

As their carriage trundled through the aetherlit streets towards House Halen's estate, Serena decided to give Amelia some much-deserved praise.

"You handled that well," she said as a conversation starter.

It was a blessing that her canonisation had gone so smoothly. Amelia was, after all, a trouble magnet. Any significant event involving her had a fifty-fifty chance to either go to plan or have Amelia's *amelianess* cause a storm of horn-clutching chaos.

"Ha!" Amelia replied with a wild grin. "Are you kidding? I was so conscious of my feet when I was walking down that carpet! I kept thinking of what happened during the award ceremony!" Amelia buried her face in her hands, letting out a rather unladylike groan. "If I don't think about it, everyone will eventually forget, right!?"

"Of course," Serena's father affirmed.

Not a chance, Serena thought.

"Serena speaks the truth," her father continued. "You handled it extremely well. Of all the witnesses to your canonisation, I imagine many of them had all kinds of expectations of a *living saint*. I don't think it's outrageous to say that you exceeded those expectations, Amelia."

"Really?" Amelia peeked out from behind her hands.

"Yes," he said with a serious nod. "The moment you appeared, it was like a spell was cast upon the room! No one could take their eyes off you! I fear the Church will regret the choice not to take photographs. They'll want you to appear in that uniform again."

"Heh," Amelia said, scratching her neck. "Maybe… If they pay me enough!"

At Amelia's words, Serena's father awkwardly coughed.

Serena laughed.

"I hope the Church is prepared," Serena said, flashing Amelia a playful grin. "I doubt they fully understand the bundle of chaos they've brought into their fold!"

"Hey!" Amelia protested, puffing out her cheeks. "From my point of view, *you're* the one who's always nearby when things go tits up! Ah…" Amelia covered her mouth, casting a glance towards Serena's father. "That wasn't very saint-like, was it? Oh!" She pointed at the window. "We're here already!"

Despite Amelia's naked attempt at changing the subject, her observation was spot on. The carriage passed through the estate's gatehouse and, within seconds, was parked in front of House Halen's estate. Serena heard the crunching of boots walking over gravel before the carriage door was opened by her father's butler, Johan.

Serena peered out past his shoulder. Behind the butler stood a familiar grumpy face. Serena's grandmother. She was gripping her walking stick with shivering hands and looked rather unhappy.

"Hurry up!" she barked. "How much longer will you force me to stay out in this blasted cold!" The walking stick was jabbed into the floor several times in annoyance. "Hurry up! Let me see my favourite granddaughter!"

"Grandmother!" Serena exclaimed. "Thank you, Johan," she said quietly, taking the reliable old butler's hand as she climbed down. Serena approached the elderly demon and said, "Don't let Lani hear you call me your favourite. She'll throw a tantrum!"

"Bah!" The old demon scoffed. "She wouldn't dare, not in front of me or her mother! It's because of young Dalinar over there!" She raised her walking stick, jabbing it toward Serena's father. "If he didn't spoil her so much, she wouldn't be so immature!"

"Hello, Sachiko," Serena's father intoned, stepping down from the carriage. He took off his overcoat and wrapped the cold, complaining demon in it. He turned towards Johan. "I'm guessing she insisted on coming out here?"

"Yes, Highlord," Johan said politely. "I warned her about the weather, but she still refused to take a coat. She claimed…" Johan frowned slightly. "That she survived much harsher winters before."

Serena's father sighed. "Sachiko, you must be more careful. You're not young any more! You need to look after your body and save your strength!"

"Ha!" Serena's grandmother laughed. "If you weren't a Highlord, I'd show you how much strength this old body and its walking stick have!" She turned towards Serena, clicking her tongue. "Look how improper he is - calling a woman like me *old!* Tsk! Anyway, dear…" She placed a wrinkled hand on Serena's shoulder. "Congratulations on your Golden Horn. Despite young Dalinar's best efforts, you and Nina continue to bring prestige and honour to this house!"

