

Chapter 6:

Sanguine:

The sun beat down hard over the vast sands with the glaring heat of dragonfire. Like they were ants under the magnifying glass of some crazy, mad sorcerer, the two dragons trudged over the endless sheet of shimmering granules. Sanguine's furry coat had never been made for the heat, nor had his clawed paws been adapted for the shifting surface under him. Every time he took a step, half a dune would slide out in a melting slew of sand, while loose rocks and boulders rolled free.

This is why I only ever travel out here at night. He internally scolded himself for having ventured out into the middle of nowhere, peering at the clear, blue sky. *Any patrol is going to see us from miles away.*

He almost wished he was back in the river, at least there things had been cooler. No matter how deadly the turbulent waters may be. Yet out here it was as if he would boil alive before so much as reaching their destination. He had been assured it was not far, yet looking at his guide he could only hide his simmering discontent behind a scowl.

Easy for the shapeshifter to say, it's not a problem crossing the desert when you can adapt to it! He thought bitterly, almost envious of the drake's powers. *How in the night's name did I end up saddled with someone like this!?*

The shapeshifter had no issue with the sweltering environment. Xeno took every step through the shifting sands in stride. Their dark form had been adapted into a silvery-tan creature, with large, plated scales, and a spiny tail. They bore no wings since the prince had told them they couldn't fly, instead boasting a sharp set of dorsal spikes and a narrow fin. Their claws had morphed to distribute their weight in the sand, while their eyes shunned the gleam from the sun as they panned across the blurred horizon. Heat seemed to ripple from their whole body, shimmering across the pale plates like steam from warm water as they effortlessly pranced across the dunes.

"Urg, how much further is it?" Sanguine groaned dryly. "You said the entrance was right next to the river?"

Xeno perked up, fins ruffling as sand was shaken free of their many plates. Then they glanced back curiously.

“Correction, I said it might be near the river, the tunnels are always shifting,” they reiterated, same as the past two times Sanguine had complained. “And trust me, you want to go down the right one. One wrong turn down there and you’ll regret it.”

“I regret being out here already!” the prince exclaimed through his exertions. “I am hot, up to my ears in sand, and every guard my sister so much as sends out on a stroll is going to spot us!”

Xeno blinked at the prince, cocked their head, then rolled their emerald eyes. Like some kind of oversized rattlesnake, their plated spines quivered. Sanguine imagined it was a sign of frustration from the thing’s desert form, but he hardly cared as he scowled at them.

“What, going to pull some witty retort out from under your tail to tell me I’m wrong?” he spat with a huff, wings ruffling as his sandy ears folded. “I can’t wait to hear it.”

It was odd to see the shape shifter’s normal two sets of eyes roll in place of four for the second time, but Xeno huffed right back.

“Will you just relax, the sands out here move all the time, there’s no point of reference, there’s no way they can find us,” the drake assured, marching on down a set of dunes.

“You seriously underestimate how tenacious my sister can be,” Sanguine muttered, carefully placing one paw after the other as he cautiously followed.

The dry surface shifted like water under him, paws sinking deep before it slumped out like fresh snow. Like a lazy avalanche, the dune gave way. He flared his wings, yelping in alarm. Yet it was too late, and like a dusty snowball, he rolled down the vast mountain of sand. The world passed by in a dusty flurry, half blistering orange, half pale blue sky as he tumbled, landing with a hard thud against a relatively stable surface. It cracked under him like a dry river bed, pressing against his muzzle with a sour scent. He wasn’t sure whether it was his sweat, or the blistering white plates pressed to his prone muzzle, but something suddenly tasted very salty.

I’m really, really starting to hate this stupid desert. He huffed, peering out across the vast expanse of white plates as Xeno casually trotted down beside him. *So easy for some, night curse shapeshifters!*

“You alright?” the disguised insect asked, peering down at the prince with a sideways stare. “I wouldn’t recommend licking the salt pans, plenty of folks died on them.”

“Oh, I wonder why!?” the prince growled, uncoiling from the heap he’d fallen into, staggering to his paws, and shaking off the sour, white grains. “This place just keeps getting better and better.”

