



For the first few hours, their journey went well.

They skimmed the sands, travelling in a direction that would take them deep within the Salaban Bowl. The hardened sandstone that Hakim and its surroundings were built upon gave way to fine sand and windswept dunes. The skimmers had little trouble, smoothly following the rises and dips. They maintained a rough formation, with Serena and Naji leading. It wasn't perfect; the skimmers would pick their own paths. Barq would trace an optimal route through the sandswept aetheric currents—his skimmer instincts guiding him and Amelia better than she could have done herself.

The heat was rough, but manageable. Amelia coped the best, but even she too found her forehead beading in sweat. Her layered wards worked well, but there was still something so overwhelming about the heat that made her feel a little too warm. It was as if the air itself was *thick* with heat—a hellfire syrup that they breathed. Serena, with her own orange aura and Amelia-born wards, appeared to fare well enough. The remainder of the group struggled. If it weren't for their water rations that Amelia would cool to an ice cold temperature, they might have been in trouble.

They did stop and try and see if Amelia could ward them against the rising heat. The result was effective, but problematic. Unlike the wards she'd maintained on Serena that had been refined to perfection and had their aetherflows moved to the Shimmer, she couldn't replicate that level of cloaking with newly cast wards so quickly. The result was that three new aetherflows poured out from her. Even cloaked superficially, the interference they generated in the turbulent aetherfield caused the skimmers enough discomfort that it affected their pathfinding and hovering, causing them to struggle to stay in formation.

So they continued without. Mel and Finella relied on their orange aura to regulate their temperature while Hinako did her best with second-circle magic. There was one blessing; the dense saturation of the Red Sand's aetherfield meant everyone could maintain a high amount of aetheric output. With every dune they climbed,

and every slope they glided down, it became easier. Yet, the easier it became, the hotter the thick air felt. Despite the worsening conditions, it was a good opportunity for Mel; the Red Sands was providing the demon a rare opportunity to get her body comfortable with orange.

For the first few hours, they managed.

Until the sun rose high and the air became so thick and dry that a single breath would steal away every drop of moisture. Finella asked for a break, and Serena was happy to oblige.

"Let's stop for a moment," Serena called. "This place looks good."

They pulled into a sunken piece of land. The ground was cracked, made of hardened clay topped with a thin layer of sand. Never before had Amelia seen a place look so *thirsty*. A rocky outcrop gave them a slither of shade. They all eagerly parked their skimmers and took a moment to recover.

"Seven Hells, Six Heavens, and the under-sky's secrets," Finella gasped. "I've never been so *hot*." The Northerner gulped some water, continuing, "every time I breathe, it gets worse. I'd be dead without orange. Dead, I tell you! How can air be so hot? Miss Liona, if you could..."

Finella chuckled her the water flask and Amelia spooled up her magic, cooling it down to near freezing before chucking it back. The demon drank some, paused, drank some more, and then without any warning, tipped the rest of it over her head.

"Ah..." she sighed. "Finally, some relief." Finella mouthed her a thank you before looking at Serena. "I can't believe how well you two are managing this. Does being a Speaker really make it that easy? Or are Miss Liona's wards *that* good?"

"It helps more, Officer Bright," Serena began, climbing off Naji, "if you don't think about complaining. May I suggest you think of other things?"

"Believe me, I've tried that, Captain," Finella said. "Oh, how I yearn for the snowfields at the moment." The demon closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around herself. "The cooling gaze of the Purple Moon. I swear on my horns, it

doesn't get as cold there as it gets hot here. Something's wrong with the Red Moon, I'm telling you."

Amelia set about cooling everyone else's water, chucking them ice-cold flasks in turn. "Doesn't it get dangerously cold?" she asked Finella. "Tomes told me that during the Purple moonrain it can get so cold that with windchill people freeze to death in seconds." She climbed off Barq and began brushing him down, just like Noor had shown them.

