



Inside the Bastet family home, Amelia and Serena had barely made it through the entranceway before Nefertari spun around. "If you aren't in a rush, Speaker Halen, Miss Liona..." She tapped the floor with her bare foot. "I like to keep an honest home."

"You...?" Serena frowned. "Oh," she said. "Of course."

Sitting down, Serena began to unlace her boots. Amelia joined her. It was slow going to remove her boots with one arm occupied by a purring peeka, but they were soon barefoot. Amelia could sense Serena's discomfort by the way she wiggled her toes and tried to hide her feet in the hem of her trousers. It was quite adorable, actually. There was a strange thing in the East about bare feet. Something about being barefoot with someone carrying the implication of intimacy between them.

That certainly didn't seem to be the case in Ishaq.

"Ishaqian culture, Miss Liona," Nefertari explained after Amelia asked. "My mother told me it was initially a test of the skills of the homemaker. It's also a sign of trust from the guest. To refuse to go barefoot without permission can be considered an insult. In a well-kept Ishaqian home, you can walk barefoot throughout and not acquire a single speck of dust or discomfort." Nefertari gently scuffed the floor with the sole of her foot, twisting slightly to show Amelia. "See? Not a speck." Her accent was subtle, her pronunciation a charming mix between Centralis and Southern. "Although my dear husband has his own ideas of where it came from..." Nefertari gave Menes a sly smile and darted into the kitchen.

"Mmm," Menes mumbled as they followed his wife. "Before it was the mark of a good wife, it was there to show respect for those who walked the Golden Path, my *anisa*."

"Golden Path?" Amelia asked. It was a term she'd heard before. Menes had mentioned it shortly before Serena had demonstrated her amazing embroidery skills by turning his brother into a pincushion.

"The path through the Salabans," Menes explained. "Through the mountains. It winds, you see"—Menes motioned a snake with his hands—"and follows the river that feeds Ishaq. It is the path the founders took when fleeing the desert all those years ago, after the Malignant Darkness conquered it. The survivors walked barefoot, and that's why it's polite to take your shoes off now, my *anisa*. It is to show respect to their struggle."

"But why was it called the *Golden Path*?"

"Because when they made it through the mountains and saw the land before them"—Menes cast his hand in front, as if framing a scene through a camera—"they realised they were finally safe, and untold prosperity lay before them in bountiful, untouched lands of golden grass and grain."

"And," Nefertari spoke up, "because those 'refugees' were only those wealthy enough to escape. They brought so much gold, looting the stores of Trekell and Haki, that it kept spilling from their pockets, covering the way in gold. Hence, *Golden Path*."

Menes grumbled something in response, but Nefertari slid past him, smoothly picking up colourful arcwhales and moving them into the next room. Their wireframe constructions, covered in vivid feathers and fabric, were stacked up on one wall. They sat underneath another bundle of colour and feathers. This bundle, however, was alive.

"Golden Path!" squawked Solara. "Golden Path! Golden Hair! Golden Hair!"

Was it Amelia's imagination, or was the bird looking at her?

"Quiet, Solara," Nefertari chastised. "We have guests."

"Peeka!" cried the bird, spreading its wings. "Peeka!"

"Meow!" answered Romulus, jumping from Amelia's arms and dashing into the room. Before Amelia could say anything, the peeka launched itself onto the perch, only to begin pushing its neck against Solara and licking it in a manner that looked rather uncomfortable for the bird.

"Solara likes peekas," Menes explained, casually moving around the kitchen table and preparing places. "Especially Romulus."

"They know each other?" Amelia asked. Any doubt she may have had on that matter was extinguished as she saw Solara pull crystals from its feathers and try to stick them behind the peeka's ears. It didn't work very well, but Romulus was enjoying it, judging by his purring.

*I wonder if Serena would ever let me pierce her ears with a crystal earring?* Amelia wondered. She glanced at her girlfriend, only to receive a look that said, *Don't even think about it.*

"We hosted Captain Duval once, Moons watch over him," Nefertari said, returning to the kitchen. "Romulus is a fine peeka. I take it you've inherited him, then?" She put her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow.

"Mmm!" Amelia nodded happily. "We have!"

"As if I had a choice..." Serena murmured.

Nefertari laughed. A soft, polite chuckle that emphasised her presence in the most elegant way. "He's an exemplary Luscan, Romulus is, with one of the best coats I've seen on a peeka. They are extremely adventurous. Be careful, Speaker Halen." Once Serena affirmed her response, Nefertari nodded at the disguised safe. "Would you like me to put that somewhere, out of the way?"

