



"What do you want to do?" Amelia asked.

"They are more than likely the group Noor rented to before us," Serena said. "If they're a scouting party for the upcoming moonrain, then there's no need to make contact. If they're not..." The demon gave her a side glance and tapped her sword. "Then we'll deal with it."

"Wouldn't they be further ahead?" Amelia turned, peering at the faint haze of Hakim to the south. "Noor said they came yesterday. Why would they only have made it this far? They're not waiting for us, are they? Ooo," She couldn't help feeling a dash of excitement rise, "it could be a trap!"

"Who would be capable of reacting to our movements so quickly?" Serena mused. "We told no one other than Menes, and I doubt he's betrayed our trust. Perhaps..." Serena trailed off, tapping the hilt of her sword rhythmically. "Perhaps they are after the same thing we are. We were told the Enemy was looking for these shards as well."

"Darkblades?"

"Could be." Serena shook her head. "Either way, in a space like *this*..." The demon gestured to the mesa environment. Kilometres of sandstone valleys, overhanging arches, and towering rock formations stretched to the horizon in all directions but the south. It was a natural maze. "We can slip past them easy enough. We'll head east and then north. Give them a few clicks clearance."

"Mmm..." Amelia peered at the distant cave entrance. "Shall I take a look?"

"A look?"

"Yeah." She raised an arm, flexing her bicep. "Reconnaissance, you know? I worked so hard to figure out how to get into the Shimmer; might as well put it to good use. I need the practice, don't I?" Amelia could tell from Serena's slight narrowing of her expression that her girlfriend was considering it. "And let's be

honest," Amelia said, "if they are enemies, then I'm not exactly in much danger, am I?"

Serena thought for half a dozen seconds before slowly nodding. "Very well, then," she said. "But don't enter the Shimmer here. When you managed it in Ishaq, the force shattered the floor. Made quite the noise, too. Best head down and away from the skimmers. I'll tell the others."

They climbed down to Cave Aikawa and woke the rest of their expedition team. Serena gave everyone a rundown of what they'd seen and instructed them to prepare the skimmers for a long night of desert travel.

"Don't go in their cave if you can help it," Serena told her. "Think of these questions: How many are there? What is their equipment? Are they aether users? Don't spend more than a few minutes observing. We'll be on standby. If you need help, send a signal."

Amelia tilted her head. "Signal? What kind?"

The demon shrugged. "Something obvious. Throw out some lightning. A giant fireball. Speak a Word. Whatever it takes."

"Wow." Amelia couldn't help but grin. "Is it my imagination, or have your normal cautionary words about my magic suddenly vanished?"

The edges of Serena's lips curled. "We're in the middle of nowhere," the demon explained. "If there's one place where we can get away with being..." The demon looked Amelia up and down. "Being *you*, then it's here. I don't know how long this search will take, but I intend to take advantage of the dense aether." Serena nodded to the group. "That goes for the rest of you. If you can focus in the heat, this is the perfect place to solidify your skills. Some of you may want to consider pushing for third-circle magic or yellow aura." Serena nodded at Finella and Hinako before facing Mel. "That goes for you too, Officer Mori."

Mel's eyes widened. "My orange still needs refinement," she said. "It's too soon, surely?"

"I wouldn't have brought you with us if it was too soon," Serena said. "I expect to see some flecks of yellow in your orange by the time we're back in an

environment more conducive to sanity. Now, enough dallying. Let's go." She locked eyes with Amelia. "Be careful. If you're not back within the hour, I'll come for you."

"Noted," Amelia affirmed. "Back soon!"

She left the cave and ran to the south. Once she was certain that she was far enough away not to be detected, she stopped, took a deep breath, and began focusing inwardly. It took a minute, but she was able to bring her mental state back to that time in Ishaq. That time when she'd accepted who she was.

*Dreadmage Thornheart.*

And, of course, the adorable demigod girlfriend of Serena Halen.

