

Chapter 17: The Dragon who can turn Human

Atlas found her next prey, which was another deer. She struck it down with another wind blade spell to its throat and watched fall down dead. The magi landed down by the animal and was about to teleport the second kill over to Danielle, but then someone ran into her hindleg. "Uh! What the hell?" she asked, turning head to the rear to see a spiky-haired blonde man in black clothes and the sleeping black-haired man he dropped onto the ground with a soft thud. Strangely, the black-haired one seemed to smell more dragon than human, but he certainly didn't look like a hybrid. Perhaps he was a shape-shifting dragon who can turn human? Another human scent caught her nose; she looked up see a black-haired man, who almost resembled the blonde, in the tree line top. The blonde man stabbed his sword in the ground started to gasp for air; clearly, he was exhausted. The magi looked at the weapons the two of the trio had and suspected them as hunters. Tensing herself with wariness, she growled at both of them and asked, "Alright humans, are you dragon slayers or not?"

The blonde turned to face Atlas and answered, "I'm not, but I would not put it past Marc to kill you for fun." He turned his head back to where the guy known as Marc have stood a second ago.

"Hey, where'd he go?" asked the magi, intent on finding him so that she could get to him first before he did her. The bad guy was nowhere in sight.

The blonde swordsman stood there for a few seconds before he put his sword away and went to pick back up the sleeping man. "I'm sorry if we interrupted your breakfast," he said as he placed his companion back on his back. He was about to collapse from the brunette's weight with his swords for he had little strength left. "I hate to ask, but is there somewhere safe we could spend the night at? We have no energy, either of us, and we have not yet eaten for some time, aside from a few apples," the blonde asked Atlas as he set the brunette back down against the tree not far from him.

"Well I do live in a castle. But it's not fancy like you think it is," Atlas told them. "That place was old and dusty when I uncovered it yesterday. It originally belonged to the Fire King, but he's long dead." But for the safety of her nieces, she wasn't about to let them go there yet. "I can teleport you guys there, but only if you answer one question. What species is that guy you're with? It's weird for humans to smell so much like dragons," the magi asked.

The swordsman looked to the brunette and answered, "He's a white dragon; he took human form because he exhausted himself from flight."

"Well that explains the smell," said Atlas, who now felt that they were good. White dragons, unlike certain hostile breeds, would never harm other dragons as they were gentle pacifists by nature. Since the swordsman was allied with that kind of dragon, then he most likely wouldn't harm the nieces as he was apparently dragon-friendly. She said to him, "Okay, I'll send you guys there and then I can get some food for you, too." She pushed deer towards the blonde, she said, "And while you're at the castle, give

this deer to my niece, Danielle and tell her it's from me. I'll let my nieces know that you're at the castle." The swordsman nodded his head in agreement before she teleported the two to the main hall of the castle.

The dragoness turned back to her deer and continued eating it. While she finished it up, she contacted the hatchlings with telepathy, *'Danielle, Kylie, we got guests in the castle. Go to the entrance and give them a nice warm welcome when you meet them.'*

'Okay, Aunt Atlas,' said the hatchlings, who were eager to see the strangers.

'Also, Danielle, a blonde...' The magi paused briefly, thinking that the whiptail wouldn't know what color blonde is. *'Well, a yellow-haired human will be there to give you a deer.'*

Danielle asked, *'Is he like Henry and Yukki?'*

'Er, I don't know. Maybe,' said Atlas. She wasn't too sure of the blonde's personality, but he did appear cool and honest so far. *'Anyway, if you two need something, just let me know, alright?'* she said.

'Alright!' the sisters promised.

After the telepathic connection was cut, the magi used her knowledge of humans to figure out their diet. She knew that they ate pigs, chicken, cows, goats, sheep, fish, shrimp, eggs, lobsters, crabs, fruits, vegetables, and the artificial sweets made in the form of candy, cakes, bread, etc. She figured that the supermarket she went to with Henry would feed the human, but what about the dragon who was in human form? Maybe the human food can feed him too, like how the popsicles did for Kylie. Atlas pictured the supermarket's parking lot in her mind and teleported herself there.