"Maybe in some places," Finella responded, holding the flask against her face and rubbing it in a manner that Serena would have likely stopped if they weren't in such a harsh environment. "Only if you're foolish enough to go through a coldspot."

"Coldspot?" Amelia asked.

"You know how heat rises?" Finella raised her hand upwards. "Well, cold collects in low areas, where the landscape naturally dips down." She gestured to their surroundings. "Like where we are now. Coldspots can be ten, twenty thols colder, just by moving down a few metres. If you camp in the wrong place, you can freeze. It doesn't happen often. But... even that isn't like *this*. It's easier to warm up when you're cold than cool down when you're hot. Especially with aura. More water please, Miss Liona. Ah, thank you..."

They drank in silence, enjoying the little respite they had. Amelia spooled up her aether, invoking a cooling breeze from the *Marzanna* branch. It helped, but not as much as she'd hoped. The desert had a way of whisking away the chill, subsuming it with the Red Moon's gaze. She was tempted to do more, but didn't want to risk confusing the skimmers.

After a few minutes, Hinako broke the silence.

"It wasn't always like this, was it?" the demon asked. "The last Southern Overlord communed with *Suijin*. We studied this in the Academy. There always was some desert in the South, but it was much smaller. All this"—she tapped her foot against the cracked ground—"used to be tropical, like Ishaq's surroundings. I think we're in an old river bed."

"Mmm," Amelia affirmed. She looked around, following the sunken area that continued in a rough line, stretching into the distance. "Looks like it." She brushed under Barq's saddle, earning a grateful *meep* from the skimmer. They hadn't faced any sandstorms yet, but even so it was surprising just how much sand had already got, well, *everywhere*.

Seeing how much Barq appreciated her handiwork, the rest of the team began brushing down their skimmers. It was oddly satisfying to remove every last bit of the abrasive material. They worked quickly, with Mel finishing last, mostly because she still seemed nervous walking in front of Jasur's mouth, lest his tongue strike out once more.

Serena busied herself with a bundle of documents from her luggage. It was the final set of maps and information Aiden had passed onto them before they'd left. A parting gift from Sarafina and Intelligence. "We've barely covered thirty clicks," Serena said, tracing a line on the paper. "We should reach the mesa soon, there we can find more shade and have a proper break." The demon looked at them one by one. "If we find a good place to secure the skimmers, we can move away and have Miss Liona properly cool us down."

"Looking forward to it," Finella said, stretching. "Thirty clicks? That's decent going, Captain. That Hakian wasn't lying. His skimmers aren't bad." She patted Thali. "How deep are we going, Captain?"

"As deep as we need to," Serena answered, folding the paper. "Journey before destination, Officer Bright. Journey before destination." She climbed onto Naji and signaled for the rest of them to do the same.

"That Sangoist tenet sounds profound when you live long enough to reach your destination," Finella grumbled. The Northerner reached an arm out of the shade into the blistering sun. "Unbelievable," she muttered, shaking her head. "Back into hellfire we go..." She climbed onto Thali and gripped the reins. "Let's go quickly, Captain, before I get any crazy ideas like mutiny."

"What is it with you Northerners and mutiny?" Serena said, clicking her tongue.

Amelia giggled.

They left the rocky outcrop and continued their journey. It only took a few minutes before they were sipping their water again. Even Amelia found herself drinking. Although she was certain she could bathe in literal lava if needed, there was something stifling about the desert heat that made her uncomfortable enough to drink. She would be fine without water, and neither did she need to sweat, but it was as if her body hadn't realised it yet.

An hour passed in relative silence. Other than a few commands from Serena to slightly change direction, the minutes passed quietly. Amelia tried once or twice to chat with Mel, but quickly caught on that the demon wasn't in the mood to talk. Finella and Hinako seemed more interested in drinking more and more water than doing anything else. Instead of conversation, Amelia passed the time by looking upwards, examining the Red Moon in the Shimmer.

