quickly as possible. Once target one reports that she’s made a friend with a *federation accent* then target two will likely investigate.”

“Our cover should hold, right?” Polina asked. The merchant company they were sailing under was an honest company registered in Vinay. Polina wasn’t sure, but she suspected most of the employees and perhaps even the company owner himself didn’t know it was a front for federation intelligence.

“It’ll hold... Unless someone gets captured,” Marakova said with a grim expression. Capture meant interrogation, and interrogation likely meant torture. “Keep the pill close at all times. Hold it under your tongue during the next meeting.”

“Yes, team leader,” Polina couldn’t help but swallow nervously. She would have to gather intelligence while holding a pill in her mouth that would kill her if she swallowed it accidentally. It was nerve-racking yet, on a weird level, exhilarating.

“We’ll spend the next few days going over what questions we need answered. We’ll run you through example conversations so you’ll know what to say in any circumstance. You’ll be alright, Polina Volkova.”

“Thank you, team leader,” Polina gave a smile and felt the determination in her heart solidify.

She was so close.

So *close* to getting revenge.

So *close* to Serena Halen.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Polina's Confusion

Mel paced in front of the door to the training room. Back and forth she went, too distracted in her thoughts to stop. Her throat was constricted and she felt like she wanted to be sick. A pit of anxiety had formed in her stomach that gnawed at her mental state. She wanted desperately just to run away.

Unfortunately, running away was tricky while her broken arm was wrapped in a sling.

For the third time, she raised her a fist to knock and for the third time, she hesitated. Beyond that door were not one, not two, but *three* Speakers! How was she supposed to be able to handle that!

“You can do it, you can do it...” she muttered to herself like a mantra. She squeezed every bit of mental strength she could muster and knocked on the door.

There was no answer.

Of course there was no answer. This training room was a private area for instructors and Speakers. She knew about the famous sound-blocking enhancements covering its thick wooden walls. She reached down and before her instincts could stop her, she opened the door and stepped through.

Unexpectedly the training room looked like nothing special. It was also questionably quiet. Too quiet. For a moment, Mel considered she might be

in the wrong place but then she caught sight of a man eating training buns to the side. He spotted her and waved, then gesturing for her to come over.

Further into the room, Mel saw three people - two demons and a human - sitting silently on the sand in a meditative pose. It was the grandmaster, Speaker Halen, and the individual who broke her arm.

Speaker Thornheart.

Mel approached the man who had waved at her, glad to have some instruction to follow as opposed to standing around awkwardly. She recognised him as part of the trio that had been coming in most days to train. As she walked over, she couldn't help but note that he didn't feel like a swordsman. Was he a mage? Another Speaker?

"Hello," she whispered.

"Hello, sit down," the man gestured to the floor, "They should stop for lunch soon. Are you hungry?" He offered her a bun as she settled into a respectful *seiza* position. Mel took the food with her good arm, not knowing how to refuse. She couldn't bring herself to take a bite, feeling like she would throw anything she ate back up.

"Thank you," she said, her voice slightly breaking. "Ahem! My instructor told me to come here at this time to, um... apologise." She looked at the floor, feeling small and naive. She shouldn't even be in this room! It was a room for monsters. For true masters!

"Ah... you'll be the trainee Serena told me about. Well, Amelia sure gave you a beating, didn't she? How's the arm?" He flashed Mel a friendly smile.

Mel blinked a few times at the man's straightforwardness. "It's, uh, well..." How was she supposed to answer this? "... Broken," she finished before giving herself a mental slap for the lacklustre response. Thankfully, the man seemed to be in a somewhat cheerful mood. He didn't seem to be training. What was he here for?

Questions she couldn't and wouldn't ask.

“You needn’t worry much,” the man said, popping the last bit of a bun in his mouth and swallowing. “Amelia has a kind heart. She feels terrible about what she did. I’m sure she’ll heal you in a- ah, here they are!”

Mel scrambled to her feet and offered a deep bow at the approaching trio. With only one arm she couldn’t manage traditional Manwese etiquette so she placed her good hand on her hip and bowed in the Samino style.

“Trainee Mel, welcome,” came the gruff voice of the grandmaster.

“Hello again!” came the chirpy voice of Speaker Thornheart.

She heard nothing from Speaker Halen and when she straightened her posture, she was greeted with a pair of terrifying crimson eyes that stripped away her ego and left her naked and hollow. What a fool she had been to provoke the ire of such a *noble* demon.

“Tsk! So this is the one that insulted House Halen with such impudent arrogance?” Speaker Halen snapped at her, putting one hand on her hips and another on the hilt of her training sword. For a moment, Mel thought she would pass out from the sheer *presence* of Speaker Halen.

“I- I’ve heard of your great achievements,” Mel rambled, “I think- think you’re a huge inspiration to others. And me, of course. I-I wanted to apol- apolo-” Mel swallowed the lump in her throat and forced the words out. “Apologize for my thoughtless words the other day. I’m very sorry!”

“Bah! What an awful apology,” Speaker Halen clicked her tongue, turning her head slightly away as she looked down on Mel. “And what do you have to say to Speaker Thornheart?”

Mel glanced at the human Speaker who gave her a silent wave and a friendly smile, entirely contrasting Speaker Halen’s presence. “I’m very sorry!” She blurted out, bowing quickly again. “I failed to conduct myself properly as a trainee officer!”

“You should make her grovel,” Speaker Halen said coldly. “I would have broken both her arms if I were in your position. And a few ribs. Tsk! To

“speak to a Speaker like that...”

“Oh, stop it!” Speaker Thornheart suddenly piped up, turning away from Mel and addressing Speaker Halen. “She’s gone white as a ghost! You’re-”

“Why are ghosts white?” Asked the man sitting down. He was staring at Speaker Thornheart with a confused expression. Despite her confusion at being defended by the one she offended, Mel couldn’t help but also wonder where that expression came from. Was it a human culture thing?

“Wha-” The human Speaker also looked confused. “What colour are they supposed to be? Wait, never mind! The point is that Mel feels bad about what she said! No need to torture the poor girl!”

Mel couldn’t help but wonder at Speaker Thornheart calling her a *girl*. She was twenty-one herself, and if she wasn’t mistaken the human looked even younger than her. If she had to guess she would say Speaker Thornheart was as young as eighteen!

No, that wasn’t possible. The human was a *Speaker*. No one could become a Speaker so young. She must have used her human healing powers to make herself youthful. How old was she really? Forty? Fifty? She didn’t act like she was older.