"Thank you, Grandmother," Serena said, glancing at her father, who was rolling his eyes.

Grandmother had never fully approved of House Halen's activities in the war. Sachiko Halen came from a generation where producing munitions was considered a lesser vocation, whereas farming and academics were held in high regard. Of course, after decades of steam-powered and ship-assisted Wilderness clearing, the East now produced more food than it consumed, selling the excess to Centralis. This immense food production meant farming was often thrown in as a *lowland* vocation and not given the appreciation it had previously held for centuries.

"I wasn't the only recipient," Serena began, looking back.

As if on cue, Amelia appeared. "Hello, Grandma!" Amelia chirped. "How have you been!?" She gave Serena's grandmother a deep bow before adding, "You shouldn't have come out when it's so cold!"

"G-grandma?" Both Serena's father and grandmother stuttered.

"Amelia also received a Golden Horn, Grandmother," Serena continued as if nothing had happened. At this point, she had moderate resistance against Amelia's outbursts of… Amelia. "I wouldn't have been able to save so many people without her spellwork."

"Ahem!" Serena's grandmother cleared her throat. "Well, of course! I would expect those you associate with to be exceptional, even if they are only human! Besides…" Her eyes narrowed slightly as she examined Amelia. "I said she'd do, didn't I? Although I wish you could have brought a nice man home instead!"

"Grandmother!" Serena complained.

"Sachiko…" her father mumbled.

"What!?" the old demon exclaimed, raising her hand to her ear. "I can't hear you if you mumble!" She tapped the floor with her walking stick. "I stand by what I said! I want to hold some great-grandchildren before I die! I want to see some softhorns running around the house! See some snotty noses and hear some blubbering cries! I'm not staying alive just to spite you, am I!?"

"Could have fooled me…" her father said quietly.

"I heard that!" her grandmother protested, waving the walking stick. "I'm not deaf! Besides…" She lowered her impromptu weapon and turned her attention back towards Serena. "If you or Nina don't have children, then Lani will beat you to it! And I just know she'll spoil *her* softhorns every bit as much as your father spoiled *her*!"

"May the moons fall upon me and put me out of my misery…" Serena's father muttered, his face suddenly showing an expression of resignation. Serena

couldn't help but smile at their bickering. Despite first appearances, she knew her grandmother's horns were still as sharp as ever. Sachiko Halen was one of the few people who could put Serena's mother in her place.

"Greatlady Oshiro is with Highlady Halen and Young Lady Lani in the eastern reception room," Johan said before Serena's grandmother could retort. "I fear keeping them waiting any longer may be inappropriate, Highlord."

"Yes, Johan. Thank you." Serena's father sniffed, adjusted his uniform, and then led everyone into the house and through the brightly-lit hallways. The house was unnaturally warm. When Serena questioned it, her father explained, "We had underfloor heating put in while you were away." He pointed to the floor. "Copper coils run under the floor, with an aether switch and red moon crystal every metre. They're connected to these rotary switches here." He pointed at the wall where a crystal switch sat.

"Impressive," Serena admitted. Now that she knew where to look, she could perceive the aetherflow running underneath their feet. "Expensive?" she asked. Red crystal had been going at a premium for years, and acquiring it for purposes not related to the war effort carried a heavy cost.

"Not with our contracts," Serena's father replied, looking over his shoulder. "Right, best behaviour. Let's give a good impression to Greatlady Oshiro."

They entered the reception room. Serena saw her mother entertaining Greatlord Oshiro's wife, Ashina Oshiro, along with Lani who was doing her best not to look bored. Half a dozen of House Halen's employees formed a ring around the room, ready to step in with refreshments at a moment's notice.

"Dalinar!" Ashina called out, her refined voice carrying a melodic quality that was pleasing to listen to. "Michiko was just telling me how much time you've been spending down in Shimashina! A good husband must make time for their wife!" Ashina turned towards Serena's mother, saying, "Honestly, I'm half-tempted to storm into Vikram's office and tell him to give Takahiro some time off! Every week, he has to travel somewhere new!"