Since her first experience mistwalking, she hadn't caught sight of the Red Moon's dragon a second time. Or rather, she hadn't caught sight of the intricate spellformation that was the Red Moon, wrapping around the impossibly large creature a second time. Without stepping into the Shimmer, her perception greeted her with a perfect sphere of warm red moonlight. Although, if she looked long enough, there was the occasional flicker of shadow that hinted that there was something *more*.

Assuming all the other moons were the same, each with their own dragon, then what did that mean? How did that fit into the structure of the world? What role did they play? The moons generated the moon crystal that served as the foundation for the economy of the Known World. Was the crystal the purpose of the spellwork, or a side effect? What had the world been like when the moons weren't there? The continents floated, lumina-locked by the aetheric reaction of thousands of years of moon crystal saturating the earth. There must have been a time when that wasn't the case, when the continents sat below the lumina. Then did that mean—

"I see it!" a voice called out suddenly, snapping Amelia from her thoughts.

It was Finella.

"There!" the demon cried, pointing and gesturing wildly to the west. "Can you see it?"

Amelia followed everyone else in looking to the west. There she saw nothing but endless red sand and a horizon that shimmered in the desert heat.

"See what, Officer Bright?" Serena asked.

"Jimar!" Finella shouted. "It's so close!"

"Nonsense," Serena said. "We're far too far away to see Jimar from here. It's more than two hundred klicks to the—"

"No, it's there!" Finella cried, a strange desperation in her voice. "Look! I'll prove it!" She pulled her reins, taking Thali away from the group towards the shimmering horizon.

"Officer Bright!" Serena shouted. "Stay in formation!"

"I think..." Hinako muttered, almost whispering. "I think I see it too."

"Officer Bright, what in the Seven Hells..." Serena clicked her tongue and called for them to follow. They swerved to a course due west, their skimmers trailing Finella and Thali.

"Ha..." Mel sighed, pointing to the horizon. "It's not Jimar, Officer Bright!"

"Thank you Officer Mori," Serena said. "Now let's—"

"It's an oasis!" Mel shouted. "A lake of water!" Before anyone could say anything, Mel urged her skimmer on, racing to catch up with Finella. "We can cool down!"

"I see it too!" Hinako shouted. "There really is water over there!"

"What the hells?" Serena questioned, looking at Amelia. "Do you see something as well?"

"No," Amelia said. "I think they're hallucinating."

"Moons!" Serena clicked her tongue. "Idiots. Come on, Naji!" At her urging Naji let out a noise that was somewhere between a meep and a growl. The skimmer surged forward, its mighty fins rippling with eagerness. Amelia encouraged Barq onwards, and soon she and Serena caught up to the erratic officers.

In a move that made it seem as if Serena had been riding skimmers her entire life, the demon maneuvered Naji in front of Finella and Thali. In one smooth motion, Naji turned around and puffed up, flaring his mighty finspan and sounding a series of threatening clicks. The effect was immediate. Finella's Thali and Mel's Jasur let out a shocked meep, reflexively digging their twin tails into the ground. The sudden shift of inertia threw their riders into the air where they tumbled into a sandy heap.

Serena shared a look of concern with Amelia before climbing off. She approached the fallen officers. Neither of them seemed the least bit unhappy. Instead, they were giggling.

"Whoa, Captain," Finella said. "Even for you that was something else."

"It's an oasis, I told you," Mel said, rolling onto her back, reaching into the air as if trying to grasp something. "It's not Jimar. You're too obsessed with coffee, Officer Bright."

"I love coffee!" Finella shouted.

"You'd get married to it if you could," Mel said, giggling manically.

"I can't do that, Officer Mori. Not before you."

"Before me?"

"You and Jasur. We all saw that tongue of his. Ha!"

Mel burst out into hysterics. Through her laughter, she managed to squeeze out, "I know someone else who likes a tongue between their legs!"

"I can't believe it!" Finella yelled. "So do I! I wonder if we're thinking of the same person?"