“Whatever,” Speaker Halen rolled her eyes. “Hurry up and heal her, then. I’m hungry, and seeing her here pisses me off.”

“O-okay!” Speaker Thornheart stuttered before turning to Mel with a smile.

Mel was about to ask if she needed to do anything but before she could get the words out Speaker Thornheart started to *glow*

. It wasn’t the warm glow of a gas lamp or the white glare of an aetherlight. It was the glow of *magic*. Speaker Thornheart’s golden hair shone with aether, and her blue eyes intensified to a shade that Mel could only describe as beautiful.

She had never been this close to a mage casting a spell and for the first time she understood what it meant to detect the formation of magic that took place within the body. As Speaker Thornheart twisted and moulded her aether Mel could sense it folding into the spell structure. Mel might not be a mage herself, but there was no doubt about the unbelievable amount of *skill* that Speaker Thornheart was demonstrating.

A moment passed and golden light with - if Mel wasn't seeing things - blue flecks flew from Speaker Thornheart and entered Mel's body. She braced herself for pain, but instead experienced a feeling of *warmth* and *love* that caused her mouth to drop open. She wasn't being struck by the human's magic, she was being *embraced*.

As the *kindness* rippled through her body, one thought came to mind.

Seven hells, I've become such a bitch. Mel thought.

She always snapped and argued with her brother. Where was the caring and supportive younger sister who would cheer him on while he trained? She mocked and bullied those weaker than her to impress her friends. Where was the girl who used to gossip and giggle about boys she and her friends fancied? When had she let such darkness into her heart?

As the magic dissipated and her feeling of self returned, Mel looked at the human in open wonder. How unfair it was that demonkind had no gods of healing! She glanced down and tentatively moved her arm. She slowly pulled it out of its sling and straightened it. Still feeling fine, she began to flex her arm.

It was completely healed.

No, it was stronger than ever before!

"That's amazing..." she mumbled. "I don't know how to-"

"Don't worry about it!" Speaker Thornheart chirped before giving Mel a thumbs-up. "Just be a lot nicer to people from now on, okay?"

“I... Yes. Thank you, Speaker,” Mel bowed deeply to Speaker Thornheart. She felt a profound sense of gratitude towards the benevolent human. The person she was a week ago would have scoffed if someone had told her she would be thanking a *human* so sincerely, but here she was.

“Trainee Mel,” the grandmaster intoned softly, “Not many demons alive can say they have experienced human healing magic. You’re extremely fortunate to be granted her kindness, aren’t you?”

“Yes, grandmaster,” Mel replied as she straightened up.

“That said...” the grandmaster rubbed his beard, “It would be best if you *minimised* Speaker Thornheart’s healing, should you ever talk about it. I’m sure your arm feels perfect right now, but keep it in a sling for another week. Do you understand, Trainee Mel?”

“... Yes, grandmaster,” Mel replied, “I understand.”

“Return to your lessons now,” the grandmaster said. “Work hard, and your talent will take you to new heights.”

“Bye!” Amelia waved.

“See you,” said the man.

“Tsk!” Speaker Halen glared at her.

Thanking them again, Mel exited the training hall. As she walked back through the corridors to her lessons, a new-found vigour formed in her mind. She *would* work hard. She *would* break through to orange, and then yellow, and then after all that she would challenge Speaker Thornheart again after she communed the First Word! She would fight her as equals!

She would show her what it meant to be a true swordsman!

Polina paced outside the cafe. Three days had passed since she last met Amelia, and now it was time for their second meeting. Under her tongue,

the hard wax capsule was a constant reminder of the danger she was in. She took a few deep breaths and double-checked the green flag hoisted in a doorway at the end of the street.

Green meant the meeting was going ahead. Green meant Serena Halen hadn't followed Amelia. Green meant she could be calm. She forced herself to stop pacing and leaned against a wall. She didn't have to wait long.

"Hello!"

Polina turned to see Amelia bouncing up to her with a smile. In Amelia's eyes, Polina saw no deception or hostility. This was great, as it meant whatever investigations they had done on her in the last three days had come up clean. Or, they hadn't, and Amelia hadn't been told. The latter was one of the worst-case scenarios, and the thought of it prompted Polina to wiggle her tongue to assure herself the poison was still there.

She had questioned Natalia Marakova over the effectiveness of the poison in the situation where Amelia was there to heal her. She had been assured that what was in the capsule was specifically formulated to resist magical interference. Apparently, it would take a titanic amount of healing energy to overcome. If Amelia did try to heal her it would be meaningless.

"Hi there," Polina said, with a smile that wasn't completely fake. Regardless of whether Amelia was a traitor to humankind or not, she *was* rather friendly, and it was difficult not to respond in kind to the woman's cheerfulness.

"Shall we get going? I only have a few hours before I have to be somewhere," Amelia said. "Or, do you want to get a coffee first? My treat?"

"Uh, no, that's all right, thank you," Polina had been told to avoid eating and drinking lest she accidentally swallow the capsule. "If we could head to the market immediately, that'd be ideal. Do you need to get anything?"

"Yeah!" Amelia gave her a thumbs up as they began walking to the tramlines. "I'm going to buy a huge bag of Jimari coffee beans! For the ship!"

Ship? She must be talking about *The Vengeance*. “What kind of ship?” Polina asked.

“Ah, it’s a military ship. Called *The Vengeance*. I’m helping Lady Halen with her duties! Lots of need for a healer on a military ship, you see...”

Polina’s blessing reassured her there was no lie in Amelia’s words. “That’s amazing. *The Vengeance* is famous! Even us merchants have heard about it. Are the stories true, what they say?”

“Oh?” Amelia hopped on a passing tram and held out her hand to help Polina up. “What kind of stories do they tell?” Polina clambered onto the tram, and the pair of them settled in some seats.

“Stories like... the ship can sail through the lumina to the fabled *undersky*! Is that true?”

“Hmm... I don’t think it can do that much...” Amelia looked thoughtful. Her answer wasn’t definite either way. What level of trust did she have with Serena Halen? Polina needed to figure out how embedded Amelia was in the Cascadian military structure.

“I heard merchants saying there’s a creature living in the ship’s walls. They say it eats crew members that don’t work hard enough!”

“Pfft!” Amelia giggled, “That’s not true! Anathor is *lovely*. I don’t think he even needs to eat.” That wasn’t a lie. At the very least, Amelia did appear to have a benevolent opinion of the Formless’s nature.

