

Chapter 20: The Carnival

Minerva went on her way to the magic carnival event to check it out. She didn't have work today, because Richard decided to give everyone a break to recover from the trauma of the tragic event. She looked to see that there were large circus tents with purple & white stripes, animal pens, game stands, dancers, rides, and food stands at the town center. Looked on with interest at the fun things here and admired the dancers' colorful and festive appearances. She reached the carnival entrance and went in. The woman looked around to see which game she would play first. There was the dart game, where people would throw darts to pop the balloons for a prize. Next to it was a game called "Toss a Ring", where the players would throw a ring at one of the small poles. The other one was the typical heavy hammer game that tested the player's strength to see if they could hit the bell. That game was definitely not for Minerva as she couldn't lift up the hammer high enough and win. She decided to make her way to Toss-a-Ring and play that game first. She gave the man a silver coin and received three wings. She threw them all, but only one managed to make it onto the pole. "Oh man, I lost," said Minerva. But she wasn't affected by the loss anyway. She just wanted to have fun.

The woman left the ring toss game to go try out the other games. As she walked, she heard a man somewhere shouting joyfully, "We got a winner!"

She turned her head to get a curious look at the winner. To her surprise, she saw the familiar duo once again at the hammer game. The hooded man from yesterday had rang the bell and won the game. *'You know, I keep running into these two lately. It's almost as if fate's trying to bring us together or something,'* she thought contemplatively. *'Maybe something dangerous will happen here next? Like a mad crazy clown coming here to terrorize the carnival?'* she thought jokingly. The woman made her way to the high striker game and looked at the hooded man, to whom she smiled at and greeted, "Hi, congrats!"

The man turned his head to the sound of her voice and smiled back at her. He asked curiously, "Hi, thanks. Are you doing alright?"

"Why yes I am," Minerva replied. She was a bit grateful for his concern.

Then the man apologized, "I'm so sorry you got pulled into the mess with those criminals; I never intended for you to get caught in the middle of it."

The woman forgave him and said, "It's alright. I'm pretty sure you never saw that coming. I mean who would?" The future was certainly unpredictable with all kinds of surprises both good and bad.

Then the man asked, "By the way, what's your name? I've had to save you twice, running into you more than once, and yet I don't know your name." The copper dragon close to him nodded with kindness in his emerald green eyes.

The woman introduced herself, "My name's Minerva. I'm a member of ADR; you know, the building that got attacked. And who would you be, Mr. Hero?"

The man smiled and answered, "I'm Ronan." Then he turned to his dragon friend and continued, "And this walking bag of fire and ice is Drake. We're from the southern desert." He patted Drake's nose. Then he asked curiously, "What does ADR stand for?"

The woman gladly answered, "It stands for the Association for Dragon Rights. I understand that you may not hear of us much, because our organization is small and unpopular. Slave owners and conservatives would often ridicule us for trying to show the cruelties of slavery and free the dragons." It was amazing the ADR managed to stay strong despite the strong opposition they faced. Maybe now the dragons were free, the Aquarians were here to police any human-dragon conflicts in the city, and the mayor having banned any form of oppression and killings of the dragons, the ADR will be stronger and help accelerate the harmony between the two races. Then she became interested in Ronan's homeland and asked, "So what's your country like? The southwest region."

Ronan went on to explain, "It's mostly sand. A few oasis spots spread out. Easy to miss because those who aren't from the land think they're seeing a mirage and walk right past one. I lived there for only five years of my childhood."

"Mhmm," Minerva responded, unsure of what to say. What the man said about the southwest region sounded like the way the TV media portrays the country's land and climate; well when a character finds something only to be fooled by the mirage's illusion.

Then the southwesterner shut his eyes and continued, "After that, I lived in the mountains, often passing down into the desert for trading purposes with my teacher."

"What kind of teacher was he?" the woman asked.

They started to walk together as Ronan continued his story, "He... taught me to survive; how to hunt. He taught me everything I know. The one thing he couldn't teach me was how to let go of pain."

"Pain?" Minerva blurted without thinking. Then she quickly realized that bringing up his past might not have been a good idea. It might make Ronan recall some horrible memories and make him feel bad. "Uh forget what I just said. Tell me more about your master," she said, trying to change the subject.