“Just be glad there are no Sand Maws about. With all the blundering you’re doing, they’d snap you up in a second,” the shapeshifter muttered, casually moving on over the salty lake bed.

“Now you mention that? Good to know,” the prince deadpanned, making sure his next set of steps was particularly soft as he followed his guide.

The sea of cracked white plates shimmered like fresh snow while a ripple of heat rose from the distant horizon. Rocks lingered about them like withered skeletons, coated in sickly ivory and yellow residue. They were nothing compared to the actual bones themselves, there were thousands, many those of dragons, griffins, and other such creatures. That was only counting the small ones, there were towering walls of ribs comparable to the bulwarks of great forts, while skulls that could easily be lived in still clung to salty strands of sinew. As if petrified in a thousand-year state of decay, salt covered every inch of the things. Fangs and claws the size of trees rose up either side of them as Xeno led him right through the center of a particularly large draconic skull, winding down a ragged path that followed its spine at the opposite end.

Someone had crafted a flimsy walkway of wooden planks and struts, crudely tied around the monstrous vertebra with rope. The whole thing had been encrusted in salty grime, creaking under their weight as pale dust trailed free. Once again, Xeno made the trek look effortless, while Sanguine was caught battling to stay on balance.

Night curse whoever built this, the least they could have done is install a railing! It felt odd to wish for such a thing, winged beasts were not so bothered about falling all too often.

Yet from the looks of the bones scattered about, there had not only been winged creatures here. Not only that, but the further they made their way along the long-dead titan’s spine, the more other structures came into view. Rounded huts crafted from withered bamboo and animal hide were tethered to the side of leg bones and within the empty eye sockets of skulls. Rickety bridges spanned the gaps between them, still plucked at by carrion vultures and silvery lizards. The petrified city stretched out to the horizon, where grounded ships still lingered, as if floating on the mirage that shimmered below the sky.

The prince had to blink several times, first to ward off the glare of the sun, then to confirm he wasn’t actually looking at a distant ocean. The thought of water had him

licking his cracked lips, even as salty as they were. Yet as Xeno swiped crusty bones from the walkway ahead, it was pretty obvious there had not been a drop of liquid spilled here in decades. Therefore, Sanguine asked the only thing that had been plaguing his mind for the past day.

“Okay, this is getting ridiculous, you said the city was under the sands, not in the middle of a salty death trap!” he spat, adding. “Just how far is it now!?”

Xeno’s head perked as the shapeshifter glanced back and sighed. “I wasn’t talking about *this* place, this was all just a staging area for the thieves guild back in the day.”

“Heck of a place to set up shop,” the prince muttered, as the two trudged on. “What in the night’s name happened here?”

“The oceans dried up a long time ago, bones are all that’s left,” Xeno elaborated, shoving aside more skeletons. “They say this whole place was underwater once.”

“What I wouldn’t give for some of that water right now,” Sanguine hissed under his breath, scowling at the very hydrated-looking bug. “You make it look easy.”

“You don’t go living out here for years without learning how to cope with the heat,” Xeno muttered, spines and fins quivering. “It’s not far now though, look.”

They nodded out over the salty expanse. The passageway had wound up around one of the titan’s ribs allowing a vast view over the shimmering plane. Just below, no more than a short walk from the bony settlement, was an island of orange rock. Surely once a small dot of land in the middle of the vast lake, the thing had almost sunken down into the salt with everything else, little more than a small ridge in the vast desert. Upon its tallest point, like an oasis carried on the back of some half-buried beast, were the smooth walls of a ruined temple. It was coated in sand and salt, yet was also the first bit of truly solid ground Sanguine had seen in days.

It felt strange for a dragon to feel so thrilled at the sight of hard ground, but the prince dashed right to the edge of the walkway regardless. He spread his wings, only to be caught by Xeno as the whole thing creaked under him.

“I thought you said no flying,” the shapeshifter asked, but right now the prince hardly cared.