“My ship is so boring and cramped! It must be so *amazing* to be on such a big ship. How did you end up being employed by Lady Halen?”

“It’s a story you wouldn’t believe!” Amelia grinned, and Polina let her eyes show desperation as her blessing told her Amelia believed that to be true. “I guess you can say it was by pure chance! I didn’t even have a say in the matter!”

“You didn’t have a say? Were you captured!?” Polina knew captives could develop attachments to their kidnappers. Is that what happened here?

“Heh... we had a rocky start, me and Lady Halen,” Amelia rubbed her nose, “But we’re all good now. I get paid a fair wage and get to experience a lot of new things!”

“You want to travel?” Polina asked, and seeing Amelia nod further asked if she had any places she wanted to visit if she had the chance. By asking this, she could indirectly verify places Amelia had never been.

“Loads of places! I want to go east to the Three Sisters! That’s where Lady Halen’s family is based!” Amelia started, her face becoming very excited and her body animated. “There’s also a gigantic creature underneath the Cascadian Basin I want to visit!” Polina nodded. She’d seen photographs of the Cascadian Titan’s skull.

“There’s the desert in the south! Apparently they ride these animals called *sandskimmers*,” Amelia spread her arms wide, “That glide over the desert sands! Oh, oh! I also want to visit the Far West! See how they grow loqua berries under the green moon! Apparently, it’s hard to get permission...”

“There’s sandskimmers in the Endless Sands,” Polina said, “I rode one when I was a child. They’re amazing animals,” seeing Amelia’s eyes grow wide, Polina recounted the story of when she’d had the opportunity to ride one of the creatures.

“Ah, you’re so lucky...” Amelia sighed, “I’ve only ever seen Kenhoro!” That was the truth, so Polina took the opportunity to chase down some information.

“You were born here?”

“No, I just meant Kenhoro is the only place in the empire I’ve ever visited!”

“So, were you born on the human continent then?”

“Yup!” Amelia chirped.

It was a lie.

“I was born in Karligard! After I understood my healing abilities, I sort of just... wandered around alone until I chanced upon Lady Halen!”

More lies. Polina resisted a frown. If she wasn't born on the human continent and she had only visited Kenhoro, then where was she born? She didn't have the look of a native of the Sabanis Dominance. Was she from one of the floating islands? Maybe she was from Mur?

Most puzzling of all. Why would she lie? Was she protecting someone, or was someone instructing her to lie for another reason?

“It must have been hard,” Polina answered, trying to sound sympathetic. “To be alone for so long. What kind of places did you visit while travelling from Karligard?”

“Ah... I sort of wandered through Christdom a lot. I never really visited any cities as I wanted to avoid the church. Then I kept going south, and the rest is history...” Amelia shrugged. Her words were lies and knowing that Polina could tell they were practiced lies that were spoken a little too mechanically.

“Why did you want to avoid the church?” Polina asked, “They would have given you a life of luxury! They still would!” Her voice raised slightly at the end, and she had to quickly bottle her rising emotions. “Sorry,” she whispered.

“It's okay,” Amelia said. “I suppose it must seem strange. But there's not much difference whether I'm up there healing humans or down here healing demons and humans, right?”

Of course there's a difference! Polina wanted to shout but resisted the urge. “Do you really think there's no difference? Despite the... conflict?”

Amelia shook her head. “Not really. Did you attend the moonrain festival the other day?”

“No,” Polina said. She was forbidden from partaking in anything like that unless it was a part of the mission.

“Well, I did. We followed the procession for the first bit. It was amazing, there were colourful costumes and dancing and drinking and...” Amelia trailed off, “Anyway, the point is, guess what I saw?”

“What?”

“Demon and human children playing and dancing in the streets! They looked adorable and they were throwing coloured chalk at each other. They were laughing and playing! You know what that means?”

“... What does it mean?”

“It means any distrust or conflict between demon and humankind is *learned*. Those children playing with each other will only grow up to hate each other if other adults *teach* them that! Who cares if one person has a pair of horns and the other doesn't? We all feel the same emotions for the same reasons...” Amelia was quiet for a moment. “And that's why I'll heal whoever I want when I want,” She turned and looked Polina directly in the eyes, “So it's not a problem, right?”

Polina knew she was being asked if *she* thought it was a problem. The honesty of Amelia's candid take on human-demon relations had thrown Polina into a pit of confusion. Just who was this fellow human?

“I suppose not... it's just... not a lot of people share the same views as you do...”

“Well then!” Amelia exclaimed, sounding a lot more cheerful, “It'll be down to me to start changing people's minds then, won't it? Come on, this is our stop!”

They hopped off the tram and headed to the central market. During which Polina tried to get answers from Amelia but the signals her blessing gave her were causing even more confusion. She asked Amelia who had taught her healing spells, and her truthful answer was *no one* did. This was

supposed to be impossible. Training even a talented human into a healer was extremely skill, resource, and time-intensive. It wasn't something that you could just do by yourself.

Was her blessing broken?

As she slipped in questions here and there, Polina grew more and more confused. Amelia, who came from nowhere and had never visited anywhere apart from Kenhoro for a week, had somehow developed a comprehensive understanding of healing magic. To make matters worse, Amelia told her she was only *twenty-five*.

Had she just fallen out of the sky?

One thing was sure, Amelia's accent was definitely Centralis Imperial. She spoke like a native, yet every answer she gave around the subject indicated she had never been in or near Centralis.

It made no sense.

One thing she could confirm is Amelia was *not* in the military, nor was she a citizen. Apparently, she was planning to become a citizen of Cascadia as soon as possible. Not only a citizen, Polina was sure they would make her a Cascadian Lord.

Amelia asked plenty of her own questions and Polina politely answered. Amelia seemed to love stories and adventure so she would mix in a few tales of her real experiences adjusted on the fly to fit with her fake identity.

"Oh, Tatiana! This was what you wanted, right?" Amelia guided her to a paper and ink stall, where Polina bought a hundred sheets of paper and a few bottles of ink. This action wasn't just part of her cover story; she'd been told the entire team would be spending much of the time they had on the way back writing reports.

She sighed. Polina didn't want to leave. She couldn't leave. How could she head back now after coming so close to Serena Halen? Although she didn't think Amelia was necessarily a *bad* person, it made her sick when she heard

the woman speak of Serena Halen with such kindness. Did she not know the actions that monster had taken? The people she had killed?

“What’s up?” Amelia asked, “You looked sad suddenly?”