"Ah, my dear—" Menes began.

"It cannot leave my sight," Serena explained. "I cannot tell you more, I'm sorry."

"Hmm..." Nefertari chewed her lip before asking, "There's nothing explosive in there, is there? The last thing I want is a crate of munitions blowing up the hog I've so carefully cooked. And myself, for that matter. Not all of us are blessed with aetheric control over aura and spellwork."

"...That will not happen, Lady Bastet." Serena tilted her head. "I assure you."

"I see." Nefertari paused, her eyes wandering over Serena, Amelia, and the crate. Amelia could almost see the cogs in her head turning. She knew the Southern demon was trying to figure out exactly what kind of mess her husband had brought into her home. She could imagine the questions going through her mind.

*What's in the crate, Meni?*

*How's it connected to the Hellfire Captain?*

*And how does this mysterious ice mage, as adorable as she is, fit into it?*

*Better keep my disguise flawless,* Amelia thought, steeling her aether and commanding it to keep doing exactly as she intended. She was a little concerned that Nefertari might recognise her, given that her facial structure was the same. Her *Kanaxai* magic only darkened her hair, changed her eye colour, and gave her incorporeal horns. It was shocking how *different* Amelia looked with only a few changes.

*I'd make a great demon,* she thought.

"I always wanted a peeka," Nefertari said, moving to the larder and returning with a bundle of colourful fruit. "My husband's nose, unfortunately, doesn't agree with them. Just watch, he'll start sneezing soon." She cast a playful glance at Menes.

"As long as he doesn't jump on me, I'll be fine," he said.

Under the watchful eye of Solara and the purring Romulus, they made small talk while preparing dinner. The roasted hog, lying on a bed of potatoes and tightly bound with fragrant herbs, sizzled as it was taken out of the oven and placed on the side. It wasn't anywhere near as big as the one the Head Chef cooked for the *Vengeance's* crew, but its small size didn't stop it from making Amelia's mouth water.

"A burrowsnatcher," Serena mused. "It's been a while."

"You've eaten it?" Nefertari asked. "I would have thought it not suitable for an Eastern palate."

"When I was a teenager, they were fashionable for a while." Serena's eyes took on that distant look they did when she was remembering a fond memory.

"Why are they called burrowsnatchers?" Amelia asked.

"They take over bouncer burrows," Serena explained. "Eject the family living there. They are herbivores, despite their violent predisposition. They're all over the lowland farms, so I'm told. I bet the twins know all there is to know about them."

*Bouncers*. Fluffy, rabbit-like creatures Amelia had seen in the pet shops in Asamaywa. Adorable, but not quite as domesticated or happy to cuddle as a peeka.

While the burrowsnatcher continued to cook, Nefertari enlisted Amelia's help in cutting exotic fruits into bite-sized chunks for the skewers. They started with amberfigs, honey-sweet figs with golden flesh, followed by citrusy moonpears. By the time they were dusting chunks of mirzamelon—a small, striped melon with an intense floral fragrance—with a spicy-cinnamon concoction, Serena stood up and offered her services.

"I fear our family's reputation would be damaged," Nefertari mused, "should it become known I enlisted a Speaker to work in our kitchen. This work is beneath you, Speaker Halen."

"No work is beneath me," Serena replied smoothly, taking a knife. Nefertari tried to argue, but in the end, relented. Amelia had to admit, Serena was every bit as skilled in preparing the fruits as Nefertari was. It was as if she'd been doing it her whole life.

"What?" Serena asked, catching Amelia's look. The corner of her lips curled in response to the implicit question. "Father was determined that I be taught how to cook, despite my obsession with training. Surprised?"

"Very," Amelia replied. "There's always something new to learn with you, isn't there?"

Serena didn't reply, but Amelia didn't miss the warm smile on her girlfriend's face. She glanced at Nefertari to see the Southerner looking at her with a puzzled expression. Quickly averting her gaze, she focused on preparing the fruits.

"Miss Liona."

A pair of utensils was thrust into her vision. Amelia looked up to see Nefertari smiling at her. "You worked in the *Vengeance's* kitchens, yes? If you could." Amelia looked blankly at the carving knife and fork for a few seconds before remembering herself.

"Ah, of course," she said, delicately taking the knife and fork.

"Cut thickly, Miss Liona," Nefertari said. "For the skewers."