"It's a pleasure to host you, Greatlady Oshiro," her father said with a bow. "I'm sure every minute away from you brings pain to Greatlord Oshiro's heart. He was only recently complaining about having to take another trip, so I'm confident he shares your frustration."

"Look!" Ashina said, waving her hand playfully. "Look how the men protect each other! What are we poor wives to do, Michiko!?" Before Serena's mother could answer, Ashina turned her attention towards Amelia and asked, "Don't you

think women are more trustworthy, Amelia? Come sit here, dear." She patted the couch next to her.

"Okay!" Amelia nodded. She curtsied politely before making her way over to the couch. "Hello everyone!" Amelia exclaimed, giving Lani a small wave as she sat down. "It's nice to meet-" Amelia was interrupted by something. Serena saw her eyes widen and her pupils dilate. Serena followed her girlfriend's gaze to see what had caused Amelia to look at something in a similar manner to how she looked at Serena.

Ah, of course.

"That's *Poro*!" Lani explained, seemingly happy to contribute. "He's an Ainese Shorthair! He costs over three hundred denarii, but he doesn't like playing with me!" Lani pouted. "He scratched me once, so be careful!"

"He's so…" Amelia's eyes flashed dangerously. "Cute! Poro! Come here! Psst psst!"

Serena resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She sat down opposite Amelia, saying, "He has a temper. Perhaps now isn't the best time…" she trailed off, hoping Amelia would understand that playing with the house *peeka* could wait until Amelia wasn't sitting next to *Greatlady Oshiro*.

"Nonsense!" Amelia exclaimed. "Poro!"

Poro lifted his head.

"Meow?"

"Come on!" Amelia clicked her fingers.

To Serena's shock, Poro, the grumpy peeka that never let anyone stroke him without exchanging a few bites and scratches, jumped down from where he was curled up, bounced across the floor, and, after only a moment of hesitation, jumped up into Amelia's lap! Then he began to purr as loud as a lift engine before kneading his front feet in circles and rubbing his neck against Amelia's hands.

"He likes me!" Amelia said happily.

"Wow…" Lani mumbled.

Serena wasn't as vocal but shared her little sister's surprise. Poro the peeka, or as Lani sometimes called him, *Poro The Terrible*, had never shown as much affection as he was doing right now!

Honestly… did Amelia have to make friends with *everything* she came across?

"You're an animal lover?" Ashina asked, her voice devoid of any annoyance at Amelia's impoliteness. The greatlady raised a hand towards Poro, quickly

withdrawing it when he tried to swipe her. “It seems only you have a talent for the felines, Amelia,” Ashina said, pouting slightly at her rejection.

“Poro! Behave!” Amelia chastised the peeka, who eventually settled down after having his ears scratched. The peeka curled up, burrowing its nose between its two tails, and fell asleep while still purring loudly. “Sorry,” Amelia said sheepishly. “I love cats-” Amelia coughed quickly. “I mean, I love peekas. Serena won’t let me take one on the ship!”

“Is that so?” Ashina said with a gentle smile before turning her attention to Serena. “Why not? I would have thought the presence of a peeka might do wonders for ship morale?”

“I fear it would be too distracting, Greatlady,” Serena explained carefully, glancing at Poro. She decided not to mention that the other reason was selfish. While they were sailing, she and Amelia had separate hammocks, and if she couldn’t sleep with Amelia, then she sure as hell wasn’t going to let a *peeka* replace her!

“They make good rat-catchers,” Amelia said, grinning while giving Poro scritches.

“There are no *rats* on my ship,” Serena countered. She’d heard stories about waterborne ships having problems with vermin. They climbed the ropes while the watership was tethered to the dock. Luckily, regular ships like the *Vengeance* didn’t have that problem. Imperial docks were too well guarded to let any rats slip up the gangway.