The man sighed and then said, "He wasn't of my blood, but he was more of a father to me since..."

When he was unable to speak anymore, the woman suggested, "Well let's just forget about the past for now, it seems like it's just making you sad. Why don't we go play a game instead, or watch one of the performers?" She hoped the change in topic to something more joyful would cheer him up.

Ronan sighed before nodding to Minerva. "Yeah, I'd like that," he said with a small smirk.

"Me too," Minerva replied.

Drake followed them as the man asked her, "So, what are you doing in this city anyway? Is the ADR your only focus?"

The woman answered, "Well most of the time it is, because I work over there as a journalist. But other than that, I also try to live a normal life as everyone else. Hanging out with friends and what not." They stopped to see the performers, who were all women in brightly colored costumes with large feathers in the back to give the appearance of wings. They danced as their feathers and beads shook.

Ronan looked down slightly and said sadly, "I have no clue what to do with my life anymore....."

Minerva turned her head to him and she said, "Huh?" She wondered what had gotten him down this time.

The man continued, "Now that my revenge is done.... I feel incomplete."

From Minerva's understanding, it sounded like he was talking about the kidnapper he slew last night to save her. She said to him, "That's the thing with revenge; sometimes it causes more problems than it solves. I'm not sure what you can do after that, but maybe you could find a job somewhere in town. I know the ADR has some job openings up to replace our lost members."

Ronan shook his head and replied, "No.... I'm not of any use in an organization like that. I'm trained to hunt and kill. ADR sounds like it doesn't use someone with those skills."

"Well I suppose I'll have to think of another job, won't I?" said Minerva. She pondered her thoughts and brainstormed some occupations that would fit the foreigner. The first thing that came to mind was hunting. Being a hunter involved hunting and catching animals for food, fur, and other purposes. The hunter would trade in the animals he/she caught and get paid. The woman looked to Ronan and confidently suggested, "How about becoming a hunter? That would put the skills you have to good use."

The man smirked looking at her and replied, "Perhaps. Only one problem with that. A hunter usually has someone to come home to... I have neither a home nor someone to return to." He sighed unhappily.

Minerva felt sympathetic to the man's trouble and wanted to help him out. She placed a hand on his shoulder and offered, "Maybe you could stay over at my house. I wouldn't mind a roommate."

Ronan turned to face her and gave her a smirk. "You'd offer me a home when you barely know me? Why?" he asked curiously.

"Well? Where else are you going to stay?" asked Minerva. "Surely, not out in the streets." She continued, "Besides, you saved my life twice. I feel like I should owe you." Sure, it was true that she hardly knew him, but after the events she saw involving him, the woman felt that he was a good person who would never harm an innocent person.

Ronan's smirk turned to a smile. "Well, I appreciate that, thank you. Do you have a place for Drake to stay as well?" he inquired. "He can sleep just about anywhere."

Drake's eyes rolled at his friend's comment before he added, "I can sleep in many places, I'll be fine wherever you can fit me."

Minerva replied, "Well I do have a garage. But I'll have to clear some stuff up to make room for him." Even with her car gone, there was still some things that would take up space in the garage.

Drake nodded as his human partner said, "That could work, Drake is rather big though so I hope your garage is big enough."

"It is," the woman confirmed in response.

Ronan told her, "If we're going to do this, you should know I do a lot of exercising and I will find ways to exercise around your home most likely."

Minerva smiled with interest and said, "Wow, you sound like you're an athlete. I can't wait to see what kind of exercises you'll do." She was looking forward to seeing what kinds of exercises he does that were out of the Northeast region's culture.

The man smile with a chuckled, saying, "This feels so different from how I've been living my life. I don't have to hunt anymore. Let me know when it's time to go." He smirked at her through his hood. Drake was sitting, enjoying the festival entertainment.

"Okay," Minerva responded. The dancers had finished their performance, which was pretty soon after the pair were done talking. "Come on, let's go see what else is there," the woman said. She moved around looking for an interesting attraction. There, she saw a tent belonging to a fortune teller and there were like ten people in line. Thinking that this might sound like a bit of fun, Minerva said, "Ooh, a fortune teller. Ronan, do you want to check it out?"

The man said in suspicion, "I don't think that's a good idea. They're usually scam artists." But Drake nudged him as if the dragon wanted Ronan to go check it out.