"Right, right," Amelia said. She took a deep breath. This was her opportunity to redeem herself. Forget invoking Words or casting spells. She'd studied the book *Tomes and Dagon* had brought her. She'd memorised practically every word. Her stat-enhanced brain had absorbed every tip and trick.

"Away from the bone..." she muttered to herself.

Serena snorted.

"Excuse me?" Amelia raised an eyebrow as she delicately slid the long-pronged fork into the tender burrowsnatcher. "Something amusing?" She gave Serena a look that said, 'I dare you to bring it up now.'

"Not at all," Serena said slyly. "Not at all," she repeated. Serena continued to cut fruit, but her eyes and attention were on Amelia, her eyes twinkling in anticipation. "I just noticed," Serena said innocently. "This is a lovely marble table, isn't it?"

*I'll actually stab you*, Amelia told Serena with her eyes.

*What?* Serena's eyes widened with mock surprise. *What did I do?*

Honestly! Amelia could invoke a Second-Word, throw the balance of power between the Terra Firms off and be canonised under the Demon Church, but what did her girlfriend choose to tease her about? A table! It was House Halen's fault for making her carve in front of Greatlord Oshiro, anyway!

"I've been practising," Amelia muttered, positioning the knife. Just as she began to apply the perfect amount of pressure, the exotic accent of Nefertari filled her ears.

"Say, Miss Liona, you're rather intimate with Speaker Halen, aren't you? I was wondering—" Nefertari was cut off as the burrowsnatcher's head was cleaved off, separated from the main body by the reflexive tensing of Amelia's body mid cut. The cooked head, propelled as if it had its own propulsion engine, escaped the roasting plate and went spinning across the table. It slowed, coming to a stop at the far edge.

For a moment, time stood still as everyone watched in silence at the teetering head.

Then it fell onto the floor.

"Quick!" Solara squawked. "Quick!"

Romulus leapt from the perch, flew across the room and snatched the head. Before anyone could do anything, he ran back, launching himself up next to Solara, where they began feasting on their stolen spoils.

Amelia swallowed, slowly turning to look at Nefertari. "Intimate?" she asked. "How did you—"

"Ah, it does not translate well into Imperial, does it?" Nefertari said, shaking her head. She clapped her hands. "Solara! Bad bird!"

"Let them have it," Menes said, chuckling. "They earned it."

Nefertari clicked her tongue, gave a final glare towards the troublesome peeka and parrot before turning to Amelia and saying, "Intimate is not the right word. Imperial is limited when it comes to things of this nature. Friendship, perhaps?" Nefertari gestured between Serena and Amelia. "I talk of the close friendship between two women. We have a word for it in Hakian, but Imperial lacks it. I can see there are no barriers between you. You act as if you were lifelong friends." Nefertari shrugged. "Casual."

Through her aetheric connection with Serena, Amelia could sense her girlfriend relax. Outwardly, the demon showed no visible change, but Amelia could feel Serena let out an internal sigh of relief. Her girlfriend had, on more than one occasion, expressed concern about how Southerners might react if they discovered their relationship. Not out of shame, but out of concern that it could complicate her duties.

"We met at the academy," Serena said. "Miss Liona won a scholarship and was invited by Lord Inoue to study there. The *Vengeance* needed an ice mage." Amelia watched Serena casually shrug as her false backstory was recounted.

"Lord Inoue?" Nefertari's eyes widened. "The Aether Addict?"

"Mmm," Amelia hummed. "Have you met her?"

Nefertari shook her head. "I only know her by name. But you..." She trailed off as she looked into Amelia's eyes. What was the glint in the Southerner's eye? Amusement? Suspicion? "You have some Cerulean heritage," Nefertari said, tapping her eyes. "Samino father and Cerulean mother, I'm guessing?"

"How could you tell?" Amelia shifted awkwardly and tried to look inconspicuous as she continued carving the now headless burrowsnatcher.

"Your horns would be bigger if your mother were Samino," Nefertari said. "Your accent is wonderful, Miss Liona." The demon paused, casting Menes a slow look before returning her gaze to Amelia. "Where in Centralis did you grow up?"

"N-Noheim," Amelia replied, immediately cursing herself for stuttering. She remembered everything about her backstory and knew that every bit of it would stand up to scrutiny, courtesy of Intelligence. That, however, didn't mean she could say it out loud convincingly.

"Mmm." Nefertari smiled. "The heart of shipbuilding beats in Noheim, they say. When were you last there?"

"Last winter," Amelia replied, doing her best to nonchalantly carve the meat.