“I wanted a Luscan,” Lani explained to Amelia, “but Mother wouldn’t let me!”

“Mother didn’t let you”—Serena’s mother glared at Lani—“because they’re one of the largest breeds and are known for getting into all kinds of trouble. Luscans are more likely to get themselves stranded on some passing island than act homely!” The demon turned to Greatlady Oshiro with an apologetic expression, saying, “My apologies, Greatlady.”

“None needed,” Ashina declared cheerfully. She clapped her hands. “Sachiko! Come and sit down and have some mint tea! I was worried about you being out there in the cold!”

Serena’s grandmother grumbled something that sounded like appreciation before sitting down in a soft chair. An attendant brought over a cup of steaming tea, which Serena’s grandmother greedily snatched. After huffing and puffing about it being too hot, she eventually stopped complaining.

“I must offer my congratulations,” Ashina said. “For the Golden Horns that you were both awarded. So many lives were saved because of you two! It was a *dreadful* fire, was it not? You could feel the heat of it from our estate! Ash covered our lawn! I can’t imagine what it was like in the centre of that inferno!” Ashina tilted her head. “On behalf of the city and its people, thank you. The Blue Moon must have blessed us to have you both staying here when the fire broke out.”

“Not a problem!” Amelia replied happily.

Serena bowed her head before saying, “We were only a small part of a much larger effort.”

“Of course,” Ashina waved a hand. “But credit must be given where it is due, don’t you think? Besides, everyone’s contribution falls flat compared to that mysterious *Suijin* Speaker, doesn’t it!?” Ashina leaned forward. “Have you seen the photographs? What an ethereal and beautiful embodiment! Did you notice its feminine figure? Doesn’t that mean the one who invoked the lost water god was a *woman*?”

Serena was looking at Ashina, but out of her peripheral vision she saw Amelia’s hand freeze momentarily before continuing to stroke Poro’s neck. The greatlady seemed not to have noticed. Serena quickly said, “It was a truly magnificent sight. I heard rumours that the Overlord himself made the decision to reveal the communion in order to save the station.”

“Ah, you only know rumours? I was hoping you or Amelia might know who it was,” Ashina said, her voice tinged with disappointment. “I was told you were both near the location of the embodiment, so I thought you might have seen *something*.”

“A wall of thick smoke surrounded us, Greatlady,” Serena said, trying to keep her voice even. “We could barely see in front of our own noses.”

“Even so,” Ashina said, a teasing smile appearing on her face. “It must have required someone capable of cycling a *tremendous* amount of aether, wouldn’t it?” She raised a delicate finger to her chin as if in thought. “There aren’t many people known for their large aether capacity. Isn’t there a…” She frowned momentarily before continuing, “A *Lord Inoue* at the academy? Wasn’t she famous for her talents in cycling large amounts of aether?”

“It can’t have been her, Ashina,” Serena’s mother interjected. “Lunaria Inoue was seen all night helping with the earthworks to protect the lifts. Unless it was an illusion, it must have been someone else.”

“Ah, is that so…” Ashina smiled, turning towards Amelia. “What do you think, Amelia? You’re a talented Speaker. I’ve been told you invoked *Taranis* a while ago. He’s an elusive Word now, considering how much *aether* is needed to commune with him. Do you have any idea about the identity of *Suijin’s* Speaker? I would have hoped your perception would have identified them, given how *close* you must have been!”

She’s fishing, Serena thought. *She suspects it was Amelia but isn’t sure*.

Serena knew Greatlord Oshiro was not the type of man to spill Empire secrets to his wife, but she also knew Ashina Oshiro didn’t become his wife for any lack of shrewdness. Greatlord Oshiro and everyone else in the square had signed vows of secrecy regarding the matter. No matter how much Ashina Oshiro pushed, they couldn’t tell her anything.