There at the city ruins, the magi entered the grocery store through the hole she made on the night she rescued Henry from the vampire dragons. Raiding the supermarket's supplies would be easy since vampires were permanently asleep until nightfall, meaning that no sounds or touch would wake them during the day. Atlas ducked below the ceiling to allow herself to fit in with the building. But at the same time, she had to maneuver past obstacles as conveyor belt machines, sleeping vampires, and shopping carts. "Damn this narrow place. Why couldn't I be as small as that bloodsucker?" she cursed. That or she wished she knew a spell to make herself smaller or turn human. But nevertheless, Atlas has still got to try if she wanted to feed her niece and guests. The dragoness went over to the produce section and noticed that all of the fruits and vegetables were gone; probably eaten by the dragons. "Well damn, I guess I better go get some sweets instead," she said to herself.

She squeezed her way through and stood next to the aisle entrances to grab many varieties of foods that were the closest to her. Cake mixes, canned foods, candy, chips, cookies, drinks, pet food, etc. She may have spoken human, but that didn't mean that she knew what some of the words of the products meant as human languages varied between countries and she herself was originally from Solomos,

where she spent most of her slave days before coming to Rudvich.

The sisters ran through the hallways until they got to the main hall. They looked to the humans near the green lights, which were radiated by the flares on the floor. Kylie observed them and asked, "Is that dem?" She wondered if they were the guests that their aunt mentioned.

"Yeah, I think so," said Danielle. Then a savory scent reached her nose and made her hungry. She saw the deer nearby the humans and exclaimed, "And oh, dey got da deer, too. I'm gonna go eat!" She raced over to the deer and started eating it without so much as looking at the two humans.

Kylie ignored the furry meal and went over to the blonde man, whom she introduced herself to, "Hi, my name is Kywie. What's yew name?"

The blonde looked at her with a smile and answered, "My name is Strider. Over there-" He turned his head to see that his companion had left his spot. "Ok Axle, you overgrown white lizard, where did you go?" Strider asked as he got up.

"Wizard?" the balloon hatchling asked, tilting her head slightly in curiosity as to why Strider called the other human a lizard. She also wondered why he couldn't see Axle standing on the other side of him.

The flares on the floor went out, making the main hall dim again. The blonde guy took another one out of the bag, pulled the cord on the end of it. As it emulated a green flame, the brunette man's face was shown in its light. "Boo!" the older man said in a childish voice, which unaffected Strider. Even Kylie wasn't startled as her night vision allowed her to see what he was up to.

The blonde snapped at his companion, "Sometimes, Axle, you are a child. Grow up will you. You are almost 500 years old."

"So any ideas where we are?" Axle asked.

Strider shrugged and said, "Don't know; just know we were teleported here by a magi dragon and Marc is somewhere in the forest. So that means Spinx is not far behind, seeing how I manage to get this." He held a photo out to Axle and they both looked at the front and back of it for a bit.

The brunette grabbed the photograph and the flare and lit it on fire. He watched the photo burn into a black ash and then he smashed the small pile under his feet. It was a black smudge on the floor when Kylie saw it. "The less people know about this, the better," Axle said under his breath. He then looked at the balloon hatchling and asked, "You wouldn't happen to be related to the magi dragon that teleported us here, would you?"

Kylie noticed that the person called Axle smelled like a dragon. Wait, was he a hybrid? When the brunette talked to her, the hatchling got scared and ran over to one of the pillars and hid behind it. "Wah! Dun hurt me," she cried.

Danielle stopped eating and looked at her sister. "Kywie, what's wrong?" She wondered what got her sister so scared.