Smiling to herself, she felt the bizarre sensation of something ethereal sliding into place. Flicking her vision into the Shimmer, she looked down at her shadow. Then, with an exhilarating feeling of being pulled somewhere without moving, she slipped into the Shimmer.

There was a loud snap, but nothing compared to the first time. Amelia ignored the pungent smell of burned aether and quickly stabilised her aetheric cycling against the Shimmer's aetherphobic pressure. The Shimmer wanted to pull her magic apart, to take it back into the material world, but she wouldn't let it. It was hers.

She took a moment to collect herself, adjusting to the sepia world. Given that she was already in a desert, the colours didn't change all that much. Sure, it was a little more orangey and a little more brown, but not much else changed. The surroundings were completely devoid of any translucent ghostly flora; it must be too hot and too dense in aether for them. There wasn't much difference between the desert in the normal world and the Shimmer.

Well, that was if she ignored what was above her.

"Hello," Amelia whispered, giving the Red Moon a little wave.

It was beautiful. An impossibly complex formation surrounded by sparkling aetherliths that glimmered with the colour of magic; a mesmerising portrait framing the Red Moon's sole inhabitant.

A dragon.

Sure, it didn't look *exactly* like the traditional dragon Amelia had seen in her old world's media, but it was close enough. No matter how adamant Serena was that 'dragons didn't exist', if the creature above her wasn't deserving of the label, then what was? It was a gigantic beast, wrapping itself in a pair of wings and twin tails. She tried to look closer, but it was difficult to make out much detail. Yet, the more she looked, the more she felt an odd sensation rise up within her.

It was an instinctive feeling of caution, perhaps even fear. Her instincts warned her that the dragon above was beyond anything else in the Known World. It was beyond any Greatlord, Overlord, and beyond even the Empress herself. It was beyond Amelia, shard or no shard. It was an alien domain of existence, of power beyond normality. An unfathomable amount of power.

*Well, while it seems to be inactive,* Amelia thought, peering at the unmoving dragon, *it's kinda cute, in a weird way.* She didn't know why, but she felt a subtle sensation of... familiarity. Was that feeling something born from her shard? Were the dragons related to them? Amelia had deduced that her shard was a piece of a shattered god, but were the gods themselves related to the dragons?

"I'm going to call you..." Amelia pointed up, thinking for only a moment before a name popped into mind. "*Ryn*. That's your name!" She gave *Ryn* the dragon an enthusiastic thumbs-up. "Short for *Pyrinn*. I hope you like it!"

Whether *Ryn* approved or not, she gave no indication.

*Is she even a she?* Amelia thought. *Do dragons have genders?*

Well, that would be a question for the future.

For now, she had reconnaissance to do.

Amelia ran back the way she came. Moving in the Shimmer was much easier compared to the material world. In this plane, her feet didn't sink into the sand as

much, making running a simple task. Within moments, she was back with the others. She watched them, noting that their souls shined brighter now. It was likely a result of both their training and the aether-dense atmosphere.

And, of course, there was the warm and loving pink line that connected her to Serena. It flowed like silk, sitting in the centre of the aetherflow that supplied her girlfriend's protective wards. Was it her imagination, or was it also a bit bigger than before?

*Focus*, she thought.

She left the group to make their departure preparations and made her way through the mesa. Relying on her memory from before, she picked a path through the craggy environment, soon arriving at her destination. She peeked around a rock, doing her best imitation of Rommy, and took in the sights.

The cave entrance that had been so hazy before now stood before her, clear and open. It looked like it had once been a natural cave, but its current inhabitants had shored it up and expanded the entrance. She could hear voices coming from inside. The noises sounded deep, affected by the Shimmer's time differential. Still, she couldn't make out any words. Taking a breath and reminding herself that if anything went wrong, then it would be okay because she was both adorable and powerful, Amelia exited her cover and began sneaking towards the cave.