"Well I suppose you're right about that," said Minerva agreeing with him. She looked at the bright side of this and said, "But still it's kind of fun to see what you'll get. But if you still don't want to go in, we can

always play another game or see if they started the parade." As much as fortune-telling was fun, the parade sounded interesting. She wondered what kinds of platforms, dancers, and musicians she'll see there.

Ronan nodded and said, "Sure, we can do that."

"Okay then," Minerva responded. She walked with the man and dragon as she looked at the guide to see where the parade would take place at and which games were nearest to there. She found an archery game that was two game spots away from the parade. Thinking the man might want to play, the woman looked to him and asked, "Hey Ronan, there's an archery game here. Think you might be interested?"

Ronan smiled and looked at the game. "You don't want me to do that," he said, sounding over-confident. "I'd be obligated to win.... and I don't miss unless it's on purpose." Drake grinned listening to the two.

The woman smiled back and replied, "Oh, but I believe you'll have lots of fun. After all, it's a game suited to a warrior like yourself. Maybe you'll win at it." She'd like to see how good he was with a bow and arrow as much as he was with a sword. "You sound really confident with this, Ronan. Care to show off your skills?" she asked.

The man chuckled. "Since you insist," he said, as they walked up to the booth. They looked at the bows and toy arrows. Then they looked to the guy running the booth.

"Five shots per person," the carny said.

Ronan drew his own bow and one arrow. The guy started cranking a wheel to make the targets move but he could only make it go a certain speed. The assassin was able to keep up. "Three... Two... One," he counted before he fired the five arrows in 5 seconds flat. Using only a split second between shots to check his aim. Each arrow pierced their target dead center. Minerva's azure blue eyes went wide and her mouth dropped open in astonishment. Never before had she seen anybody go this fast at archery. It was like Ronan was either a really good pro or a superman. The carny hesitantly pulled the arrows out, handing them to Ronan before giving him the reward from the top shelf. The prize was a stuff animal of a frog-like cartoon character, who was green & white with blue eyes and wore purple clothes. The assassin handed it to Minerva. "For you," he said with a smile. He put away his bow and arrows.

The woman accepted his gift gratefully and replied, "Oh why thank you!"

Ronan smirked at her before they would continue on. "You know, this is my first time having such fun since I was a child," he commented.

"Really now?" said Minerva.

"I remember all the times my family played games... my brothers and sisters..." the assassin sighed.

Although, he seemed calm, Minerva could tell that there was a hint of sadness to his tone. So she decided to leave the siblings out of the conversation for his sake. "Sounds like you've had a wonderful childhood. Times like that are often the greatest days of your life," she said, smiling.

Drake gave the man an affectionate nudge and Ronan patted his head in return with a chuckle. Then the man looked at Minerva with curiosity. "Why are you so nice to me Minerva? I'm not saying I don't appreciate it, I do, but....." He sounded baffled, "I don't understand why. Anyone else would be afraid of me because of what I can do."

"Because I'm nice to everyone," the woman answered. "I mean you wouldn't want to be with someone who was all rude and rotten, would you?" she said as she made an ugly face for a brief second while speaking. "Plus, it's not every day you get to meet someone of your caliber. It feels impressive being around a skilled fighter. I'm not sure why people would be afraid. I think you're amazing," she said.

Ronan smiled and commented, "Thank you Minerva... I appreciate that. You're quite amazing yourself."

Minerva felt flattered and chuckled heartily. "Oh stop! I'm just a regular person myself," she said. She felt a nudge from Drake behind her and got pushed towards the man's arms. After she was really close to him, the blonde blushed at first for a few seconds and thought, *'Well this is kind of awkward.'* Then she brushed off the awkwardness giggled at how a bit funny it was. "Well don't we look like a couple," she joked.

Ronan gave his dragon friend a scolding glare before he chuckled at Minerva, "If we were, you would be my first."

Minerva smiled back and giggled. Then a loud masculine voice was heard announcing, "Ladies and gentlemen, the parade is about to start! Gather at the street to see our amazing line of floats, bands, and dancers! You wouldn't want to miss this spectacular event, not even the start of it. So stop playing carnival games and get your behinds here and come see the show!"