The two humans both look at the balloon hatchling. "Hurt you? Why on earth would I hurt you?" Axle sounded confused by this. "Wait. Did something happen to you in the past?" He asked in concern. He turned his head and saw the smirk on Strider's face. "What are you smirking about?" Axle snapped at the other man, who started to laugh now.

The blonde said, "Dragon scent is coming from you, which means your magic power weaken a bit over the past week. How much you want to bet it that you're in human form and your dragon scent is thicker on you?" He looked over at Kylie and assured her, "He won't hurt you. He does not attack anyone that does not attack him or his friends."

The balloon hatchling slowly peaked her head over the pillar and asked nervously, "W-weally?"

Strider back away from his friend a bit and told him, "You might as well show them your true dragon form." Axle back up out of range of the flare. Within moments, the man's body transformed into that of a white dragon. The scent from his dragon form could be smelled very much now. Axle laid down, showing he was no threat, even if he was 6 times their size. He curled his tail around to his head and laid his head down on it, but still leaving his blue eyes on the hatchlings. On his body, just right under his wing, was a scar from a sword that could be clearly seen. Kylie stared at him for a bit before she slowly walked over to him; cautious as to whether he'll attack or not. He didn't. Her nervousness died down and she started to feel safe around him.

Danielle looked at Axle's dragon form and asked, "Are yew a hybwid?" From her knowledge of hybrids, some of them looked like humans and they had the ability to turn into dragons. Perhaps Axle was one, considering he smelled like a dragon, which was another trait of hybrids.

The white dragon said with a bit of disappointment, "No I'm not; though from where I'm from, I'm called a shape-shifter for I have the power to alter my form. But here, I'm a full dragon with magic power to do so. I rather keep a low profile that I'm a dragon, for from where I'm from, there are not many of my kind left."

"Not a wot, why?" Kylie asked. She and her sister wondered how his kind got to be endangered.

Axle switched his form back to that of a human. He stood up, walked over to a pillar and leaned against it. "See? From where both me and Strider are from, it's not much different from it is here. Always someone hunting something in order to protect or achieve what they want," the man said as he started

to slid down the pillar. "Plus, I'm older than whatever hybrids were here."

"How old?" asked Danielle curiously.

Then Strider on the other hand did as jump to his feet and said something quietly to his friend that the sisters were unable to make out. The blonde picked up his sword and looked off to the empty space as he asked, "Is this place one hundred percent sealed from the outside world? Because if it not, we are about to get an uninvited guest here shortly." Axle was seen picking up both his swords and placing the straps over his shoulders. The wary brunette let out a low deep growl. "Find somewhere to hide, and try and reach the magi dragon, as Axle calls it, your aunt. Stay hidden no matter what you hear," Strider said to the sisters as he grabbed the other three flares and lit one and throw it as far as he could down the stone hallway. The flare was instantly put out with one swing of a sharp sword, one that look like Cloud's swords, from around a distant pillar.

Scared, the sisters said, "Okay, we will!" Then the hatchlings ran away through the hallway to get to the king's chamber for safety.

Danielle, being the faster dragon, had the distance gap widen between herself and her sister. "Swow down, Danielle. I cun catch up," said Kylie, not wanting to be alone and left behind to the bad guy that was in the castle.

The whiptail slowed down a bit to let her sister catch up. Then she telepathically called her aunt, *'Aunt Atlas, there's a bad guy in the castle! Help us!'*

After grabbing up the cereal boxes, chips, and pastry snacks from three aisles, Atlas got a distress call from Danielle. The magi's eyes went wide in alarm and worry for her nieces. *'Hang on, Danielle, I'm coming!'* she cried. The magi warped back into the main hall of the castle with foods and saw a shocking sight. Dead human bodies were laying on the floor, many of which had been crushed beneath the six fallen pillars supporting roof. Close nearby were the bodies of Strider and Marc bleeding from their sword wounds. Apparently, they had impaled each other as the intruder's sword was painted red with Strider's blood and the blonde had his blade stabbed through his foe. Marc and the many men he brought as well piqued her curiosity the most. "What the hell? How did he and them get inside?" the magi questioned on as to how the slayers got her after she had blocked the doors. There was no way they would have gotten in that easily. She would have to worry about that later, because right now the castle was falling apart and she needed to get Axle and her family out of here, if they were still alive. Atlas contacted her niece first to check if she was still alright. *'Danielle, tell me you're alive. Where are you and Kylie at now?!'* she asked.