Even though she was functionally invisible, she found herself unable to stop tip-toeing. It felt strangely appropriate, given the situation. She tip-toed to the entrance to get a better look. Luckily, Serena's concerns about her entering the cave wouldn't manifest, for the group inside had set up near the entrance.

There were five men. Each wore white desert clothing that covered most of their features. She could see that they had dark skin, as dark as Speaker Asrar. They were all demons, with curled horns and yellow eyes. Judging from how they managed their aether, and how their souls shone, two of them were less capable than Mel, two were on par with Finella, while the last one...

Was a Speaker.

Of course, Speaker or not, Amelia remained undetected. The Shimmer was inaccessible to all but the most powerful Speakers, and the one before her didn't have that kind of capability. He was a warrior, judging by his reliance on his fine red aura. He moved about, preparing a skimmer for travel. The rest of the cave's inhabitants followed suit, talking amongst themselves. Although she could hear them clearly at this point, it didn't help her investigation.

They all spoke in Hakian, without a trace of Imperial.

Not only that, but despite there being only five men, there were eight skimmers. Tiptoeing a few steps closer, Amelia could see why. The reason was likely also the answer as to why they had—assuming they were the group that had left the day before—only managed to come as far as they had.

It was their equipment.

Three of the skimmers, the largest of the eight, were dedicated haulers. They had no saddles; that would get in the way of the large pieces of equipment on their backs. What that equipment was, Amelia couldn't tell. They were covered in sheets, no doubt to protect them from the desert sand. While she couldn't get a good look, she could deduce the general shape: each of the three cargo skimmers had something that was long and rigid, with a large spherical end. They also each had a large box, rectangular in shape. It was strapped tightly to the skimmer next to other miscellaneous items.

The wind chose that moment to pick up, stirring the sand and dust of the mesa, obscuring Amelia's vision. Not even the Shimmer was immune to the local weather. Feeling encouraged, and certain the Speaker couldn't detect her as long as she refrained from casting any big magic, Amelia crept closer. She would just pop into the cave for a quick, totally secret, visit. It wouldn't be a problem, would it?

As it turned out, it was a problem.

Just as she neared the entrance of the cave a shout came from one of the men. His eyes were wide with shock, a shaking finger pointing directly at Amelia. He shouted again, gathering everyone's attention. Within a second all five men were looking at her.

*They can see me?* Amelia thought. *How? It shouldn't be—*

Ah.

Of course.

They weren't seeing *her*. They were seeing the outline of her in the sandstorm. The Shimmer wasn't fully detached from the material world. Just as Amelia could walk on the sand, the sand itself would collide with her half-presence, forming a ghostly outline.

One man started jabbering, only to have the back of his head slapped by the Speaker, who shouted at the rest of his team. It must have been an order or a threat, for they stopped their panic and backed away. Still, it didn't stop them making motions of what Amelia recognised as Hakian prayers. The Speaker turned to Amelia, and then did something she wasn't expecting.

He saluted.

They stared at each other for a moment.

*Time to go*, Amelia thought.

She spun up a quick formation. It wasn't an attack, just a bit of wind to disturb the sand enough to cloak her escape. From the Hakian Speaker's perspective, she hoped it would appear as a mysterious exit, and he would thus put it down to a superstitious experience.

Under the cover of the Amelia-born sandstorm, she retreated, running back the way she came. It was easier coming back than going; she merely had to follow the aetherflow towards Serena. Within a minute she'd returned. The group was finishing securing the saddles on the skimmers, doing their last minute checks for excess sand and loose straps.

She exited the Shimmer.

"I'm back!" she announced. "Oh, sorry!" She ran to Barq. Her aetheric reappearance had caused the skimmers to rear up, clicking aggressively. She

apologised once more, patting the skimmer until he settled. "It's okay, it's okay..." She reassured Barq until he let out a *meep*.