"How's the pollution these days? Still bad?"

*Why's she asking me this?* Amelia thought.

"It... is what it is," she said. "You get used to it."

"I'm envious," Nefertari said.

Amelia paused her carving. "Sorry?"

"Of your horns," Nefertari said, gesturing to Amelia's illusory horns. "It must be convenient. The door frames in the old parliament building are so short. I'm always catching mine if I don't pay attention. As much as I love the horns my mother gave me, sometimes I wish I were born with smaller ones. May I...?" She trailed off, and Amelia looked up from her carving to see the Southerner's hands inches from Amelia's forehead.

She dropped the utensils and ducked away, the noise prompting Solara to squawk.

"Ha..." Amelia chuckled nervously. "You surprised me."

"I am sorry, Miss Liona." Nefertari withdrew her hand. "I was merely curious. Call it a mother's nagging instinct to want to know who's in their family home."

"*Ahem.*" Menes cleared his throat loudly, stepping past Amelia. He picked up the dropped utensils and began quickly slicing the burrowsnatcher meat into chunks. "Let us eat, let us eat, yes? Sit, sit!" He hurried everyone into their chairs.

Amelia was positioned next to Serena. Opposite her was Nefertari, who sat to the left of Menes. "Let us take this moment," Menes said, "to thank Pyrinn for nurturing us. Thank our Ashendi sperehand for bringing us to these beautiful lands, and our spindelhand for making it so beautiful, yes?" He nudged Nefertari, getting a smile back. "Let us thank *Rhaknam* for his mercy, and pray for his good health and calm mind." Menes closed his eyes for a moment, and Amelia glanced around the table, unsure what she should be doing. No one else had their eyes closed, and before she could guess, Menes clapped his hands and announced, "Let's eat!"

They picked up their skewers, using tongs to help create a layered meal. Amelia followed Menes' suggestion on what order she should stack fruit and chunks of tender burrowsnatcher. Serena confidently navigated the task with such elegance and lack of hesitation that it took Amelia a minute to realise her girlfriend was covertly copying her.

Adorable.

"*Rhaknam* wouldn't really attack Ishaq, would he?" Amelia asked. The baby arcwhale that had died after stranding itself upon Ishaq's territory had sent the city into a strange frenzy. From what she could tell, it was half religious fervour and half opportunistic capitalism. Those stallowners selling decorations for the upcoming Arcwhale Festival must have made a killing.

"Over this? No." Menes shook his head. "It would take more than one to invoke his wrath. Once the Council get their horns straight and agree to return the body to his domain, things will be fine."

"The Shattered Isles?" Amelia asked. Seeing Menes nod, she asked, "How would you return it?"

"On a barge," he said. "A ritualistic one, full of flowers and offerings. A pilot would set the path and then board another ship to escape." Menes pointed a finger upwards and rotated it. "The barge would follow the winds, circling his domain as it falls into the centre. The arcwhales will see it and respect our reverence. This is what will happen, my *anisa*, once the Council stops being fools." Menes turned to his wife and said, "I punched Maramba today."

Nefertari paused, her skewer halfway to her mouth. "You did?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He tried to stop *Sayyidah* Halen," he said, gesturing to Serena. "What are they thinking, to challenge the *Tasalsul* so directly? She is also a Speaker! I could not believe it. They are all so stupid."

"Is that so?" Nefertari raised an eyebrow at Serena. "And why did you invoke the ire of Secretary Maramba, Speaker Halen?"

"I... can't tell you," Serena answered plainly.

Amelia saw Nefertari flick her eyes to the disguised safe. "Ah."

"My apologies."

"Don't be." Nefertari took a bit of her food, and an awkward silence descended upon them.

Amelia nibbled her skewer. Before now, she'd never thought that meat could go so well with citrus fruits, but the Ishaqian meal before them had opened her up to a whole new world of culinary combinations. She ate in silence, throwing intermittent glances at the others. Was it her imagination, or was Nefertari doing the same to her? Eventually, the silence became too overbearing, and she had to say something.

"What's Parliament like?" she asked Nefertari. "Menes talks about the Council being corrupt and inefficient, but is it the same where you work?"

Nefertari smiled. "Menes?" she echoed. "You *are* a casual creature, aren't you, Miss Liona? There are two Cascadian Lords in this room, one who is also a

Speaker. Yet you're on first-name basis with both." Nefertari leaned forward slightly, resting her chin on her palm. "You're a curious demon, did you know that?"