The whiptail answered, *'We're running away from the bad guy!'*

Atlas felt a bit glad that the hatchlings were doing the smart thing by fleeing from danger. *'That's good, Danielle. Just get to a safe place like the library or the chambers and I'll meet you there. Whatever you do, don't run into corners or dead ends, alright?'* she told her.

'Okay, Aunt Atlas.' There was a brief pause before the magi heard her niece's next telepathic message, which sounded dire. *'Aunt Atlas, we got more bad guys chasing us! HELP!'*

"What?!" the dragoness cried out in panic of the hatchlings being in danger. She had been hoping the dead humans were the only bad guys in the castle, but now it turned out there was more of them. *'I'm coming, Danielle! Just give me a picture of where you're at now,'* she told her. The image of the hallway appeared in the magi's mind. *'Okay, got it, I'm on my way.'* Atlas went over to Strider's body and teleported herself and him. She felt she needed to bring him along, so that Axle can see for himself that his buddy was dead.

The sisters had turned corner into another hallway. Up ahead at the end would be the stairs that would lead upstairs into the next floor. Kylie's slow speed had annoyed Danielle, because the whiptail wanted to run as fast as she can and make it to a safe place in time. "Kylie, why are you so slow?" she whined.

"I dun know!" the balloon hatchling cried. "I'm not as fast as yew, okay." She hadn't mean to scream at her sister, but it was just that the threat of the danger was making her frightful. Suddenly, they heard footsteps behind them and saw eight men coming at them.

Danielle's eyes went wide with fear and she screamed, "Bad guys!" She started to run full speed, leaving her sister behind as she telepathically called her aunt.

Kylie saw her sister abandoning her and had her hand reached to her as she cried, "Danielle, dun weave me!" Luckily, Axle had come to fight and kill off some of the bad men. He pulled both his swords over his shoulder and threw it at the two closest to him, running them through their chests. He did not even pick up his swords as he ran by the bodies, at a full sprint. The other six noticed they were not alone in this chase, as two broke off from the group and went to stop the shape-shifter.

"Get out of my way!" Axle yelled at the two as grabbed the two that broke off from the group. He grabbed their heads and slammed them into the stone floor, crushing their skulls. He grabbed two knives that hit the floor and throw them at the next two closest, missing completely this time as the knives sailed through the air and stick into a wooden pillar that was not far ahead of Kylie. Then the shape-shifter finally caught up with the remainders of the group. He caught them by full surprise when he grabbed the two back; he snapped one neck and ran another through with his partner's sword. The other two turn their attention to Axle, but they had slow reaction as he grabbed them both and threw them into the ground hard. They lost their weapons as the cold blades slide across the ground. He pulled back his hand from one and throw the other down the hall way behind him, than he did the same with the

other one. Just seconds later, rocks were heard falling from high places. Axle was then grabbed from behind and slammed into a wall by a big man. One of the men, that Axle had thrown back down the hall way, slammed him into the wall and went to punch him in the face and then into his stomach. Axle gasped for air when the man did that as the others went for their weapons. Then the shapeshifter fell to the stone floor. The same man went and kicked him in his side and then place his foot on Axle's back, which he pressed hard down to force the shapeshifter to stay on the ground. He took both his weapons and shoved them though Axle's back, causing him to scream in pain as the blood flowed from the fresh wounds and out the corner of his mouth. Within moments, the shape-shifter passed out from blood loss.