“Ah, I was just thinking I have so much work to do I’m not sure if we’ll be able to meet again...” Polina mumbled the prepared and practised line.

“Oh no! Are you heading back north?”

“That’s right. Merchant traffic shuts down in two weeks, so we’re leaving before then.”

“It must be tough, being a merchant,” Amelia said, “You travel to all these places but never really settle down anywhere!”

“Yes... it’s difficult...” Polina answered.

“Well, if you ever have free time, come find me!” Amelia chirped and told Polina what inn she and Serena were staying in. Polina knew the inn already, although the field team hadn’t assigned anyone to watch it directly. It was too dangerous to tail or observe a Speaker like Serena Halen. They would be detected almost immediately.

Amelia found a stall selling sacks of coffee beans and she bought a huge bag of Jimari beans. Polina couldn’t help her eyes going wide at the amount of money Amelia carried. It made sense as she must have been paid a tremendous amount for her healing capabilities.

After all, demonkind didn’t have any gods of healing.

They took the tram back to the cafe, and Polina bought a coffee which Amelia insisted on paying for. She avoided drinking it, instead standing and holding it in her right hand. A signal to the team that everything had gone okay. She didn’t know who, but someone sitting inside or outside the cafe would be someone under Natalia Marakova’s instruction.

Bidding farwell to Amelia, Polina returned to the merchant ship where she was thoroughly interrogated for hours until every tiny detail had been

repeated a dozen times. At the end of it, she was exhausted and simply collapsed onto her assigned bunkbed.

Getting revenge was tiring.

Chapter Thirty: The Second Word of Divinity

For the next week and a half Amelia followed a simple schedule. First, she would wake up in Serena's arms and give her a blast of healing magic. Serena had remarked that she suspected her body might be getting younger as a side-effect, although she wasn't sure. The pair of them decided to keep an eye on things.

The next daily task was washing, followed by breakfast and a morning coffee. Serena had raised an eyebrow when Amelia had returned with a twenty-pound sack of Jimari coffee beans but otherwise didn't say anything.

Tomes continued to turn up in the morning and help teach Amelia writing and reading. She was getting good now and could understand more and more complex sentences. She also enjoyed the mathematics books he had brought her and was delighted to find that demons had discovered calculus! Although they used different symbols that felt strange at first, she got used to them. At seeing how proficient she was with numbers, Serena mentioned that her oldest sister, Nina, would get along with her.

They would then proceed to the academy to train. Amelia never saw Mel again, but she caught sight of her brother once, who only glared at her but otherwise said nothing. As she continued to spar and practice her swings, Amelia was feeling more and more confident by the day. The wooden sword now felt natural in her hands and the grandmaster and Serena were pointing out fewer and fewer mistakes.

Still, the first aura lay beyond her reach. It was a frustrating experience. Her experience as a mage only made it more challenging to get her aether

moving in the unfamiliar ways required for the warrior's aura. She was making some progress, although Amelia felt like it was happening far too slowly despite both Serena and the grandmaster telling her she was doing great considering the amount of time she had put in.

"Try imagining a convection current," Serena said one time.

"A convection current?"

"Right. When you heat a cup of water from the bottom, the heat travels like this." Serena scratched a diagram into the ground. "Imagine something similar but instead of heat it's your aether moving throughout your entire body."

"I tried that! Look!" Amelia focused inwards and flowed her aether around her body.

"That's not the same," Serena said, "You're *flaring* your aether like a mage and relying on your exceptional aether control to move it while it's agitated. Aura needs a more delicate touch. You need to inject *intention* into your aether and *let* it react instead of *forcing* the expected reaction."

That instruction had helped Amelia greatly, and she soon felt she was on the right track. She was given a few more meditative exercises, which she practised as often as possible.

After training, Amelia would wander around the city with Serena. Sometimes Aiden would join them, although he had a growing list of other tasks that would keep him busy. Now that he had sent off the report about Amelia it was mostly a waiting game for whatever the Cascadian government decided.

Serena had been spending more time around the ship as they finished the repairs and installed a new gun turret. The shipment from Ponan had the last vital supplies they needed, and with the help of the greatlord's men, they were ahead of schedule.

Serena's weird dreams had stopped, although Anathor had warned them they might return when they left Kenhoro to sail south. Amelia had questioned Serena about the nature of *The Vengeance*. Was it alive? Did it have a soul? Her questions only received half answers and an apology. Apparently, the answers she wanted were locked behind doors and protected by Serena's superiors on a need-to-know basis.

It was a shame Tatiana was too busy to meet up again. Even so, Amelia was happy to make a human friend. Surprisingly, Serena didn't seem bothered, stating she wasn't the kind of person to stop her from having friends. She had been suspicious at first, but after her investigation into the merchant came back clean, she didn't mention Tatiana again other than after their final meeting where Serena made sure Amelia recounted everything she had said 'just in case you let something slip'.

They would spend their evenings at the inn, training and chatting. On occasion, they went out for food and drinks. Thankfully, there was no more drama or drunken lords to cause problems.

Then the night would come, and without fail, lips would meet lips, and the fingers and tongues of one of them would have the other giggling and moaning. As the days ticked by, they grew ever more comfortable around each other and Amelia would often not even bother to get dressed anymore when she woke up. Instead, she would lounge around naked while drinking her morning coffee, enjoying both the bitter taste and Serena's eyes on her.

When they finally went to sleep, Amelia would kiss her girlfriend and whisper 'Goodnight, Ren' and Serena would whisper 'Goodnight, Lia'. Their little nicknames became a small ritual that only they would witness every night. A sign of their growing relationship and trust.

All seemed to be going well until one morning, ten days after she had met Tatiana for the last time, Serena stomped into their room, frustration and worry visible on her face.

"What's up?" Amelia asked.

“Just overlooking the loading of the new cargo down in the docks, and guess who I bumped into? Or rather, who bumped into me?”

“The greatlord?”

“Worse. The *Dragon* is in Kenhoro.”

“So?”

“So? The man has direct command over the eastern admiralty! I’m used to taking my orders from Greatlord Oshiro! That was who swore me into my commission! Bastard...” Serena poured herself a coffee and sat down, mumbling a few curse words.

“I guess he gave you an order?” Amelia asked, sitting up.

“Intelligence has detected movements of Christdom church agents in Kenhoro and Tanhae. The Federation are up to something as well. Kenhoro’s getting hot.” Serena took a sip of the coffee. “The *Dragon* wants us to take a civilian cutter down to Shimashima, while Dagon will sail *The Vengeance* towards Ponan before turning south and meeting us.”