Minerva started to get excited and said, "Oh my gosh, the parade! I have to go see it!" She walked off ahead a few feet before she stopped and turned around to asked, "Hey, do you want to come?"

"Go on ahead, save me a seat, I'll be right there," Ronan said before walking away.

"Okay," the woman replied. She went over to one of the sidewalks where the crowd stood as they await the parade. When she looked at the crowd, she noticed that the humans and dragons were standing separated from one another. The humans seemed to be avoiding the dragons like a plague. Minerva knew why and she couldn't blame them for it. A few days later after the tragic event was still too fresh in their minds for them to want to forgive the dragons easily. *'It's going to take quite a long time for us to*

get along together,' she thought and sighed.

Atlas watched her nieces play-fight with one another. Danielle was trying to nip at her sister while using the characteristic reflexes, albeit imperfect, to dodge her sister's hand smacks. The magi smiled, liking the fact that they were having fun. *'Look at them; being competitive and trying to win. They almost look like they're warriors themselves. It sure takes me back to the time when Flarina and I played with each other,'* she thought. She pictured Kylie as herself and Danielle as Flarina inside a desert cave that resembled their childhood home in Solomos. Those memories she reflected on were certainly nostalgic with joy, but at the same time, Atlas missed her sister and wished that she was here to talk about the good old days together before their enslavement.

Her thoughts were soon interrupted by the ringing sound of a metallic object dropped on the floor. She turned her head around to see that Axle was awake. A broken sword was very close by him on the floor; it was probably the source of the sound. The man picked up one of the swords and ran it into a crack in the ground. Then he sat down and lean against it. He looked up at Atlas, with his blue eyes softened. "If you wish to know something, you might want to ask me now," Axle said in a faint tone. "And before you ask, my name is Axle Incarus from the land of Shadow Wind."

A few questions, both important and curious, came to Atlas's mind. She planned on asking them one at a time. "So Axle of Shadow Wind, from what I heard from your friend Strider, you two were being hunted by that Marc character. Why is that?" she asked.

The man answered, "Marc was paid to hunt us by a necromancer named Spinx, who want my heart for eternal life and this triangle. Other than that, I am not allowed to say." He looked over at the two little ones playing around.

"Sounds like you two have been on the run for a while," said Atlas.

Axle look at the sphere with the orange flame dancing inside its glass shell. Its color started to shade a bit to more of a sunset red. The man shook his head and stood up. He grabbed the huge sword and pulled it out of the ground. He placed the sword on his shoulder. "I'm sorry about this whole thing we got you caught up in, but I have a request I must ask you. Will you take this to the mountain if I can't?" Axle said as he held out the yellow triangle.

The magi replied, "Sure, I can. But which mountain is it?" She couldn't just go blindly running towards any mountain without knowing if it was the right one or not.

Axle answered, "It is a mountain named Trident. All I know is it is a very old mountain with a stone that have a hole for the triangle to fit into. Rumor said it will show the path of the person what they need to do, and what need to be paid to do it."

"Trident, eh? I never heard of it. But if I do see it, I'll let you know, alright?" Atlas said. Then she made a vow, "And Axle, I'll do everything to protect you in Strider's stead. With Marc gone, Spinx is going to have to find another sellsword to do his dirty work. And this should buy us a lot of time." Time to get further away from the bad guy that is.

As Axle stared hard into the magi's eyes, he said, "Strider was not just my friend to let you know, he was a personal bodyguard, assign to me by my father and the court before I left. He volunteered for the job, and knew the risk. I can't let you risk your life when you already have those two to protect. Spinx will use it to his advantage."

Atlas reasoned, "Well you are right that I do have my nieces to take care of. But how are you going to survive on your own, Axle? I mean if that Spinx crook is a necromancer; that means he's probably going to send some zombies after you. And who knows how many of them he has." She imagined a white dragon, knowing how most of them were pacifists, would not stand a chance against a horde of zombies, especially if they were dragons.

The man shook his head and said, "No, I don't know either, and it seems that there no way of changing your mind." He looked back at the two hatchlings still playing and continued, "Seeing how if Spinx finds those two, we are going to be in trouble; so it would be best if they came with us." Axle turned his head back to the magi with a bit of pity in his eyes. "It is your choice and I can't stop you from making it. Now if you excuse me, I'm just going to be outside and do a Shadow wind tradition for Strider," he said as he grabbed both of the large swords and took them with him.