“What, it’s only a short glide away, we can risk that,” he reasoned, then tapped a claw on the walkway. “Better than this shabby old thing.”

“Don’t be silly, this thing’s perfectly safe,” Xeno responded, doing a dance along the walkway, stomping a foreclaw, and glancing back with a smirk.

Sanguine frowned at them, only for Xeno’s smug look to be sucked away as the shapeshifter fell through the flimsy wood. It was only a second later that the prince realized the drake had fallen while in a form that couldn’t fly. Without a second thought, he dove from the platform, causing more of the salty mess to snap away with a hard twang as he plummeted after his guide. The hot air made it hard to fly, the spires of bone jutting up all around him not helping as he reached Xeno and yelled.

“Can’t you just change!?” The bug merely shrieked in alarm as the two of them were struck by another walkway, ropes going taught, before snapping with a sharp crack.

Sanguine did all he could to pull away, only for the tangle of salty chords to snag his wings, as the two of them rolled in the air and struck the smooth side of a towering rib. The vast bone crunched under them as it listed, salty grime shattering like glass as the two rolled down the petrified slope in a dusty flurry. Finally impacting the ground hard, and bouncing to a stop in a mound of skeletons.

I see one more bone and I’m going to kill someone! Sanguine thought, rubbing the back of his head as his blurred vision spun. *I don’t have time for all this gallivanting about!*

He sat up, steadying himself as he swayed and shook off the grasping arms of long-dead humanoids. Seconds later, Xeno poked free, an avian skull perfectly placed over their head like some kind of tribal helmet.

“Well, that is one way to get down,” they muttered through their exertions, seeming a little bit thrilled despite how much they’d just been screaming.

“Yes, well, if you are done messing about, let’s just get to that tunnel,” Sanguine retorted, flicking the skull off Xeno’s head, and scowling at them. “We could have just flown there!”

“You really need to make up your mind on the whole flying thing,” Xeno muttered, shaking more bones from their back as they rattled their scales. “Besides, you’ll just sunburn your wings.”

“I think I’ll live,” Sanguine deadpanned, dragging himself out of the bony mound, only to heave the rope that was still wrapped around his wings with him. “Help me get this junk off.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t get your tail in a twist,” Xeno muttered, creeping back, only to wince at the vesper’s knotted tail.

“Ha-ha, very funny,” Sanguine grumbled, tugging rope from around his neck, then his hind legs, stretching out and shaking salt from his fur. “Just become something that can fly and free my wings, we’ll glide over to the tunnel.”

Xeno nodded, shifting to heave the ropes from the prince’s leathery limbs as he sat there and peered off into the bony city. The sun was getting lower, the afternoon was growing old. He could still see the ships and rocks sailing on the horizon upon the ghostly sea, but there was also something else in the blurry haze. Sanguine blinked, tilting his head to try and make out if the plume of pale dust was real or not. It looked for all intents and purposes, like something were chewing on the earth, grinding along like some kind of elemental storm. He cocked his head the other way, ears perking as Xeno tugged some more.

There was a very distant rumble in his twitching ears, barely audible over the soft sound of the wind. Like a churning river, only it was getting louder, and that odd illusion was getting bigger, almost as if it were coming right at the two of them. He felt the soft hum through his paws next, saw the small specks of dust start to vibrate like little jumping insects. His wings instinctively ruffled, his dry mane prickling. Causing Xeno to huff.

“Hey, stop moving,” the shapeshifter scolded, yanking one strand of rope hard. “I’ve almost got you out.”

“Sorry, sorry, just... What is that?” he asked, jabbing a forepaw at the disturbance on the hazy horizon. “It doesn’t look like a normal sandstorm.”

The disguised shapeshifter didn’t look too impressed they were being interrupted, yet craned their head up high to peer out over the desert regardless. Their sharp, adapted eyes scoured the horizon as Sanguine peered right at that oncoming storm, feeling the hum in the ground grow, as did that distant sound.