"Maybe," Amelia shot back, undeterred. "And I'm not a creature. I'm Lia. Nothing more, nothing less! You can call me Lia, if you want. Hey..." Amelia put her skewer down and flashed a top-tier let's-be-friends smile. "Can I call you Nefertari?"

Nefertari blinked slowly. "...You may," she said slyly, the corner of her mouth rising. "Both of you may. In politics, the more friends you have, the better, Lia. I have a feeling we'll meet again. The Liona family are unfamiliar to me, but must be well-connected in Noheim."

"Why do you say that?" Amelia asked.

"Because their daughter is sitting at a table with two Lords as if she's having afternoon tea. I heard the Hellfire Captain ran a harsh ship." Nefertari flicked her gaze to Serena. "A proper warship, full of battle-hardened warriors that dared not put a step out of line. Yet you seem comfortable and casual next to her, in a position where so many others would quake."

"My exploits are exaggerated," Serena said, placing her skewer down. She intertwined her fingers and continued, "I prefer earning respect, rather than taking it through fear. My crew follow my every command because they are loyal, not because they are scared of me."

"Spoken like a true Imperial captain," Nefertari mused. "Although, please don't misunderstand, Speaker Halen. I'm well aware of the exaggerations. Once you took Port Highwind, your name and face were plastered on every broadsheet in Centralis for weeks. That was when all kinds of interesting rumours circulated."

"Such as?" Serena asked.

"That you were first to land, and Spoke your Word, splitting the island in two."

Serena laughed politely. "My *Narean* isn't quite enough to split an island, I'm afraid. I'm not the Empress."

"Of course." Nefertari returned her own polite laugh. "Everyone who told the tale added their own flair to it. But, if I may ask, is there any truth to the rumour that

you fought and won against an enemy Speaker, in a ferocious battle to the death?”

“Who knows?” Serena replied without missing a beat.

*Is that how they covered up Korvus’ mutiny?* Amelia thought.

“Well, as I see you here and now, I can see it as an unlikely event,” Nefertari said.

“Why’s that?”

“I heard some foolish voices whisper that you were gravely injured, but I can see that one at least is false. Looking at you now, I see you are complete, in both mind and body.” Nefertari looked down at the table, where she very slowly and deliberately tapped the table’s surface once, twice, and then thrice. Returning her gaze to Serena, she said, “In fact, I can’t help but note how youthful your appearance is, Speaker Halen. Given your age of thirty—”

“Do you have a point to make, Nefertari Bastet?” Serena asked, the faintest hint of annoyance in her voice. Amelia could see Menes open his mouth to say something before reconsidering his life choices and closing it.

“A question, not a point, Speaker Halen,” Nefertari retorted.

“Then ask.”

“Is your healthy appearance a result of the healing magic of House Halen’s recently hired advisor?” Nefertari’s expression darkened slightly. “The human they call Amelia Thornheart?”

*Ah, Amelia thought. This is awkward.*

“Yes,” Serena answered. “It is.”

“Ah, I’m envious,” Nefertari said, her voice taking on a layered tone. “A woman’s envy, that is. Well...” She trailed off, once again slowly tapping the marble table. “Demonkind has no gods of healing,” she said, “so I don’t think Tamerlane can complain much if we have a single healer of his, can he?” Nefertari smiled and leaned back slightly. “And what a healer she is, Speaker Halen. I exited Parliament one day to see the sky full of ships. All travelling to the East, to Asamaywa, no less. But even then”—her gaze flicked to Amelia—“I could never have predicted

how large-scale her healing would be. I dare say it was bigger than the healing events Christdom puts on. Our Empire has changed, hasn't it?"

"...Yes," Serena said. "It has."

A second silence blanketed the room. Amelia, not knowing what to think, set about rebuilding her skewer, sliding slices of amberfigs and moonpears in between the remaining chunks of burrowsnatcher meat. She tried her best to focus on her food, but the urge that was building within her could not be ignored. She really tried, relying on her mental power that had withstood a rushed *Asclepius* embodiment, the mental power that had called upon *Suijin* and pacified an inferno, the mental power that worked so hard to come up with new ways to make Serena blush.

She tried, she really did.

But the urge was greater. It ballooned up her throat, filling her mouth and puppeteering her tongue. She tried to stop it by taking a big bite of her food, but it only delayed the inevitable. Feeling the urge about to explode, Amelia caught Nefertari's attention.

Then, like an arcwhale breaching through a cloudwall, the question was asked.