Atlas watched Axle leave to go do the Shadow Wind tradition. She didn't know what it was, but she guessed that it was some kind of ritual for the dead. The dragoness went over to her nieces, who stopped playing and listened to what their aunt had to say. "Danielle, Kylie, we're going with Axle to Trident Mountain," she told them.

Kylie wondered what that place was and asked, "What is a Twident Mountain?"

The magi answered, "It's a place where we're going to put Axle's special object at. Spinx wants it and we can't let him have that. He'll try to come after all of us for it. So we're all going to stick together so that we can be safe."

"Who's Spinx?" asked Danielle.

"A very bad human that you should stay away from," the aunt answered warily. Speaking of bad humans, Atlas now felt it was a good time to teach her nieces a good way to flee. "Listen, since we're going to move again pretty soon. I think I should tell you girls what to do in case you see a bad guy," she said to them. Then she instructed them, "Kylie, inflate yourself. Danielle, wrap your tail around her foot or tail." The balloon hatchling breathed in a lot of air and inflated herself, then the whiptail grabbed her

sister's foot with her tail. With the preparation done, Atlas told them the next step, "Now start running around, Danielle."

"Okay Aunt Atwas," said Danielle. The hatchling started to run away as Kylie was dragged through the air. The balloon hatchling at first a bit surprised by being pulled fast like this, but then she started to enjoy the ride and giggle happily. Hearing how her sister laughed, made Danielle happy as well and she, too, laughed along with her sibling.

The magi let the whiptail run for a little while until she told them, "Now do you see how easy it is to escape like that. Now you and Kylie can get away good without being slowed down. So keep that mind the next time you're in danger."

The sisters replied, "Okay!"

Atlas felt glad that her nieces had learned this important lesson. But her pride soon died down when she stiffed up in alert after smelling the scent of blood from outside. She sensed that something was wrong. *'Oh, what happened now?'* wondered the magi.

Danielle stopped running as the hatchlings smelled blood, too. Kylie said, "Smells wike somebody got hurt."

Axle appeared at the doorway with a part of his clothing was covered in blood, along with his hands. "We might want to be leaving now. A group of bandits just came by and Spinx is not far behind either. His death scent is getting stronger every moment, which means he getting closer," he said in an undertone as he tried to wipe the blood off his hands.

Atlas frowned and cursed, "Oh shit, we got to go! Danielle, Kylie, get on. We're getting the hell out of here!" The hatchlings quickly got onto their aunt's back and she took off into the air to fly through the hole in the building. "Let's go, Axle," she told the man.

Axle turned into his dragon form and jumped into the air and with a power thrust of his wings. In clear day light scars over his body was visible from every angle, each look like swords marks and other dragons. Easily, the white dragon caught up with Atlas and said, "There one other thing I need to do for Strider before we leave, and you may watch if you wish."

The magi stopped and hovered in the air. "Alright, but make it quick, okay?" she said. The longer they waited, the closer Spinx would get to them. Axle flew straight up higher in the air. Almost as if at the perfect height, the dragon switched form again and started to fall; and then it started. With Grace of his moves and his combine dragon form and human form into a dance. Atlas opened her mouth in worry and wondered, *'What the hell is he doing? Is this really how the ritual goes? Why is he falling?'* Then her worry subsided a little when she thought about it. He probably might have done this before, so he's going to be. Besides he could transform back into a dragon and use his wings to prevent himself from

crashing to death on the ground.

Axle stopped dancing between the halfway point from his original fall and the ground. Then he changed to his dragon form and caught himself just above the tree line and quickly returned back to Atlas. "We may go now," he said. "But we must go north; north-east to the mountain."

Atlas understood and said, "Alright, I got it." If the mountain was in the northeast direction, that would mean she will be going the other way since she had been traveling west to journey to the Northwest region. She hoped that the mountain they were going to wasn't anywhere near Windfall. Because that would mean she would have to extra protective with her nieces, since that's where the hybrids were. She'll be damned if she let anyone of these creatures near and hurt them. But at least they were going in a northern and it was probably above the rebuilt city on the map, if she had one. The two dragons flew up north, while taking glances in between 30 seconds to see if Spinx or anybody related to him were below them.