Something is wrong. The prickle of anxiety in his fur was telling enough, but he saw the movement Xeno realized just what they were looking at as the drake’s expression felt flat, and their scales lost any semblance of color. *Oh, by the night this can’t be good.*

The shapeshifter took one look at Sanguine’s knotted wings, then glanced between the grounded prince and the rocky island that was their destination. They did little more than stand, shake, and start to run as fast as they could, shouting.

“Forget your wings, just follow me as fast as you can, and don’t look back!” The bewildered prince looked at the fleeing drake, his wings, then the storm as it grew to almost engulf the horizon.

Okay, think about how you are going to kill that bug later, right now just do as they tell you! All sense of cautious curiosity was gone as the vesper sprung to his paws and started running as fast as they could carry him.

The half-length of rope still tied to his wings didn't help one bit, but running on pure adrenalin, he soon caught up with his terrified guide. Right as the oncoming storm struck the titan's rearmost ribs from below, shattering them in a shower of bony splinters as the ivory tower tilted down over them.

"Go left!" Sanguine called, shoving Xeno in the same direction as the shadow of the bony tower loomed over them and came thundering down in a shower of salty dust, right as their pursuer tore through the thing's length in another bony explosion. "What in the night's name is that thing!?"

"I told you Sand Maws were around here!" Xeno called, and Sanguine glanced back over his shoulder to see the sharp ridge of shifting scales that were swimming through the earth after them. "Just keep running, it can't get us on the rocks!"

What I wouldn't give to just fly right now! That small island of rock had never looked so far away as he ruffled his knotted wings. *Just keep going, almost there.*

He was at least glad not to be running on the unstable sand as Xeno's adapted paws delivered the shapeshifter to the bastion of safety first. They spun back, reaching out with a foreclaw as Sanguine beat his bound wings, bowed his head, and panted hard, doing all he could to stay ahead of the gaping maw that rose from under the sand. He didn't dare look back, seeing the thing's vast shadow loom over him as he poured every ounce of his will into running. One paw hit the ground, then another, one after the other in rapid succession before...

He stumbled, a rope catching his foreleg as they flailed from his knotted wings. He staggered forward, earning a face full of salty earth, only for the mass to practically liquidize under him, sucking him downward like quicksand as he staggered back up. It was far worse than the shifting sands behind them, and as the monster drew closer it only got worse. He was practically gagging on the stuff as it swallowed him downward, only for a claw to wrap around his foreleg and yank him free.

Xeno's scales shimmered like monochromatic diamonds in the sun's glow as they flared out to disperse the sandy drake's weight. With a hard tug of their tail, still wrapped around one of the rocks, the shapeshifter dragged the vesper free of the sandy trap. Coughing, the two fell back on the hard stone, right as the huge, toothy tunnel of the thing's maw sucked down the salty sand. It spun and rotated like a whirlpool, behind a vast beak of hard, gray scales atop an eyeless mouth. Then as suddenly as it had

surfaced it sank away, seeming to vanish deep into the earth, leaving a great lake of loose sand in its wake.

“L—let’s not do that again,” Sanguine stammered, rubbing his sandy chest to make sure he was still alive.

“Don’t worry, it can’t find us on the rocks, though it’ll lurk around for days,” Xeno huffed through their exertions. “There’s a passageway in the temple back there, if we move slow, it’ll forget about us.”

Because that makes me feel so much better. Sanguine thought, filled with confidence at the idea of going underground with a subterranean monster like *that* lurking around.

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From the moment he saw the dark, sandy tunnels of the catacombs, Sanguine had to wonder if the dusty depths were any worse than being swallowed alive by the Sand Maw. Whereas everything out in the sun-baked wilderness had been the same ivory white, in here everything was a sandy orange. From the carved walls, to the rivers of loose sand that flowed about them like water as Xeno led the way deeper into the catacombs. They were not even at the seal into the lost city yet apparently, barely beyond the temple’s own haunted undercroft, and already the creeping bugs were becoming increasingly unsettling.