The balloon hatchling kept running and running. But fortunately, one of the men had caught up and grabbed her. Kylie let out a terrified scream. "Gotcha!" said the man. He raised his dagger up and then brought it down at the hatchling's throat. It missed! Kylie had suddenly disappeared and was replaced by clouds of purple smoke. The dagger had struck the man on his empty palm. He let out a groan of pain and pulled the dagger out.

Soon he heard an angry voice, "Get your hands off my niece, you filthy bastard!" Then he was struck with an ice spear to his chest and killed. Atlas had a look of fury on her face. How dare he tried to harm Kylie. The aunt would not put up with murderers inside her castle or around her family. The balloon hatchling hugged onto her aunt, shaking and eyes shut tight. She was still scared from nearly getting killed. Atlas turned to the last man, who was near Axle's bleeding body. She roared loudly and cast a fire beam at him. The man screamed loudly in agony as he was burned. He ran around with his body on fire in constant pain. The magi focused on Axle and teleported him to her group, next to Strider. Atlas looked around for Danielle and called, "Danielle, where are you?" No response, so she tried again. "Danielle?"

"I'm here, Aunt Atwas!" the whiptail said as she came running over to them.

"Good, now we're all here. Let's get the hell out of this place before it comes crashing down on us," the magi said. There was no need to kill the last man, because the Castle of Fire will come crumbling down on him. Atlas teleported everyone out of the castle and over to the ruined city. She knew a white dragon who could help out Axle.

Atlas laid Strider and Axle under the shade of the broken down retail store's interior. The sisters looked worriedly at them. "Aunt Atlas, do you think dat dhey'll be okay?" asked Danielle.

The magi said grimly, "I don't know, Danielle. I don't know. But let's hope they do. I can only hope that they'll be alright once we bring that white dragon here." She didn't want to tell them that Strider was dead, because then they're going to think that their parents being among the stars was a lie.

Kylie, who was still recovering from the fright of nearly getting murdered, looked up at her aunt and pointed accusingly at her sister. She thought now would be a good time to tattle tale and said, "Aunt Atwas, Danielle weft me behind."

"What?" the magi asked in a shocked tone. She turned to the whiptail and eyed her judggingly as she asked, "Danielle, is this true?" She didn't like her niece being selfish enough to leave a close blood relative behind like that.

Danielle shrunk back out of fear that she could get punished. She replied in her own defense, "I-I didn't wan the humans to get me. Dhey were coming and I had to wun away."

Atlas scolded her, "Danielle! I know it's important to be safe, but your sister's safety is also important! You should have brought her with you. I expected better of you!"

"She was swowing me down!" the whiptail cried. "The humans were fast and getting closer."

"Closer, huh?" the aunt asked. She was starting to understand her niece's situation a bit. It sounded like Kylie wasn't fast enough to outrun the assassins. Calming down some, Atlas said, "I guess we're going to have to work on y'all's speed." She thought about putting the hatchlings through some training exercises for fleeing, so that they can better escape successfully without having to sacrifice each other. But that would have to come later.

Klang! They heard the drop of metal hitting the ground and making a ringing sound. The Firestars turned their heads to look over at Axle, who has just woken up after removing the bloodied daggers. "Hey Axle's alive," Kylie said. The shape-shifter let out a pained groan before he used his magic to heal all his wound slowly.

Atlas asked the dragon-human, "So how are you putting up, Axle?" No answer was received as Axle turned to look at his fallen companion sadly and spoke three words in an unknown language before he fainted. A tear escaped from his right eye and slide down his cheek before hit the ground below. Feeling pity and sympathy for the boy, Atlas said, "Poor Axle, I better help them fast." She knew how much losing a loved one hurts and now the man was going through the same thing, too. Picturing the white dragon from the other day, Atlas form a telepathic communication with him, *'Hey you, remember me? I'm that magi you helped healed two nights ago.'*

The dragon replied, *'Oh yes, I know you. You're the one with the human boy. What happened? Did you get yourself into another fight protecting him?'*

'No,' she told him. *'But I'm with a dragon who can turn human. He and his friend got attacked by bad humans who broke into my castle and now one is dead and the other one is knocked out. So I need you to get here right now.'*

The healer dragon told her, *'Alright, just give me an image of where you're at and I'll try to be there as soon as possible.'*

'Alright, hang on.' The magi took off into the air and studied the building's detail from below. She sent that mental image to him.