“Why?”

“Because with so many foreign agents poking their noses around the likelihood that you’ll be attacked or someone will try and kidnap you is too high. There will be Speakers hidden in the enemy agents, and we’ve already had one fight in the city where Words have been Spoken,” Serena said with a thoughtful expression, tapping her horns. “I suspect it’s some kind of counter-intelligence move. I bet they’ll leak where we go through certain channels to identify leaks and see who moves to follow us or *The Vengeance*.”

“*We*? I can come with you?” Amelia asked.

“Of course,” Serena said. “He all but stated he expected both of us. I think it’s fair to assume the *Dragon* is aware of our relationship now. Which means...” Serena gave a soft sigh. “My family also knows.”

“I can’t wait to meet your family! It’s going to be fun!” Amelia said with a grin.

“*Fun* is not the word I would use...” Serena muttered.

“When do we have to move?”

“Now.”

“*Now!?*” Amelia blurted out. It was so short notice!

“The cutter waiting for us at the eastern docks is called *The Sakamoto*. It’s one of the last lines out before travel shuts down tomorrow or the day after. Storms will start hitting the city any day now.”

“But, but...” Amelia cast her eyes around the room that had begun to feel like a home. “What about our stuff? The masks? My coffee!” She went over and hugged the enormous sack of Jimari beans.

“Ha!” Serena scoffed at her actions. “There’s people waiting for us outside. I’ll have them get whatever we miss and put it on *The Vengeance*. As for us, pack your clothes in a bag.”

“This is happening so fast!” Amelia cried, “Do we have rooms on this other ship?”

“I don’t know. But it’ll be packed. They probably picked it *because* it’ll be packed. I bet you whoever’s working behind the ticket office today is an agent in disguise taking notes on whoever has a sudden pressing need to board *The Sakamoto*.”

“Right, right,” Amelia said as she hurried around the inn room collecting her worldly possessions. She made sure to fill the pockets of some of her clothes with what coffee beans she could, which made Serena shake her head.

Her girlfriend joined her packing, and within a few minutes the pair of them were downstairs saying goodbye to Mister Weng. After exiting the inn, Serena talked to a mysterious man smoking a cigar.

“Can you get the rest of our possessions and get them on *The Vengeance*?”
Serena asked the man.

“Boys!” he called, and a pair of demons appeared from around the corner. “Go upstairs with Weng and get everything that doesn’t belong to the inn. Get it on the ship!” The pair of demons headed inside, and the man produced two tickets which he handed to Serena.

“These are your tickets for *The Sakamoto*,” he said. “It leaves in an hour, so you’ll need to hurry.”

“Will the ship have an escort?”

“No, not until it gets closer to Shimashina. This is all short notice.”

“Right, we’ll be off then.”

“Good luck.”

With that, they hurried to catch a tram to the eastern docks. When they arrived, Serena handed over the tickets to the demon sitting inside a windowed office who glanced at the pair of them before stamping them. Amelia wondered if that demon was really an agent in disguise. He looked exactly like the bored minimum-wage worker you could find anywhere.

Finding the bay *The Sakamoto* was docked in gave Amelia a shock. It was very different from *The Vengeance*. The cutter was made entirely of wood and didn’t appear to have a walkable deck. Instead, a gangway led into an opening on the ship's side. It was about half the size of *The Vengeance* but looked far sleeker.

“Cutters are built for speed,” Serena explained, “Lightweight and powerful engines. No armour. We’ll reach Shimashina by tomorrow morning.”

They boarded the ship, pushing through the other passengers and their luggage. They found their rooms near the engines in the rear of the ship. They knew they were near the engines because they could feel the rhythmic beating of the lift engine sounding from somewhere close by.

“Guess first class was sold out,” Serena said as she opened the door and peered in. The room was small, with a single tiny bed and a thin table. Amelia’s room was opposite and it was equally compact.

“Like sardines in a can...” Amelia mumbled.

“What are sardines?”

“Small fish. Packed tightly together in a can for transport.”

“Do they taste good?”

“... Nah.”

“*The Vengeance* is prepping to move. Something spooked them.”

Natalia Marakova snubbed her cigarette into the desk. Polina swallowed nervously. “Do we follow them?” Polina asked.

“No,” Marakova waved a dismissive hand. “We do not deviate from the ship’s itinerary. If we do, it’ll blow our cover. We return to Vinay as planned. We have other agents in other cities. They’ll report to us when they see it make land.” She narrowed her eyes at Polina. “Do you have any problems with that, Polina Volkova?”

“No, team leader,” Polina said. She knew Marakova was well aware of her personal history with Serena Halen. It was the core reason why Marakova was originally *against* her coming on this trip. Nevertheless, Polina had been on her best behaviour for the duration of the mission. Never complaining nor deviating from her instructions.

“Target one and target two are not sailing with *The Vengeance*,” Marakova said, prompting a series of murmurs to erupt around the room. “One of our assets has informed us they’re taking a cutter south to Shimashina. A ship called *The Sakamoto*.”

“Why the split?” One of the men in the room asked.

“Church Intelligence is in Kenhoro,” Marakov explained, “And you know how sloppy they can be. The information regarding the targets taking different routes is floating around in a few circles. It’s an intentional leak.”

“To see who’ll bite?” Polina asked.

“Damn straight,” Marakov glared at the room, “And we’re not biting, understand?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Came the chorus of replies.

“We’ll rebase ourselves in Vinay until we verify if *The Vengeance* makes land in Shimashina, and then we’ll plan our next moves. Alright, get to work. We need to get the cargo on board quickly if we’re going to beat the storm season.” As everyone turned to leave, Marakova called out to Polina. “Not you, Senior Volkova. Stay behind for a minute.”

After the two of them were alone, Marakova slowly took out another cigarette and lit it. The smoke lingered in the air, ticking Polina’s nose.

“You’ve done good work, Senior Volkova.”

“Thank you, ma’am!”

“But your role ends here. Once we reach Vinay, you’ll be heading back to the bureau. The director has a dozen testimonies he needs you to verify.”

She couldn’t go back! She was so close! “Ma’am...” Polina began to argue her case, but Marakova cut her off.

“You can’t come down south to Shimashina. Your face is known to target two, and target one would have seen a copy of the photograph from your merchant visa.” Marakova clasped her hands together, relaxing back into her chair. “You’ve done good work, but your blessing is too valuable to risk further in the field.”