All the Xeno drake had to do was breathe a small plume of emerald fire to reveal the head-sized spiders and scorpions scurrying from the flame like rats. The prince had to wonder if the insectoid dragon, now boasting their true form, had any kind of kinship with the monstrous arthropods. They didn’t even seem to bat an eye at the deadly bugs as they finally came upon a long hall, terminating in a large, rounded door of sandstone.

Arches laced with cobwebs loomed overhead, while cracked marble covered the floor under a thick layer of dust. The claws of the pair tapped on the ancient stone as they made their way down the hall, more bugs scattering in their wake as they finally reached the far end. The rounded door looked to be made from a series of rings, each one engraved with hieroglyphics similar to the walls around them. There was draconic text mixed with far more ancient runes in a way not even the prince’s royal education allowed him to understand. Yet Xeno peered at them as if they were just words on a piece of common parchment as they exhaled more fire to light up the wall.

“Can you read that?” the prince asked, passing the drake by to look the walls up and down.

“It is ancient Scarbi text, hardly anyone can read the full thing,” Xeno admitted, running a foreclaw over the etched sandstone. “But I know the parts I need to know to get through here.”

The drake nodded to the rounded door, creeping over to the stone rings, and started to rotate them into an alignment. They ground like mill stones as the insectoid dragon strained. Yet sure enough, they soon lined up to make an odd, diamond-like pattern. At the center was a paw-shaped indentation, just shallow enough for some dragon to press into. It didn't look like the claw of any dragon Sanguine knew of, however. Not that Xeno had an issue, with a flash of green flame, the drake's left forelimb became a perfect fit for the door. It was an odd mix of prismatic and golden scales, yet just as soon as it was there, the paw reverted back.

“Only a Scarbi can open most of the doors down here, there are other ways in, but not for a thousand miles,” the shapeshifter muttered, glancing over their shoulder with a proud smirk.

“Good to know,” Sanguine retorted, as the door gave a heavy shunt, a sound like gears whirring in the wall as the whole thing started to growl and shudder.

Dust trailed from the ceiling, and for a second, the prince was terrified the worm monster from outside had found a way in as the whole room started to shake. He ruffled his freed wings to keep balance, yet Xeno didn't so much as flinch as the door finally began to sink into the floor before them. It vanished into the thick slot with a dusty huff, the cacophony of sounds going silent as the room stopped shuddering. Beyond was a dark tunnel, emitting a cold breeze that caused cobwebs to shudder like torn curtains.

“Well this is it, stay close, the change-ways are treacherous,” the drake warned, snorting a small breath of illuminating fire as they led the way.

Sanguine rolled his eyes, yet he was at least glad for the cool air after having spent so long out in the sweltering hot desert. He followed the bug down a winding stairway, then a long tunnel lined with rough walls and narrow alcoves. Each one contained an odd statue of some kind of four-limbed insectoid beast, coated in golden scales. Rubies were fitted in each of their four eyes, yet from the empty sockets in many, it appeared that the two of them were not the first to plunder these depths. He thought to take a few, but the second he reached for the gems, hissing bugs crawled across the statues to ward him off.

“Night curse all these little things!” he hissed, snatching his foreclaw away from the statue. “They're everywhere!”

“Just don’t touch anything and you’ll be fine,” Xeno muttered back over their shoulder. “They say most of this stuff is cursed.”

Now they tell me that part. The prince internally muttered, as the two of them slipped down a side passageway and descended a spiral staircase wrapping around a far grander golden statue. *Hardly stopped anyone else from stealing stuff.*

He said as much, hunching his shoulders and folding his wings tight to squeeze through a small breach in the wall. Xeno merely glanced back with a shrug as they responded.

“You think anyone who took those things actually got out of here alive?” They casually kicked a mound of dusty bones by the wall, and Sanguine swore he saw several glistening rubies roll free. “The tunnels shift and change, with no bound to change fire, you’d get lost forever.”

“Then let’s try not to hang around,” the prince muttered, making extra sure to cling close to the bug as Xeno snaked under an archway and up another set of sandy stairs.

“How far is it again?” he asked, and Xeno paused to think, a foreclaw to the tip of their muzzle before they responded.