Which was something Serena suspected the greatlady had thought of.

“Hehe,” Amelia smiled awkwardly. She raised a finger and rubbed her cheek. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve only been in the East a short while and haven’t yet memorised all the significant mages. I was preoccupied with healing, you see? It must have been a powerful *demon,* though. Don’t you think? Are we sure it wasn’t the Overlord himself? I’ve heard he wasn’t seen during the fire.”

Ashina sighed. “Sadly, Vikram was photographed in Centralis at the time.” The greatlady sipped her tea before dejectedly saying, “I suppose not all mysteries have to be answered. Although…” Her eyes shone with sudden enthusiasm. “You must tell me about Katalin of Driss! She’s refused all my invitations! I was *this* close to storming into the academy myself and dragging her out! You’ve been training with her, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, Greatlady,” Serena replied, glad of the subject change. “Highlord Driss has been teaching biweekly sessions for the academy’s instructors. Her swordsmanship is as elegant and refined as the stories say. No…” Serena paused, thinking about the time when Katalin taught them how to fight outnumbered, where the Northerner skillfully outwitted an entire class of senior warriors, all trying to swarm her. “She’s even more impressive than the stories.”

Suddenly, a memory flashed in her mind. In it, she avoided getting sand rubbed in her eyes by a dirty, sweaty, and snarling Katalin. Meanwhile, Serena did her best to slap the Northerner into submission with her hellfire tail.

Serena gave herself a mental slap. If she didn’t think about it then it didn’t happen, right?

“Oh my!” Ashina put her tea down, leaning forward with excitement. “And what about her looks? Is she as beautiful as the Northern Lords claim? Is her hair the colour of fire and her eyes a shining emerald green that no man or woman can refuse?”

Serena smiled at the naked eagerness of the greatlady. “Her hair might not reach the colour of fire, but she nevertheless carries a sharp and refined beauty that would satisfy any man. Although, I fear the poetics of her potential suitors may have led you astray. Katalin’s eyes are purple, not green.”

“Hmm,” Ashina hummed. “I’m certain I heard about her green eyes from Greatlord Driss himself. You would think a man would know what his own daughter looks like, wouldn’t you?”

“Perhaps she is using a *Kanaxai* glamour, Greatlady,” Serena said. It was a plausible explanation, but Serena knew it wasn’t true. Even under the heightened perception of *Narean,* Serena hadn’t detected anything unusual regarding Katalin’s appearance. Still, she didn’t want to argue with *Ashina Oshiro* over such a minor detail. “Or perhaps, like Amelia, her eye colour is the result of her magic?”

The greatlady no doubt knew Amelia Spoke *Asclepius* and would understand that was what Serena meant by *magic*. With that thought in mind… perhaps Katalin’s purple eyes resulted from that mysterious word *Alinyah?*

No… that didn’t make sense. Katalin’s eyes had become a brilliant blue when she Spoke *Alinyah*. It didn’t match it would give her *purple* eyes. Maybe it was the result of a different Word? Was it possible Katalin was a Second-Word Speaker? As much as that seemed outrageous for someone as young as the Northerner, Serena couldn't refuse the possibility after seeing her skill with the blade.

After all, Amelia existed, didn’t she?

Just as the conversation reached a natural lull, a house employee announced that the food was ready. Everyone stood up and made their way to the dining table. Serena, and she suspected everyone else, did their best to ignore all the peeka hair clinging to Amelia’s clothing.

It was strange. Ignoring a *Greatlady* to play with a *peeka* would normally be a catastrophic failure of etiquette that could be fatal to the reputation of a newly-formed house. Yet somehow, Amelia had once again gotten away with being Amelia.

Their dinner was a traditional Samino multi-dish meal. They each went through a dozen different dishes, ranging from small appetisers to artistically arranged cuts of fish and meat that had been steamed, fried, and sometimes flame-grilled.