"Let's say their name at the same time!"

"Sure!"

"Right!"

"Miss Liona," Serena intoned, her expression darkening. "If I could ask for some healing magic." She tapped the hilt of her jade sword. "*Urgently.*"

"S-sure!" Amelia jumped off Barq, landing perfectly in between the two demons.

"Oh, look who it is," Finella said. "What a coincidence, I was just—"

A band of golden light, with flecks of royal blue, cut off Finella's ramblings and Mel's giggling. The two immediately froze, and then their faces contorted into expressions of abject confusion. Amelia looked at Serena with a questioning gaze, asking if she should do more.

"Officer Aikawa as well, please," Serena said.

Amelia nodded, turning and giving Hinako a measured blast of healing magic. The demon's eyes widened, and then she looked around, confused. "Oh..." she said quietly.

"Fucking hells," Finella said. "What was I—" The demon swallowed, looking up at Serena. She sat up, and then clambered to her feet and gave a hasty salute. Mel quickly followed.

"I apologise, Captain!" Finella said quickly. "I don't know what came over me, I—"

"It's *fine*," Serena intoned, waving away the apology with one smooth wave of her hand. "I didn't expect Desert Madness to affect you like this, Officer Bright. You should have warned us you were feeling unwell."

"I, uh..." Finella exchanged a glance with Mel. "I didn't know, Captain. Or, I didn't realise. I did feel dizzy, but I was drinking so much water I thought it was fine. It... came on so quick." Finella shook her head, and then peered into the distance. "I could have sworn it was Jimar. No... it couldn't have been. It's too far..."

"It's too far," Serena echoed, "and it's too hot!" She gestured for everyone to gather. Once they had, she continued, "It's too dangerous to keep going during the day. Look to the north, everyone."

Amelia, along with everyone else, faced north. There, halfway to the horizon the landscape changed. Clifflike elevations with flat tops were spread around. Some

formations were slender, reaching high towards upper-sky. Others were wide and short, with striations of orange and red sandstone running through them.

It was the mesa environment they were looking for.

"Pour some cold-water over yourselves," Serena instructed. "We'll make it there in fifteen minutes. One last push. If you feel any dizziness or any other symptoms, speak up. Once we're back on some solid ground, we'll build some shelter. Can you handle that, Officer Aikawa?"

"Yes, Captain!" Hinako said quickly. "With the earth saturated in crystal, the sandstone is easy to move."

"Then let's wait no more," Serena said. "Quickly, now!"

They didn't need telling twice. They climbed aboard their skimmers and urged them onwards. The sun was at its zenith, doing its best to suffocate them with its fiery alliance with the Red Moon. Finella, Mel, and Hinako poured water on themselves half way, but otherwise had no further mania.

They reached the mesa, the fine sand and rolling dunes giving way to red and orange sandstone. Serena brought them to the nearest cliff, and Hinako wasted no time getting to work, weaving her magic and burrowing into the rock. The demon was right, the sandstone was much easier to manipulate than even normal earth.

While Hinako busied herself, Amelia took it upon herself to build pens for the skimmers. She had to move back onto the sands, for Barq and his brothers wouldn't be able to nest themselves into the hard sandstone. Even though Noor had assured them that they would be fine without shelter, Amelia made the effort of creating a simple roof for each pen, pulling up and compressing the sand so that it was solid. The aether needed to do so caused the skimmers to click, meep, and slam the ground with their tails in apparent annoyance.

"Sorry," Amelia said to them. She was soon done, and finished the pens by drawing up a pool of cool groundwater. Only Layyin, Hinako's skimmer, drank some water. Amelia watched the skimmer's long tongue lunched outwards, lapping up water in a very peeka-like fashion.

"Impressive," Serena said, examining the pens. "We'll take watch, just in case one tries to escape. Now, before we gather in our new home"—she gestured to Hinako's cave entrance—"let's go up."