'Okay, I see. Wait for me, I'm on my way,' he said.

The telepathic line ended and Atlas looked over at Axle. "Hang in there, pal. Help is on the way," she said. The hatchlings went over to Strider and Axle to check on them. Danielle sniffed the swordsman for a second before she nudged his face to see if he would get up. Kylie looked over at Axle. Would he and Strider go up into the stars just like her parents did?

About an hour later, the white dragon finally came and landed at the broken building. Atlas walked up to him and said, "Finally, you're here. I was wondering if it would take you a long time to find this place."

The white dragon made a small smile and said, "Well I admit, I did have trouble searching for where you're at. But fate was glad enough to help me out." He looked around for the patients until he saw Strider and Axle. "I take it that it must be one of them you want me to heal?" he asked, unsure of who to work his magic on since the shape-shifter wasn't in dragon form.

"Yes!" Atlas replied. "Just go for the black-haired the one. The blonde guy is..." She paused as she wondered how to continue the conversation. Within moments she found the right words and said, "You know."

The white dragon knew what she meant and said, "Okay, I'll get to it." He went to check on Axle to see what the problem was, but his body seems to be unharmed. He used healing magic on him anyway just in case. After he was done, he went over to Atlas and said, "Well he's all fixed now... I think."

The magi looked over at the brunette for a second before she said to the white, "Alright, you can go. Thanks for your help again."

The white dragon said, "No problem. I hope the next time you need help will be better than this one." Then he flew out of the building.

But before he could fly out of the building, the sisters got disappointed with how the white only healed Axle and left out Strider. Danielle complained, "Hey, how come you onwy healed Axle and not Stwider?"

"Yeah! How come?" Kylie asked.

The white dragon shook head and answered regretfully, "Because young ones, your human friend is dead. I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do. My magic can't bring back the dead."

"Dead?!" both sisters cried out in surprise.

Danielle turned her head to look up at her aunt and asked, "Is Stwider dead?"

Atlas gritted her teeth; she worried about her nieces finding out the truth and was annoyed at the white dragon for bringing it up. To debunk this suspicion, the magi told her nieces, "No, he's not. The white dragon's just worrying too much. Strider's gone up into the stars. You can all talk to him tonight if you want to."

Thankfully, the sisters bought that lie without thinking and said, "Okay."

"Anyway, you two go and play over there," Atlas said, pointing to the corner where the fallen debris and shoes racks were. "I'll take Stwider somewhere else." The sisters ran off to play, while the magi picked up Strider's body and took him outside next to the side of the building.

The white dragon had been confused by how the magi lied to the hatchlings and followed after her. "Now hold on a minute here. Why did you lie to these hatchlings like that? He was clearly dead," he asked.

Atlas answered with a frown, "Because my nieces' parents died and I didn't want them getting all sad to know that their parents are gone forever. That's why I lied."

The white dragon felt sympathy for the family's tragic past and understood the magi's reason. "Oh I see now. Sorry for your loss. Take care now," he said before flying away for good. The magi turned her attention back to Strider's body and then she used her earth magic to tear apart the asphalt and dirt to create a hole. She dropped the body down in that hole and covered it back up with the soil. She finished off the burial by burning the wall with her fire magic. She waited for the heat to sink into the wall, before she dispelled the flames to leave black marks in the form of the words in draconic language: <Here lies Strider.> The magi flew back into the building and laid beside Axle, guarding him until he wakes up.