"You were quick," Serena said. "What happened?"

Amelia quickly explained everything that had transpired.

"He *saluted*?" Serena questioned. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Amelia said. "He was quite... calm, I suppose? The others were shocked, like they'd seen a ghost. Which, I suppose, I sort of was for a moment."

"They probably thought you were a djinn," Finella suggested. "As for that Speaker... In the North, some of us view the ice spirits as the spirits of the honourable dead. Souls of Northern soldiers who died in battle. It might have been something like that."

"I suppose..." Amelia mused. She played back the memory in her mind. The eyes of that Speaker when he had saluted her... it seemed more formal than something merely born from superstitious respect. It was as if he was saluting a military superior. As if he were *expecting* her.

"Describe the equipment again," Finella said. "The round bits, how big were they?" After Amelia used some magic to mould some sandstone into the rough shape, Finella snapped her fingers. "They're aetherscopes," she declared.

"Aetherscopes?"

"Not all 'scopes are the size of the ones on the *Vengeance*," the demon continued. "There are mobile ones. You said there were three of them? That's for triangulation. The long bit extended from them? I'd bet a cup of Jimari that they are tripod legs folded up. The boxes you described next to them sound like portable steam engines. Someone on their team will be either a *Salinas* or *Marzanna* mage. They'll need a way to get water for them."

"So they're just a scouting party?" Amelia asked. "Scouting for crystal deposits?"

"I'd say yes, if there hadn't been a Speaker there." Finella glanced at Serena before continuing, "You wouldn't need a Speaker for mere scouting. You know how much

it would cost for a company to hire a Speaker for weeks on end? Too much. It's suspicious."

"Could be viable," Mel suggested, "given how much red costs now."

"Maybe..." Finella mused.

"Or maybe," Serena said, "they're planning on going somewhere with those aetherscopes where they'll need the talents of a Speaker. Somewhere dangerous. Somewhere similar to where we're planning to go." Serena looked at Amelia. "They were preparing to leave, so I think we can put aside any suspicions that they were waiting for us. While I am *tempted* to give them a visit and determine their purpose for myself, I'd prefer to avoid them entirely. There is every possibility that we will never see them again. We will head east, then north. We will be hidden in the mesa. If they or anyone else are looking for us, we will lose them there."

With Serena's mind made up, they finished preparations to leave. Amelia cooled down everyone's flasks and climbed aboard her skimmer. Barq, along with his brethren, obediently hovered, his fins undulating with the night air. With a declarative *meep*, they set off, following Serena and Naji through the mesa.

It was hot, but the nighttime air and lack of sun made it manageable. Mel even suggested that, with the ice-cold water, the night was somewhat pleasant. It was a comment that made Finella scoff.

"Reminds me of Menes," Amelia said. "Remember what he said?"

"What did he say?" Finella asked.

"When we were with him one afternoon in Ishaq," Amelia said. "The sun had gone down and he said how much he loved Ishaq at that time of day. It was when the heat cooled, and the southern breeze picked up. Right now," she reached up, gesturing to the moonlit mesa, "reminds me of that. This is like a holiday, isn't it?"

Finella laughed. "For you, maybe. It's not for me."

"I thought you would be familiar with heat. Don't you have saunas in the North?" Amelia asked. "I was told Northerners take saunas and then jump in ice cold water."

"Ah," Finella said. "You're thinking of *avantouinti*."

"Avan...what?" Mel asked.

"*Avantouinti*," Finella repeated. "A Northern word. It means 'ice swimming'. We cut holes in the ice for it. You warm up in a sauna first, and then plunge into the water. Ah..." The demon smiled, as if remembering an enjoyable memory. "It's euphoric. Foreigners always think it's horrible, but it's the best feeling you'll ever have. Trust me, if we're ever in the North, I'll show you. When I did it, I would have a hot cup of coffee next to the water. Ah..."