In between meats, they had a light palate-cleanser soup or a vegetable dish. They then had steamed sardis for the penultimate dish, the aroma of which made everyone's mouth water. Finally, they finished with a frozen sugarfruit dessert.

Apart from the mid-meal drama where Amelia and Lani were caught passing bits of fish under the table to Poro who had somehow snuck in, the meal passed with no further prodding from Ashina regarding the secret identity of *Suijin's* Speaker.

"Your chefs are incredible," Ashina announced after the dishes had been cleared and replaced with glasses of blue loqua. "If we had room in our estate, I wouldn't be able to resist stealing them!"

"I will pass on your compliments, Greatlady," Serena's father said, bowing his head.

"And Amelia, my dear. You *must* come and meet my friends! They're dying to meet you! Some have been sending invitations, and your lack of an answer has been most upsetting! We've been placing bets on who will be accepted first!"

"I've tried to answer them all!" Amelia explained. "But… I get so many and it takes up so much time writing a polite refusal every time…"

At her words, Ashina laughed. "Yes, I imagine you must be receiving quite a lot of letters. I understand you're leaving the East soon, but you can't avoid high society forever, Amelia! At some point, you'll have to embrace the delicious food and womanly gossip!" The greatlady took a sip of her loqua and continued, "When you return, I'll be insisting on you attending an event at our estate. Don't think about refusing! I'll make Takahiro order you to come if I have to!"

"Umm… thank you?" Amelia said, smiling awkwardly.

"You're welcome," Ashina said, lightly tapping the side of her glass. "Besides, we might meet sooner than you think. You may only be a Lord-Prospect, but if the rumours I've heard hold true, you'll be receiving an invitation to the Cellian Golden Ball!"

At Ashina's words, Serena felt her eyes widen. She wasn't the only one in shock. "Surely you jest, Ashina!" her mother exclaimed. "They wouldn't do that!"

"What's the Cellian Golden Ball?" Amelia asked innocently.

Ashina coughed into her glass. Serena, who was used to Amelia asking about gaps in her knowledge, quickly explained, "The Cellian Golden Ball is the most prestigious gathering of Cascadian Lords in the Empire. Invitations are generally only given to Highlords and above, with only a few going to exceptional Lords

whom the Empress wants to show recognition. A Lord-Prospect has never been invited. At least, not to my knowledge."

"Never," Ashina added, padding her mouth delicately with a tissue. "Which begs the question: Will the invitation read *Lord-Prospect Thornheart,* or will it read *Lord Thornheart*? Who knows, you might break a record for the shortest time of having Vikram sanction full Cascadian Lordship upon someone!"

"Ugh," Amelia sighed. "Sounds like a bother…"

Serena's grandmother cackled while her mother and Ashina looked mortified.

"That's the spirit!" Serena's grandmother exclaimed. "Young Thornheart here has more *grit* in her little finger than most Lords do today! The standards are dropping, I tell you! Back in my day, you had to *earn* a lordship! You-"

"Yes, thank you, Mother," Serena's mother interrupted.

"Just giving my opinion," mumbled the elderly demon before reaching out and pouring herself some more loqua.

"Well," Ashina intoned, her usual smile returning. "Now I'm *definitely* looking forward to the event. I hope the rumours turn out to be true! Remember, Amelia," Ashina said, raising a finger. "The invitation, despite its nature as an invitation, is *not* optional. Each one is signed by the Empress herself."

"Ah…" Amelia rubbed her nose. "So I'll need a good excuse? Maybe I'll accidentally drop it off the ship's side or something when we're getting shot at."

Serena couldn't help but laugh at the sight of the astonished faces of her mother and Greatlady Oshiro. Once again, her resistance against Amelia's casual outbursts had saved her.

It was refreshing to see someone else experience the chaos instead.

This is what I have to live with, Serena thought, taking a sip of loqua. Despite her thoughts, she wasn't complaining.

For she couldn't imagine living any other way.

Not since she fell in love.