

The trip up till then had been largely uneventful. We'd stopped in Steven, which Sally hadn't heard of before, but didn't spend the night, choosing instead to push on. A part of me had hoped to see her reaction upon meeting Stephen, but we didn't have the time to lose, so we only paused for a brief moment to wish John and Elena a good journey to the mountain pass as they took two of the horses with them. Sabine also took the time to renew our illusions, so we wouldn't be enjoying any unpleasant surprises, before we quickly went on our way again. Any stretching of our legs we wanted to do during the journey, we had to do inside the carriage, and we took turns standing up and flexing. My biggest issue was simply the soreness from sitting down in a carriage with barely any suspension bouncing down what were for the most part dirt roads for the better part of a day and a night.

By the time we'd arrived at Shereton, we were all sore and a little miserable. Those of us who'd fallen asleep had found their muscles stiff and their joints protesting. There wasn't a person whose neck didn't snap, crackle and pop when they turned their head. Woozily, we all got out of the carriages, and I looked around. I hadn't taken the time before to check out Shereton, largely because my reputation in the town had apparently still been in tatters as the Demon Queen, though being under some proper rule and just law had seen people's opinions begin to shift.

I looked around. To my dread, I saw that the sun had started to rise, but we'd sent a messenger ahead to ensure we had rooms when we arrived, and I hoped to get some sleep in at least. The glow of dawn illuminated the rooftops. I'd seen the township from Whitehallow, of course, but being in the city itself, it was clear just how different this place was from a hamlet like Steven. Shereton housed several thousand people, easy, and it seemed to be doing quite well for itself. I saw more than a few houses, on our way in and now from where I was standing, that had started to undergo renovations. It seemed that Sabine's rule hadn't missed its effect on the city either. Sadly, by tomorrow a messenger would announce the fact that Wydonia had declared war. Sabine would be coming with us, which meant leaving the whole of Innshire in the hands of a warden, though she said she'd selected someone she trusted. Still, people needed to be ready in case of an invasion, and we had no way of telling how the invasion force would behave if the worst happened and we failed.

Mellie paid the red-eyed man who worked the inn at night, and we piled in. Duncan took the lead in driving the carriages to Whitehallow, leaving four beds for the eight of us. Lillian and Mellie took the biggest, further cementing the 'partner' aspect already implied by two unmarried women who were also 'business partners'. That way, if people talked about our travelling group, they'd focus almost exclusively on the two beautiful women who'd rented a room together. There'd be no talk of the Demon Queen or the Hero's Companions. Sabine, Kazumi and I had no trouble taking a bed either, even though it would be a little tight, leaving Sally and Erza to each have their own bed. Sally complained playfully, clearly too tired to put any effort into it, that she didn't get a pretty girl to sleep with. We all looked at each other bashfully for a moment, not knowing who she was talking about. Suddenly she reached down.

“Just kidding!” she said, holding Tilly up. “I get the prettiest girl! Do you want to sleep at the foot of the bed?” Tilly started to growl. “Like a good kitty!” The growling turned into a soft hissing. “Who’s a good kitty?!” Tilly bared her teeth. “You are! Yes, you are!” The growl lessened, and she glared at Sally. Tilly still hadn’t made any actual effort to be put down.

“You better remember that.” She said grumpily, but clearly not so annoyed that she minded being called a good kitty, which was exactly the kind of revelation that would’ve hit a lot harder if we weren’t all almost too tired to stand.

“Okay!” Lisa said, put Tilly under her arm and walked to her own room. Erza waved everyone a tired goodbye and left as well. It was interesting to see how her usually so thoroughly composed demeanour had shifted since she was in her new role, and I couldn’t help but wonder how much of the Erza we knew was as constructed as much as this ‘mercenary Erza’ was.

We all said our sleepy goodnights, and decided that we’d leave at noon tomorrow, because we weren’t going to be crossing the Dergow on two hours of sleep, let alone the enemy lines beyond that. Despite the three of us piling into one bed, I was asleep before Sabine had even gotten in. We were too exhausted to move, and all things considered we slept really well.

Noon came too soon, but waking up between Sabine and Kazumi was delightful no matter the circumstances. Kazumi’s biological clock had completely short-circuited, and she was the last to wake up, after Sabine and then myself. We had a little while before our official departure time, and we just lay there for a moment. I’d originally wondered how they measured time here, and they seemed to use mostly candle clocks and sundials.

“Sleep well, dears?” Sabine mumbled drowsily, still sleep drunk.