"Up?" Amelia tilted her head.

"Up." Serena pointed. "To get our bearings."

They climbed the sandstone formation. With their abilities, making handholds was trivial in the soft stone. Amelia trailed behind Serena, using the handholds her girlfriend made.

"Reminds me of Kenhoro," she called. "When we climbed out of that pit."

Serena laughed. "What a memory that was."

"Mmm," Amelia hummed. "You were so nervous being in front of the Greatlord." She looked up at her girlfriend's figure, smoothly climbing the cliff face, her white clothes fluttering in the desert wind. "You're much more confident now. I bet you could stand up to an Overlord, if needed."

"Well..." Serena hesitated, pausing in her upward motions. "When you've met... you know... everyone else seems much less impressive. With the exception of one person, that is."

"One person?" Amelia asked. "Who?"

Serena looked down, met her eyes and winked.

Oh, Amelia thought. Flirting in these circumstances, are we?

With a grin on her face, they mounted the sandstone formation. To the north, the mesa environment stretched as far as they could see. To the south, it was thirty clicks of red sand dunes. This high up, Amelia could see Hakim from here, a faint shimmering blob on the horizon, backed by the Salaban mountains. Seeing it from here, it felt like they hadn't made much progress at all.

"We've made good progress," Serena said, pulling out a map. "But I'm cutting it short today. Now, we're here..." She tapped the paper. Amelia followed her finger to the grid square that marked the start of the mesa. "Intelligence *suggested* that

we should look *here*." Another tap on another grid square, this one hundreds of clicks to the north-east.

"What's there?" Amelia asked. There was nothing noted on the map, just an empty expanse.

"Sandstorms, dreadful heat," Serena said, shrugging, "and wurms."

"Wurms?"

"One of their... mating grounds, according to Intelligence. At least, one of their last known mating grounds. It's not as if this map information is reliable." Serena tapped the empty map square again. "Remember that Anathor said shards could have an effect on the flora and fauna, and on the surrounding environment? Intelligence has identified an unusual amount of sandstorms in this area. Unusual sandstorms and... unusual wurms." Serena grimaced. "They are supposedly particularly aggressive there, and.... particularly large."

"You don't look too excited," Amelia said.

"I'm trying to think of how I can reassure everyone else that I haven't gone mad," Serena said. "There's only so much trust and loyalty I can get out of them. If the conditions are bad enough, all minds will eventually break. I've seen it on the battlefield, and what is this, if not another battlefield? I'm..." Serena trailed off, before taking a deep breath and finishing, "I'm going to tell them." She met Amelia's eyes. "What we're looking for, and why."

"And me?" Amelia asked.

The edges of Serena's lips curled into a sly smile. "Well, I'm not going to tell them my girlfriend's a *demigod* on par with the Empress herself, am I?" The demon chuckled. "They'll think I'm suffering from Desert Madness. No, I'll tell them enough, but your secrets are yours to share. Speaking of your shard..." Serena gestured at the expanse around. "Do you feel anything? Any kind of connection? Some feeling?"

Amelia focused, spinning on the spot. "Not really," she said. "Only to you."

"Well, thank you."

"You're more important than any shard." Amelia stepped up and wrapped her arms around Serena's waist. The demon responded in kind and they hugged each other for a moment. "Ah, I'm going to spontaneously combust, aren't I?" Amelia asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm in the hottest part of the Empire, with the *hottest* demon alive." She pulled back, grinning. She wasn't sure if she made Serena blush. It was hard to tell in this environment. "Just so you know," Amelia raised one finger, which she wagged, "if I suffer from Desert Madness, then there's only one cure."

Serena raised an eyebrow. "Which is?"

Amelia brought their lips together.

"Simple, isn't it?" she said, giving her demon girlfriend a wink.

"Idiot," came the response.