Polina didn’t say anything. Her throat had gone dry. What could she say? Marakova seemed to see her predicament and distress as her voice took on a kinder tone. “Look, you’ve demonstrated enough competence and initiative

in the field that I'll recommend that the director open you up to more fieldwork in the future. Is that fair?"

"Yes... thank you, ma'am."

"Alright, now-" Marakova suddenly cut off, turning her head slightly as her eyes became unfocused. "Do you hear something?"

Polina focused on her hearing. There was something. It sounded like...

"Gunshots!" Marakova explained, drawing a revolver from her person.

"Wha-"

"Silence! Don't move!" Marakova hurried over to the closed door and pressed an ear to the wood. The gunshots continued, and now the sound of yelling could be heard. "They've boarded the ship," Marakova said with a grimace. She turned and, with a grunt, pulled a bookcase down so it leaned against the closed door.

"We're trapped!" Polina exclaimed.

"No, we're not. Go here." Marakova indicated to the other side of the table, and Polina obliged. For a moment, she thought she was going to help Marakova lift the table to further block the door, but instead, the woman picked up the table herself and *threw* it across the room to nestle against the door.

Polina saw a faint red glow emit from Marakova's skin.

Well, she was the team leader for a reason.

"Here," Marakova said, opening a hidden trapdoor. "No talking from now on, understand? They might have Speakers." Polina nodded furiously and followed Marakova down the trap door.

It led to a tight and suffocating crawl space where Polina dutifully followed her team leader until they reached the end. She couldn't see anything but

could hear Marakova fiddling with something metal. Suddenly, a beam of light appeared as a hatch in the underhull was opened.

Marakova placed a finger to her lips and exited the hatch on her back with careful, methodical movements. Polina saw there was a rope running alongside the underhull that Marakova was using to shimmy along. Polina took a breath, said a silent prayer and turned onto her back and exited the ship.

The sound of shouting and gunfire could be heard all around her. Polina could hear men screaming, not knowing if they were human or demon. Together, she and Marakova clambered along the underhull, using the rope that had been fed through metal rings lining the lowest point of the ship. Did all ships have these, or was it set up for this purpose?

Polina swallowed, trying to avoid looking down at the sheer drop underneath them. She focused on moving, putting one hand in front of the other, trying to ignore what would happen if she let go. After what felt like an eternity, she bumped into Marakova, who had stopped. Polina opened her eyes and looked at the team leader who was motioning down.

Polina looked down and saw they were above a platform that held the keel blocks at the ship's bow. This was only a drop of a few feet compared to the deadly fall only a few meters the other way. Marakova dropped, landing like a feline, and Polina followed, only letting out the smallest of grunts as her body absorbed the impact.

They crouched down and snuck between the keel blocks. Above them, Polina could hear the sounds of someone shouting orders. Marakova tapped her shoulder, and Polina saw that they had come to an iron gate. Marakova produced a key and with a

click that sounded awfully too loud, the gate was swung open.

Marakova motioned, and they entered the tunnel. It wasn't high enough to stand so Polina had to awkwardly half-crouch. Marakova shut the gate behind them, and they progressed in darkness for a few minutes before Marakova spoke in a whisper.

“These are the old sewers that used to serve this district before they tore it down to build the docks. Now they’re used for the flood waters in storm season.”

“What happened!?”

“Something in our cover gave us away. A traitor. Someone bribed. A mistake. It could have been anything. It happens.”

“Is everyone...” Polina felt her voice break slightly. She wasn’t tremendously close to the team, but she had started playing cards with them and they had shared drinks more than once.

“Dead? Yes, and if they aren’t, they’ll be trying to find a way to become dead. You don’t want to find yourself under interrogation by demons. Do you have your capsule?”

“Uh... no, I must have fallen out of my pocket while climbing the rope.”

“Take this, put it under your tongue.” Polina felt something pressed into her hand. It was a familiar wax capsule. She placed it under her tongue. “Quiet now,” Marakova ordered, and soon, the only sound that could be heard was the shuffling of their feet and her own frantic breathing.

Time passed and suddenly the darkness grew lighter and Polina could make out details of the wall and ground. As the figure of Marakova in front of her became ever clearer the sound of wind could be heard. They arrived at another gate. Marakova didn’t have a key for this one, so she pulled the iron bars apart with her bare hands.

Red aura really was something.

“Where are we?” Polina whispered, peering out over the edge and swallowing at the sheer drop of a hundred meters or more. The wind whistled and her hair fluttered wildly.

“On the outside of the plateau. We’ll have to climb up,” Marakova said while twisting her neck to look upwards. “It’s on a slight incline, so that

helps. I'll make the hand and footholds for you, alright? Be careful when you look up; stones and dirt will fall into your eyes."

Before Polina could protest, Marakova began climbing. Polina followed, needing to take more than a few seconds to find the courage to leave the safety of the tunnel. The wind was far stronger than she expected, forcing her to press her body tight against the wall lest it rip her off. She was sure she might have shed more than a few tears, but the wind snatched them away as soon as they could form.

Hand by hand, foot by foot, handhold by holdhold. Polina followed Marakova as she whispered prayers to the Lord. Someone up there must have been looking out for her because eventually they reached the top. Marakova peeked over before quickly pulling herself up and then helping Polina up. They were on a small street, and while Polina could see movement at the ends, it seemed no one saw them climb up.

She wanted desperately to rest but Marakova dragged her into a side alley. They ran for a few minutes until Polina's lungs were screaming at her.

"Ma'am..." Polina gasped, stopping against a wall. "Please... a moment." Marakova stopped and for the first time Polina caught a glimpse of sympathy in her eyes.

"I forgot how weak people are without aura," Marakova said. "Take a moment, Senior Volkova."

"Ah... Thank you..."

After a minute of rest, Polina felt her heart rate return to normal. They continued through the side streets at a brisk walk.

"Twenty-four, long-hall lane," Marakova suddenly said.

"What?"

"Twenty-four, long-hall lane," Marakova repeated, "Say it back to me."

"Twenty-four, long-hall lane," Polina said.

“It’s a safe house,” Marakova explained, “In the eastern human district. The key is hidden under the kami statue by the stairs leading up to the entrance.” Marakova turned and stared at Polina. “If we’re ever separated, go there and wait. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes,” Polina answered, “Why are you helping me so much? Wouldn’t it be more efficient if you were by yourself?”