“About three weeks to the other side, we will have to go out of our way to find food and water sources.” Sanguine’s ears drooped at those words, he was used to caves, but so long in tight passageways like this was going to be hell!

“You can’t be serious, I’m already getting claustrophobic in here!” he spat, tight spaces the true fear of anything with wings.

All dragons except for bug dragons, it seems. He thought, eyeing Xeno’s leathery wings scornfully.

Xeno shrugged, rolling their eyes again as they stepped aside to let Sanguine by, nodding ahead. Eyes narrow, the vesper regarded the bug carefully as he snaked by and stepped through the archway ahead, right out onto the underground balcony. Seconds later, his ears and wings drooped as his mouth hung open.

The vast, sandy cavern stretching out before him was absolutely huge. Towering below, above, and on either side, the walls of the place were like mountains filled with hollow chambers, walkways, and bridges. The roof was lined with glowing specs of blue light, clustered like stars, while rivers of sand flowed from every crack and crevice like water. Huge pillars were covered in similar alien architecture, while grand bridges spanned the gaps between them and the walls, and yet more were sunken in the sands far below.

Sanguine had been all over and had never seen a place quite like it, pretty sure his night vision gave him a better view of the underground city.

“Still feel hemmed in?” Xeno asked, stepping up to the prince’s left and snorting out their fire. “It is a long walk to the other side with no air currents, but as long as we’re quiet, no one should bother us.”

“You say that as if there’s anyone else down here?” Sanguine asked, following the bug down another set of steps that led into a vast, arched hall.

There were more statues on either side of them, each locked in what he guessed were noble and heroic poses. Tapestries of desert sands, stars, and storms lay between them, tattered and dusty as they swayed in the light breeze. Then there were the bones, countless skeletons lingered, and many looked a lot like the creatures in the statues.

“Bandits, monsters, this city is almost the size of the whole desert, there’s plenty hiding down here,” the insectoid drake informed him, and the prince felt a shudder run down his spine at the idea the worm monster could get in.

Xeno didn’t seem too concerned about that prospect, however, as they swiftly went on.

“Thief guilds ran the place for years using the smuggler’s run. Managed to get a lot of spice through the desert before the syndicate bought into it.” As if following pre-programmed instructions, Xeno reflexively turned left. “Our queen, Xenna, and I’s mother wanted to make a hive down here, called it the Nexus. Our kind used to work for the Scarbi, so it made sense.”

“I take it that didn’t go to plan?” Sanguine asked, sure he caught sight of a xeno-drake skull amidst some of the bones.

“Not quite, another of my sisters rose up against her, shattered the hive, and broke us all into our own. Xenna’s became the syndicate, the rest dissolved,” the bug concluded, instinctively making a right turn, then a left one into a far more natural-looking hall.

“These lower levels are the mines, fewer bandits, but watch out for monsters.”

“What kind of monsters?” Sanguine asked as the two of them crossed a river of slowly flowing sand.

“Manticores, chimera, sand eels, that kind of stuff.” The drake listed hazards on a claw.

“Not to mention snakes, scorpions, rock slides, cave-ins, quick sand, deadly air...”

“Okay, okay, you made your point.” Sanguine cut the babbling bug off with a wave of his forepaw.

All the while he looked at the walls, eyes scanning every crack in search of any of those dangers. What did look familiar was the withered lengths of green resin that covered some of them. Stepping up and twanging one of the taut chords he noticed how much like Xeno's hive it was, only to glance back and catch the bug peering at him.

"This was one of yours?" he asked, but the shapeshifter shrugged as they responded simply.

"Green's a common color for my kind." They glanced about at the vast web above them. "It's just been a long time since I was last here."

Is that remorse? It felt odd to think of it that way, as he was pretty sure Xeno's kind had used this place to kidnap and breed. *Funny, they seem way too soft for that.*

"Well, let's just keep moving," Sanguine prompted, marching past the bewildered drake. "The sooner we get through here the better."

"Y—yeah, yeah, of course," Xeno muttered, snatching their eyes from the abandoned hive, and once again leading the way into the darkness.