"So what's your opinion on Amelia Thornheart?" she chirped at the Southerner.

Serena made a strange noise. Amelia sensed her girlfriend turn and look at her. Determined not to be glared at, Amelia kept her gaze on Nefertari.

"My opinion?" the demon asked. "That's a difficult question to answer, Lia Liona. Are you asking for an answer given as a representative of the South? Or are you asking my personal opinion, as Nefertari Bastet, wife and mother?"

"Uh, your personal opinion, I guess," Amelia said, taking a bite of her skewer. She already knew roughly how grumpy the Southern delegation was officially. That was okay, she understood that they hadn't yet come to appreciate how cute and powerful she was, but that would come with time. What she didn't know was what their personal, behind-closed-doors opinion was.

"Even if you ask that," Nefertari began, "how could I answer honestly when the human is a valued advisor of House Halen? I fear I might cause..." Nefertari tapped the table thrice. "Tensions."

"Feel free to speak candidly, Nefertari Bastet," Serena said. "I know Lord-Prospect Thornheart isn't as popular in the South as she may be elsewhere."

"Candidly?" Nefertari's smile deepened. "I'm afraid I would be more *blunt* than *candid*, Speaker Halen."

"Speaking bluntly is fine, too."

"Ah, my *sayyidah*," Menes said quickly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Is there really—"

"I'm curious, Menes," Serena said, her voice tactfully sweet. "I understand she's been a topic of discussion in Parliament. So I'd like to know, what are your thoughts now, in private, Nefertari?"

"Well..." Nefertari's smile widened even further, manifesting into something between a predator's taunt and amusement. "As lovely as our precious new saint's demonitarian aid has been, especially regarding the Asamaywa fire..." Nefertari sighed. "Every parliamentary session since she's appeared has almost been all-out war between the Terra Firms. Without Honora there, we would rip each other apart."

"W-who's Honora?" Amelia asked.

"Honora Duguie. The Serjeant-at-Arms. Famous Speaker," Serena replied before Nefertari could. "She maintains order in the House." Serena reached out slightly, tapping the table in a manner mirroring Nefertari's habit. "You're holding out, Nefertari Bastet. A natural politician, it seems. Where's that Southern bluntness?"

"Since you're asking so strongly..." Nefertari responded with her own table taps.

"Let me say this. I hope the *Golden Healer* one day knows just how many sleepless nights she's given me and my colleagues. I hope she's aware of how much turmoil she's thrown the *Tasalsul* into. I hope she understands how much she's embarrassed the pride of the South by invoking *Suijin*. Bah!" Nefertari waved her hand. "Honestly, I have a good mind to go over to Asamaywa myself

and twist her horns! Oh, that's right, she doesn't have any because suddenly half the Empire revolves around the whims of a *human*!"

Amelia shrank back into her chair.

Nefertari squeezed her knife. "Since I'm speaking bluntly, Speaker Halen, let me also say this. I don't hate the human, not one bit. How can I hate someone who's saved the lives of so many demons? But, by the Empress and the Moons, if she were *here right now*, I wouldn't know whether I should *thank* her or *stab* her! No, wait, first I'd demand she heal *me*. Not to look or feel younger, but to get rid of the handprints on my horns! Look!" Nefertari tilted her head, tapping her elegant antelope-like horns. "Look at the stress I'm under! All because of her!"

Amelia immediately regretted not spending her first day in Ishaq learning how to enter the Shimmer. If she had, then she could vanish this very moment and escape.

"Miss Liona."

"Yes!" Amelia squeaked. "Sorry!"

"No need to apologise," Nefertari said with a snort. "I only wanted to ask if you had the *honour*"—the grip on the knife tightened—"of encountering our new saint at the academy? I heard she was attending last term there as both a teaching assistant and student. Did your... paths cross?"

"I... I didn't have the pleasure," Amelia said, doing her best to keep her voice even. "I was occupied with other things."

"I see. Well, considering how *close* you and Speaker Halen are, I would presume you will eventually bump into each other. When you do, could you tell our precious saint something? For me?" Nefertari's expression darkened, and her smile, while wide, didn't quite reach the corners of her eyes. "I could never darken the tongue of Speaker Halen with this request, so you'll have to do."

"Tell her... what?"

The demon spoke, and Amelia was pretty sure that some part of her died that day. All she remembered was the mixture of shock at what came out of the

Southerner's mouth, respect towards Nefertari for having the gall to say it, and a level of amused frustration at her girlfriend.

For laughing.