“Silly girl.” Marakova snorted. “Your blessing is more valuable than I am. The only thing worse than you dying is you surviving *and* being caught. You must *never* be caught. Understand?”

“Yes, team leader,” Polina swallowed nervously.

For half an hour, they moved through the city. Marakova didn’t tell her where they were heading, and Polina didn’t ask. Just as they were about to exit a side street onto one of the busier shopping streets, Marakova froze before snapping her body around.

“We’re being followed,” she whispered, pointing the revolver down the dark alleyway. “Someone with skill...” Marakova handed Polina the revolver and took a few steps. “Guns are no use here,” she whispered. “Run.”

“Wha-” Polina began but was cut off as a man in a robe appeared before her, swinging down a sword to cut her head off. Marakova intercepted the blade with an arm which had taken on an orange glow.

“Run!” Marakova yelled.

Polina didn’t need to be told a third time. She turned and sprinted out of the ally onto the main street, slamming straight into a demon carrying some shopping.

“Oi!” The demon yelled, but Polina ignored him and ran down the busy street, weaving and dodging between stalls and their shoppers. She ran and ran, not knowing if her head was going to be cut off at any moment. When

her lungs were about to explode, she turned into a quiet side alley and threw up onto the floor.

“Ah... ah... ah...” Tears formed and she wiped them away. Polina spent a few minutes collecting her breath and her emotions. Was Marakova okay? Polina didn’t know, but she had to keep moving. She tucked the revolver in her belt. Thankfully, the wax capsule was still secure under her tongue, having survived the chaotic events.

Polina gathered herself and kept heading east. She figured she would find the eastern human district and go from there. As she walked, she wiped the worst dirt and grime from her clothes that had built up through the sewers.

She found a pathway to an elevated part of the city where a pagoda was located. As she walked upwards more of the city could be seen below. She was at the south-eastern edge of Kenhoro, and spread out below and in front of her...

Was the eastern docks.

Where a single ship sat docked.

A ship taking on passengers and their luggage.

A cutter, with the name *Sakamoto* in white lettering down the side.

This was the ship Serena Halen was taking south to Shimashina. Polina swallowed. What should she do? What did her training tell her? The Kenhoro network was compromised. She had the location of a safe house, but Marakova also knew that location. She should assume that Marakova was captured and the location would be discovered.

This meant... she needed to leave Kenhoro. She would need to hide in the human district until storm season was over and then find a way back to the federation. Or... she could board *The Sakamoto* right now. Not only would she be leaving Kenhoro, but she would also be able to achieve her ultimate goal.

Was this the best choice? Or was her decision-making clouded by her desire for vengeance? Polina shook her head. In the end, it didn't matter. She would keep moving on. Until the end.

With her mind made up, Polina followed the path down to the eastern docks, where she saw a group of travellers getting their tickets stamped before heading through a gate. It was a gate she could climb if it wasn't in direct line of sight of the employee sitting in the windowed office.

She chewed her lips momentarily, thinking about how she could get past. Then she saw that the building the employee was in was lit by aetherlights.

That would work.

Polina waited until there was no one else around and activated her blessing. The world was drained of all colour, and she felt her energy draining. In her vision, she could see the moon crystals in the building's aetherlights glowing through the walls. She focused on one behind the employee, ignoring how queasy it made her. The crystal was stable but Polina gave it a nudge, telling it to become *unstable*.

The aetherlight exploded.

"Fuck!" The employee jumped, spinning around.

Polina moved. She walked as fast as she could while keeping her feet quiet. Towards the gate she went. She focused again, and another aetherlight on the ceiling of the building exploded. She heard the employer curse, but he didn't turn around. She reached the gate. Focusing once more, she picked a lamp in the room and made that *unstable*. As the final explosion continued, she scrambled up and over the gate and quickly turned a corner.

Using her ability three times so quickly made her feel faint, and she had to rest against a wall for a moment. Gritting her teeth, she pushed herself off. She just needed to get on the ship. But how? Polina looked around and saw a small windowed room. Opening the door, she found herself in the employee cloakroom. She found a jacket that looked like someone's spare

uniform and put it on. Grabbing a workhat and fixing it on her head, Polina exited the room.

She approached *The Sakamoto* as a family was boarding, struggling to move all their luggage aboard. They were arguing in frustrated tones, clearly the stress of last-minute travel testing their nerves.

“Need any help?” she asked, trying not to let her federation accent come through. Not waiting for a reply, she picked up a piece of luggage. “What room?” she asked. After receiving an answer, she took a deep breath and walked up the gangplank into the ship. Thankfully, the conductor was distracted and only glanced at her. She wasn't sure whether he assumed she was a part of the family or a dock employee.

Walking through the ship, Polina followed the signs to the room. She kept her head down and her eyes low. Her heart was racing. Every time she turned a corner, she jumped in anticipation of bumping into Serena Halen or Amelia Thornheart. What would she do if she saw them? If they saw her? She didn't know.

She wasn't ready, yet.

Arriving at the room she dumped the luggage inside. It was a fancy first-class room, but not a place she could hide in. As the family arrived and started bickering with each other Polina took her leave. She needed to find somewhere she could hide. Somewhere where she could find a lot of moon crystal.

Steeling her nerves, Polina walked through the ship.

Towards the engines.

“All this happened so fast,” Amelia said, swinging her legs. There wasn't even enough room to cuddle on the small bed so Serena laid on it while Amelia sat on the table. “What about Aiden? Oh! We didn't get to say goodbye to grandpa Gu or Lord Yulan!”

“Aiden will have been updated and he’ll let the grandmaster know something came up,” Serena said, yawning lightly. “Mister Weng will notify Yulan if he comes knocking at the inn. What time is it?”

Amelia glanced at the wall clock ticking softly. “Dinner time! Wow, it’s already been so long! How far do you think we’ve travelled?” The pair had kept to themselves since *The Sakamoto* had set off. At one point, Amelia had even retired to her own room and napped. The sounds of the engine had lulled her to sleep.

“Eight hours... a cutter like this will travel at fifty knots so... a little over seven hundred clicks.” Serena said while placing a hand on her stomach. “I’m hungry. Are you hungry?”

“Yeah!”

“Let’s see what passes for food around here... come on.” They both left their room and made their way to the dining room. It was a long, thin room with small tables and cubicles to the sides. Waiters moved trollies of food down the centre and at the far side the kitchens could be seen where a handful of chefs worked as they chopped vegetables and sizzled meat.

“Do you have a reserved table?” A passing employee asked.