"That sounds... mad," Mel said. "Are you sure you're still not suffering from Desert Madness?" Mel frowned and asked, "Actually, is there a Northern Madness?"

"Northern Madness?" Finella chuckled. "From the cold? Hmm... not in the way you're thinking. Although people do strange things when they get too cold for too long. They start taking their clothes off."

"What?" Mel's eyes widened. "Why?"

"Because when you get really cold, you start to feel unbearably hot. More than this desert. They take their clothes off to try to cool down, but it just kills them faster."

"You're jesting," Mel said.

"I'm not," Finella replied, slightly pouting. "Next time we're near a library, look it up. It's a real thing. *Plergoth's Paradox*, they call it."

*Plergoth's Paradox*? Amelia thought. It was a novel way to name the paradoxical undressing that hypothermia could cause. It had a nice ring to it. The more she heard about the North the more she hoped their shard-hunting duties would take them there. Would she one day be partaking in *avantouinti* with Serena and the others?

They continued to talk amongst themselves, making slow but steady progress. They stopped a few times and climbed tall formations to get their bearings. By the time they climbed for the third time, Amelia couldn't see any sign of the endless Red Sands. It was just mesa all around, as far as they could see.

For four hours they rode the skimmers. They took a break, quickly eating a snack, before resuming their travels. By the time the next four hours had passed, Amelia had to admit she was getting slightly tired of seeing the same sandstone environment after every single turn of a corner. It seemed never ending. It wasn't just them, either. The skimmers were getting tired, slowing down, hovering closer to the ground. They needed rest as well.

"We'll stop here," Serena suddenly announced, pulling Naji to a stop.

They'd stopped under a grand archway. It would provide good cover from both the upcoming moonrain and the blistering sun in the day. Not that they intended to go out until the moonrain was over. They would sleep here, and shelter during the afternoon while the land around was bombarded with crystal. According to Serena, they were about an hour from the north-east edge of the mesa.

"It's wurm territory from then on," Serena said, tracing a finger on a map. "We'll follow the Surian Valley, it paths most of the way to the destination. Inside we should be sheltered from any wurts."

"Captain..." Finella said quietly. "The words 'should be' aren't doing much to calm my horns."

"We'll handle it," Serena said, tapping the map. "Now, let's get comfortable."

They prepared their camp, carving bedrooms into the sandstone walls. Amelia took charge of digging out the cave, while Hinako managed the skimmer pens. Cave Aikawa was cosy and practical, but Cave Thornheart would be a five-star resort when Amelia was done with it.

Or, in this world, that would be a 'five-moon resort', wouldn't it?

"Don't make it too impressive," Finella said just as Amelia finished etching an ornate pattern into one of the structural pillars. "Any more and when the

Southerners discover it they'll think it's one of their ancient temples. Come back in a year, and it'll be a place of worship."

Amelia laughed. She finished the bedrooms, cutting them deep into the sandstone.

"I may be missing something, *Lia*," Serena said, sliding next to her. "But you seem to be down a bedroom. I count four." The demon gave her a sly smile. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure there was no one nearby, Serena leant in and whispered. "Make another, but come into mine later. For some *training*."

Amelia grinned.

"You're bold," she said.

"I've taken inspiration," her bold girlfriend replied. "Now go help Hinako. The Skimmers aren't settling."

Amelia gave her a wink and left the cave with a huge grin on her face. She only just managed to keep it under control when she caught up with Hinako. The skimmers were frustrated at the hard ground, slapping their tails against it, trying and failing to stir it up. Together they used magic to ground the sandstone into, well, sand. That was enough for the skimmers, who began nesting, their instincts warning them of the incoming moonrain.

With preparations sorted, they ate a quick supper and drew straws for watch duties.

Amelia was the second watch.

She settled down to sleep, planning to wait until the right time to sneak into Serena's room. Unfortunately, that time never came, because it was that night that something else came to them.

That night, the djinn came.