Kazumi and I both mumbled in the affirmative and just lay there snuggling. Kazumi’s nose was gently pressed against the back of my neck, her arms around me, being my big spoon. Sabine lay facing me, her forehead against mine. When her eyes fluttered open, I could feel them against my face. I loved how well the three of us clicked like little puzzle pieces in the bed, but we would have to get up soon, and it cast a shadow over the light of mid-day, shielded from it as we were by the curtains.

“Do you think we’re ready?” Kazumi asked quietly from behind me. I could feel her hot breath against my neck and it made me shiver in the best way.

“We’ll have to be, right?” I said. “We’ve got a plan and a way to go.”

“We won’t fail,” Sabine assured her. “Not with all of us here.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I could feel Kazumi snuggling up closer against me for warmth.

"We have some really competent people with us, Liz. Even without Daniel, the companions are legends."

I nodded. That was true. "And we have Erza," I added. "I wonder if she's worn armor like that before. She seems so... confident."

"You can say that again," Kazumi said with a sigh. I clearly wasn't the only one taken in by just how tall and imposing she looked in the armor. Something about a strong woman in platemail did to Kazumi what it did to me.

"Phwoar," Sabine said, verifying that the feeling was unanimous. "She's just... so *big*." The way she said it left no room for error in the way she meant that. I didn't even feel threatened, we all felt the same. "Besides", a smug little voice in the back of my head said, "I'm bigger."

"But it's not just that, you know?" I added. "Like, almost like she's at home acting like a mercenary, you know?"

"You mean *Merzanary*," Sabine said.

"Huhuh."

"Push her out of the beeed," Kazumi mumbled, but I could tell she was stifling a small laugh of her own.

"That was terrible," I said.

"I know." There wasn't a hint of shame. "I'm not even sorry." With that, she did roll out of bed, stretching. In the noonlight, before she was fully dressed, I couldn't help but admire the alabaster skin. I must've sighed, because I felt Kazumi stir behind me.

"I know, right?" She mumbled as she, too, looked at our girlfriend.

We all got dressed, slowly, stealing glances and kisses where we could, talking about small nothings to distract ourselves from what was to come. Once we crossed the Dergow, our journey would begin in earnest. It also began to dawn on me fully now was where I'd be going. If we considered things in real-time, it had been almost three years since I'd been in Wydonia, although that time had been in 1080p and seemed to have only been a facsimile of the real thing. Still, I wondered how much of it would feel familiar, how much I'd recognize.

I went to open the door to the main room of the inn, grabbed the door handle, and very gently yanked the door out of its hinges. Sabine and Kazumi both stared at me.

"I'm sorry!" I hissed. "I thought... I mean... I'm small now!"

"No you aren't," Sabine said, half giggling, half hiding her face. "You just *look* small! Speaking of which..."

She renewed the illusion again as I carefully tried to position the door so that it *looked* okay. Hopefully we'd be out of there before anyone noticed the damage I'd done.

We gathered in the main hall and put our packs together, organising them by size. We had enough food with us to make it to the city Morgana had mentioned. Its name was one of those things that made it so hard to decide whether this world came first, or the game did. A city with a name like Amethseryne seemed to be exactly the kind of name an author who read too much old school fantasy would come up with. I looked at the packs. There was one comically small one that Tilly dutifully put on. Even with her strength -- she might have been small, but she hadn't lost any strength for it -- there simply wasn't a lot of heavy luggage we could stuff into a bag that small. More than a few of us made noises, variations on the theme of "awww", when we saw the cat with a backpack. Tilly just hissed at us noncommittally.

Erza took the largest pack, and I the second heaviest. I still had my old strength, after all. There was a hundred pound slab of wood upstairs that could attest to that.

We all packed up and left Shereton. A little ways down the road, we could already see the bridge that connected Shereton to Wydonia. It was an old stone thing, collapsed centuries ago, now hastily rebuilt with wood. It was long, but not wide enough to march across. I wouldn't have sent an army over it on a good day. The Dergow was very gentle here, but it was easily half a mile wide, quite deep, and brooks joined with the river every few miles or so.

The tent city opposite the river was already growing in size. I could only hope they'd wait until all their reinforcements had arrived before they'd try to cross. Duncan had ensured me the bridge wouldn't survive an attempted crossing, but Sabine and Elena had figured they'd use magic to get across the river. On the far side, we could see guards by the bridge. Nobody was getting in or out of my lands without Wydonia's permission.

I looked to the others. We stood in a line, all trying to take in as much detail as we could and I took a deep breath. This was the first hurdle.

"Is everyone ready?" I said, as I began to approach the edge of the water. There was a chorus of agreement, and I heard people walk behind me. "Sabine, are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

I felt the air grew crisp as she charged up her magical abilities.

"Then we're ready," I said. I really hoped we were.