"One last thing," Amelia said. She pulled away from Serena. With a dramatic twirl, she ended her *Kanaxai* disguise, restoring her hair to its brilliant gold and her eyes to their noble crimson. "I don't need to be Lia Liona here, do I? Even if we bump into someone else, I can wrap myself up."

It had been fun maintaining a disguise during their stay in Ishaq, but Amelia felt like enough was enough. Lia Liona had only been created so she could have some peace and quiet until the shock of her Cascadian Lord-Prospectorship and her status as a living saint no longer dominated the broadsheets. There had been extra risk in travelling to the South, but it had worked out in the end, hadn't it?

"No, you don't need to be Lia Liona," Serena said. The demon stepped forward and gave her a peck on the forehead. "But you'll always be Lia to me."

"Why thank you, *little Ren*," Amelia teased, earning an eyeroll.

"We should also talk about what happened."

"What happened?"

"Earlier." Serena glanced to the side, a flash of awkwardness on her face. "You heard what Finella and Mel said."

"Mmm? Oh. *Oh*." That was right. Finella could be excused as she already knew about their relationship. After all, the Northern demon had used advanced interrogation techniques to get it out of Amelia. But... Mel? "Mel must be more perceptive than I thought," Amelia said. "Maybe she's picking up on it now she's capable of orange? And"—she threw her arms up—"we've been so subtle! Has she really figured it out?"

"I've been subtle," Serena said. "You've been... something else."

"They're going to find out sooner or later," Amelia said. "Seems like she's okay with it. Hey, who do you think she was thinking of?" Seeing Serena raise an eyebrow, she continued, "You know, when they were going to say the name of *someone* who enjoys a tongue between their legs." Amelia couldn't help but grin. "Was she going to say your name, or mine?"

"Yours, I hope," Serena said, tapping the hilt of her sword. "If either of them had said my name... Well, Desert Madness or not, conduct *that* unbecoming for an Imperial officer would have them in hot water."

"Mmm," Amelia hummed. "They're already hot enough."

"...I suppose so." Serena sighed and said, "Let's head back down, and cool down with the rest."

They climbed down the sandstone formation, checked on the skimmers once more, and joined Mel, Finella, and Hinako in the newly-constructed shelter. Hinako had done an excellent job, carving out a central room surrounded by private bedrooms. She'd kept the roofs domed and walls thick. It was to be expected, when a mage channeled *Salinas* magic they often felt a natural instinct to the structural integrity of whatever it was they were working with.

Still, did she have to build out *five* rooms?

How was Amelia going to find an excuse to sneak into Serena's now?

"Welcome to Cave Aikawa," Finella said with a flourish. "I would suggest—whoa." The demon cut off, her eyes widening at Amelia. "I'd forgotten," the Northerner said, "that you were human."

"Really?" Amelia raised an eyebrow.

"Not literally, just... in a manner of speaking," Finella clarified. "I only saw you once or twice before we set sail. You look so *different* without horns." The demon peered closer. "You look weird, I think."

"Officer Bright," Serena said quietly.

"I mean in a *good* way," Finella added quickly. "You're very, um, golden."

"Why, thank you," Amelia said, giving a perfect curtsy. She gave a twirl, letting her hair flow upwards. "It does feel weird, to be honest. After having the *Kanaxai* glamours running for so long, it's strange to be without them."

"Your hair seems even more golden than before," Hinako said. "Or is it my imagination?"

"I don't think so," Mel said, "It's not just the hair, but the eyes as well. They're somehow even more noble. Crimson suits you better than when they were blue, for sure."

"They were blue?" Hinako asked, frowning.

Mel froze momentarily, glancing at Amelia with a worried expression.

"Side effect of Speaking," Amelia clarified. "Not that I'm complaining."

Hinako nodded, and asked no more. Details of a Speaker's communion were quite a private affair, after all. Besides, Amelia was sure that Hinako would assume her crimson eyes were a result of either *Aseco* or *Taranis*. As far as Amelia knew the demon hadn't ever spoken of the *Asclepius* invocation. It had been broadly covered up, despite a few leaks here and there.