“No,” Serena said.

“Sit anywhere where there isn’t a reserved sign. Ring the bell when you’re ready to order! Menus are over there!” The employee pointed and then rushed off to collect more plates from the kitchen.

Amelia bounced over and picked two menus then followed Serena to a table. As they sat down, Amelia was delighted to find that she could read the majority of the dishes. The lessons from Tomes were really paying off! Amelia eventually settled on her choice but when she looked up at Serena she found her girlfriend was looking down the dining room with narrowed eyes.

“What’s up?” Amelia asked.

“Listen to what those employees are saying.” Serena nodded in the distance and Amelia focused on her hearing. Two uniformed employees were having a whispered discussion. Amelia’s high perception easily captured the contents.

“A *stowaway*!?” Amelia whispered, “Someone snuck onboard?”

“In the engine room... they’ve barricaded the door...” Serena mumbled, before sighing and standing up. “I’ll investigate this. Stowaways are not uncommon but considering the situation I’m going to double-check. You never know...”

“Want me to come with you?”

“No need. I’ll just have whatever you’re having. I won’t be long.”

“Okay!” Amelia chirped.

Serena left and informed the employees who she was. After a moment of deliberation, they lead her back down the room, past Amelia and through the doors. Amelia ordered her food and relaxed, humming to herself. She didn’t want to be nosey, but she couldn’t help but eavesdrop on the surrounding conversations. Everyone was travelling for different reasons. Some were trying to return for a family birthday, others for a business meeting. Some were travelling for leisure, while others were catching a connecting ship to go further afield.

As Amelia listened the hairs on her neck rose as *something* rippled through the aetherfield. Her instincts screamed at her and she had just enough time to throw up a ward around her.

And then the ship exploded.

She had just enough time to see bodies and wood fly against her ward before being lifted off her seat as the room twisted and tumbled wildly. She was flipped in the air and was only just able to grab onto a wooden pillar. Looking at her feet she could see an enormous hole in the ship where the kitchen was and beyond it the darkening night sky.

Chairs, tables, food, and cutlery bounced around the room, along with two dozen bodies, some of which were screaming and the others quiet.

Amelia gritted her teeth and boiled her aether. She threw out a healing spell, covering what she hoped was the entire ship. What else could she do? Where was Serena? She needed to find her.

“Serena!” she yelled out as the wind screamed outside.

“Serena!” she scrunched her eyes shut as tears formed.

“Serena!” she was scared. It didn’t matter how powerful she was. She was scared!

“Sere-” A familiar hand grabbed onto her. It was Serena.

“Serena...” she couldn’t help but blubber as her emotions got the best of her.

“It’s okay!” Serena yelled over the wind. “The engines blown! We need to get outside! So we can see!” Amelia nodded. Serena looked at the hole where the kitchen was. “There must have been a bomb in the kitchen as well! It’s an assassination! Come on!”

Together, they climbed *up* the dining room as the ship was now in a nose dive. They weren’t fussy about handholds, using their extreme strength to simply grip *into* the wood as they pulled themselves towards the hole. As they reached their goal, Amelia threw out another ship-wide healing spell. Who knew how many people were getting hurt by things flying around?

They climbed out of the ship and if it wasn’t for her strength the wind would have pulled her off. Looking down, she could see smoke billowing from holes all through the ship's structure. And beyond that... was the ground. The dark green expanse of the endless forest was approaching faster and faster as they approached terminal velocity.

“What do we do!?” Amelia tried to think how to save everyone on board. She could throw out a healing spell just as they collided but would that

help? In airplane disasters, bodies *disintegrated*. She wasn't confident she could time it right, and even if she did, could she heal somebody if they were in pieces?

Luckily, Serena seemed to have a plan.

"Can you Speak!?" Serena yelled. "I can't! I'll destroy the ship and blow us away! But you can!"

"Okay!" Amelia yelled back, folding the aether into *Aseco* and then ejecting the remaining aether so Speaking wouldn't cause a power release. "**Aseco**," she Spoke and she felt herself become divine as the godly aether rushed into her body. She glowed an incandescent golden, so bright anyone a hundred clicks around would see.

"Good!" Serena yelled. "Flare your aether as hard as you can! Against the lumina! Hold the ship up!"

Amelia gritted her teeth and did as instructed. Her connection to the aetherfield was extremely strong and by flaring her aether she could levitate against the vast lumina far below. She pressed her aether as far as the First Word allowed her and for a moment she felt the ship slow as the force she produced counteracted against the thousands and thousands of tonnes falling towards the ground.

But it wasn't enough. She could slightly slow the doomed ship, but she couldn't do enough to prevent the crash from being devastatingly fatal to everyone inside. The method of generating force from the lumina-aether reaction wasn't efficient.

The First Word wasn't enough.

"I need to Speak more!" She yelled, looking at Serena. "The First Word isn't powerful enough!" As her words reached Serena, her girlfriend's eyes widened as she registered Amelia's intentions. A sombre moment passed while they looked at each other with complex emotions.

Serena gave the smallest of nods. "Do it!"

“Promise me!” Amelia called, “Promise me you won’t change how you see me! No matter what I become!”

“... I promise!”

“Okay!” Amelia closed her eyes, focusing inwards, ignoring the screaming wind or the ground rushing to meet them. She focused only on the divine aether inside her as she moulded the aether of *Aseco* into the advanced Word. It was the first time she had done this for real, but her instincts didn’t let her down and in a few moments it was ready.

Amelia opened her eyes and Spoke the Second Word of the branch of divinity.

“ASCELPUS!”

The world slowed to a crawl as it took on a sepia tone. All sound was muffled apart from the ethereal *thud* that erupted from the divine aether in Amelia's body, rippling through the aetherfield and the mists. The noise snaked its way through the planes of reality as it sought its owner.

It was a knock on the door, so to speak.

After a moment that felt like a dozen seconds to Amelia, but was only microseconds in real-time, an answer came back.

“Oh, mighty and dreadful daemon lord, arrayed in human flesh. Dost thou seek to sully my nature? Dost thou desire my embodiment?”

It took Amelia a moment to register the words being spoken in her mind. The experience of having *Ascelpius* communicate with her directly was akin to being blasted by amounts of aether far denser than any attack she had witnessed in the world so far. No wonder the Second Word was such a momentous achievement here! The average Speaker would be risking their lives just making this initial step!

Well, the deity had asked her a question, and keeping him waiting would be impolite.

“Um... yes, please?” Amelia chirped.