"Let's eat," Serena announced, changing the subject.

They cooked a stew, adding dried meat and spices. They'd brought a range of food for their desert travel; biscuits, rye crackers, dried fruit, nuts, and even some hard cheese. As a last resort before they would have to dig with the skimmers, they'd brought with them a Southern expeditionary food called *pemmican*. It had only three ingredients; powdered dried meat, rendered fat, and dried fruits. It could keep for months, even in the harsh desert climate. It was there as a last resort; they had almost a month of tastier supplies before they would have to resort to such measures.

Not only that, but each member had brought a few personal items according to their tastes. Mel had bought candied ginger, while Hinako demonstrated a surprising fondness for pickled vegetables. Serena had bought fresh mirzamelons, no doubt planning to eat them sooner rather than later. As for Finella...

"Was there any doubt?" Serena asked in mock disbelief. "Surely you're not going to take it hot?"

"I'm not *insane*," Finella declared, her voice tinged in caffeine-deprived insanity, "Jimari is just as good cold. Now, if I brew this, would our resident ice mage..." Finella looked her up and down. "Actually, given your radiant appearance, should I say, would our resident *saint* be so saintly as to cool it down for me?"

Amelia gave the demon a saintly wink. "Not a problem."

With a bowl of stew and a cup of cold Jimari each, shared only after Serena had obliterated Finella with a medium-level glare, the group ate and drank. Once they were done, Serena placed her cup down.

"It's about time I told you what we're truly here for," the demon said.

Amelia could see her words sending everyone else into high alert. Postures were straightened, eyes were widened, and all attention was on the *Hellfire Captain*.

"As you now know, the *Vengeance* is a special ship. It's not just Anathor who roams its hull. The ship itself contains a soul." Serena eyed her officers one by one. "That soul is broken. Anathor's duty is more than counsel to the captain. He protects that soul's remains. We are here, in this red hell, because Intelligence

believes a fragment lingers somewhere in the desert. Our duties are to find it, and return it to the Fourth Deck, where the *Vengeance's* soul is waiting. These fragments, or *shards*"—Serena's eyes flicked to Amelia for a fraction of a second—"are powerful, and more dangerous than any black crystal you've seen. We must find it here before the Enemy does." Serena lifted her cup, took a gentle sip, and finished with, "That is all."

No one said anything for half a dozen seconds.

Then Finella's eyes widened further, and she blurted out, "I *knew* it!"

"Is that so?" Serena mused.

"More or less," Finella said. "Anathor was always so coy when you asked him! 'Hey Anathor, if the ship can sail into the lumina, could it sail further to the under-sky?'" Finella's expression turned into a grumpy frown, and her voice deepened as she mimicked Anathor's way of speaking. "Hmm... she is not ready, Officer Bright." Finella ended her frown and returned to her normal way of talking. "'Hey Anathor, what's in the Fourth Deck?'" The frown and deep voice returned. "Hmm... It is not for you to know, Officer Bright. Hmm... I'm Anathor, and all I do is grumble and say 'Hmm...'"

Everyone burst out laughing. Even Serena had to cover her mouth to hide her mirth.

"I *knew* it would be something like this," Finella continued. "We Northerners are familiar with inanimate objects carrying souls. Thousands of ice golems roam the snow fields. If a few pieces of ice can carry a soul, then so can a ship!" Finella folded her arms, looking proud of herself. Then, as she met Amelia's eyes, her expression narrowed and she said, "But you already knew, didn't you?"

"Me?" Amelia pointed at herself innocently.

"You don't seem one bit surprised."

Amelia grinned and looked at Serena. Her girlfriend sighed and said, "Miss Liona—" she paused, momentarily frowning. "I mean, *Amelia*, is a talented mage. As a Speaker of both the human Word *Aseco* and the demon Word *Taranis*, she has quite the... *unique* capabilities. Intelligence believes that she has a good

chance of tracking down this... soul shard. The Red Sand's aetherfield is turbulent, so her talent is needed."

"Plus," Amelia added with a wink, "It sounded like a good excuse to go travelling."

"This duty," Serena said, tapping the ground, "is of the highest importance to the Empire. Amelia's talents are key to finding this shard, and you were all chosen specifically because I believe that you can contribute to that effort. So, in the coming weeks, I order you to bear the heat, bear the stress, for you are carrying out a duty that will guide the Empire into a new age. Take pride in that."

Serena didn't need to say it twice. Amelia could practically see both Mel and Hinako inflating with pride. Even Finella seemed affected, although it didn't last long as she soon bombarded Serena with a litany of questions. She was quickly shut down, and instructed that any more information would be given on a need-to-know basis.

Serena then detailed their future plans. It was simply too hot to travel in the day so they would take turns keeping watch while the others slept. Once night fell, they would resume travelling. Under the daytime heat, any hope of maintaining a watch outside was impossible, so whoever was keeping watch would linger at the mouth of Cave Aikawa, where they could keep an eye on the skimmer pens.

Even with their plans to sleep the day away, it quickly became apparent that the cave, as sheltered as it was, would quickly warm up and become uncomfortable. As powerful as Amelia's healing was, everyone agreed they *wanted* to sleep through the heat. After some testing, a solution was found. Hinako drew up a large amount of groundwater, not so high that it breached the surface, but just enough that it lingered an inch below. Once Hinako was confident she'd spread the groundwater throughout the bedrooms, Amelia froze it solid. The effect was a massive block of underground ice that kept Cave Aikawa cool enough to sleep. It would take the entire day to melt, and even when it did, they wouldn't get wet.

With such an ingenious magical solution to their problem, they drew straws to decide their watch. Amelia had the last watch, so she enjoyed a long sleep before being gently woken by Serena.

"Watchtime," Serena said quietly. "I'll keep you company. No point in me going back to sleep now."

"How very kind," Amelia responded, rubbing sleep dust from her eyes. She could hear everyone else in a deep sleep. After running the Golden Path through the night and then jumping straight onto skimmers and challenging the Red Sands, everyone had fallen asleep the moment their head had touched their bedrolls.

She got up, and sat at the entrance with Serena. The skimmer pens each contained a telltale hump of sand, signalling where a sleeping skimmer lay buried. The skimmers seemed to have had the same idea as they had; sleep through the heat.

With Serena, she watched the sky slowly darken and the world take on a red tinge as the residual sunlight gave way to the pure moonlight of the Red Moon. The moonrain was close now. The ring of aetherliths around the moon had deformed; a sign they were breaking free from the moon's gravity and beginning their approach to the planet's upper atmosphere.

"Thirty-six, maybe forty hours," Serena said. "That's when it'll hit."

"I wonder if it'll look as amazing as the blue moonrain."

"Mmm."

They sat in silence for a moment, before a strange smell tickled Amelia's nose.

"I smell smoke," she said. "And... food."

Serena sniffed. She frowned, then sniffed again. "So do I. You have a good nose." The demon looked up, her eyes tracing the handholds they used earlier. "Let's check it out."

For the second time they climbed the sandstone formation. Only this time, when they summited its peak and explored the surroundings with their enhanced senses, there was something new that caught their attention. Something unexpected to the north.

Perhaps two, maybe three kilometres away, barely visible in a deep sandstone valley, was another cave entrance. It might have been natural, or it might have been made hours earlier. Amelia wasn't sure, but she was sure of what the flickering light in the entranceway meant.

"Fire," she said. "They must be cooking. It's another group." She peered closer, but even with her vision it was difficult to make out details. The night air had picked up and there was more sand blocking her vision. She thought she saw a skimmer move into the cave, but she wasn't sure.

"Either way," Serena said, "you know what this means?"

"Yes," Amelia said.

They had company.

