

Chapter 23: The Newcomers

Danielle was done eating the catfish by the time the adults returned, but Kylie didn't eat any of it. She had tried a taste of it, but spat it out as it wasn't part of the balloon dragon diet. "Aunt Atwas, I'm hungry," she said to the woman.

Atlas walked slowly and awkwardly over to the hot spring as she told her niece, "Don't worry, I'll get you some food as soon as I stop hurting." She carefully set herself into the hot spring with one leg going in and then the other leg going after. Then she let herself slowly sink into the warm water. The spring was quite soothing to the pain.

Axle walked over to a wall near the entrance and slide down it. He placed the shield to the right of him as he leaned the sword over his left shoulder. He leaned his head against the wall behind him as he stared up to the ceiling. "Atlas, we have a guest coming from what I can hear. I can't tell if it's a large dragon. But whatever it is, the hum of the wings is getting heavier as if it's getting exhausted from flying," Axle said with a heavy breath of air. Atlas rose a bit out of the water and turned her head around to look at the entrance of the cave. She got out of the hot spring and walked over to the cliff of the cave. She looked outside to see who or what was there. If it was Spinx and one of his undead dragons, then this she was going to escape by teleporting everyone including herself to somewhere else. That way, Atlas would still be alive to take care of her family and have more time to recover. A large black dragon was seen flying outside; fortunately, he didn't have the stench of death on him. "So he headed north," Axle said out loud as they watched as the dragon circled a second time.

"Who?" the woman asked without taking her eyes off the black dragon that was heading toward the cave.

"It's Mekarh, Atlas," Axle answered. "Would explain why he vanished from Shadow Wind, but why is he so far north?" he asked as they watched Mekarh fly around one more time before landing near Atlas, with a powerful gust of wind following just shortly behind him. It made the woman's hair blow back and she kept her eyes closed to keep the dry air from getting into them.

The hatchlings were also affected by the gust as they were almost swept off their feet. Kylie went, "Eek!"

Danielle held on to the ground as best as she can and cried, "Whoa!"

Mekarh looked at the two hatchlings and then Atlas before he turned his attention to the bleeding man that was his brother. Almost in an instance, he growled at the woman with a low tone as if he was accusing her of being responsible for Axle's wounds. The man growled at his brother, "Mekarh, she is a friend and a good person, so back down."

The black dragon still growled a little bit longer before heading over to his brother and pressing his head against Axle's chest in a gentle way. "Are you going to tell me how you got injured?" Mekartha said as he pulled his head back and looked at the man.

Axle simply shrugged and answered, "Arrow to the chest. Now are you going to tell me why you are so far north?"

Mekartha simply shook his head. "I came to find you to help me save our sister, I'm sure you already know who has her," the dragon said as he curled up around his brother, though he did have to move Axle a bit to do it.

"Ya, I know; and she knows as well," the man said as he pointed to Atlas. "But first I must finish what father has sent me to do; it was the last thing he wished."

The woman walked up towards them a bit as she said, "We're still on our way to Trident Mountain. We had to rest and heal first because Spinx attacked us." Then she changed back into a dragoness and continued, "I'm Atlas, I've just started escorting Axle and protecting him ever since his bodyguard, Strider, died."

The hatchlings went over to Mekartha and looked up at him as the whiptail piped with an open smile, "And I'm Danielle!"

"I'm Kywie," said the balloon hatchling, who was smiling, too.

Mekartha looked at Atlas and said, "So you can shape shift as well. I take it Axle told you how to." He looked at his brother, who has already fallen asleep. Mekartha shook his large head before saying to the family, "It's nice to meet you all. But as you can see, Axle already passed out and I think I'll go to sleep as well."

The magi caught the metallic scent of blood nearby. The smell was coming from Axle and this had her concerned. "I don't think he's just passed out. Something's wrong, can't you smell it?" she asked, sounding worried. She went over to the man and lowered her face to get close his body. After breathing in the scent, the dragoness thought, *'Yep, that's blood alright; his blood. Why the heck didn't Axle heal his own wound? He's a white dragon for Pete's sake.'* After withdrawing her head away from him, she prodded the man with her paw and told, "Axle. Axle, wake up! You're bleeding."

The man opened his blue eyes up and replied, "Ya I know I'm bleeding, I can't stop it until the poison wear off. The certain poison makes your mind fuzzy, making it near impossible to use magic of any kind unless you're focusing on the certain spell really hard. Right now, I'm keeping myself in human form to keep the blood lost as little as possible. I am healing, but at a very slow rate. If I was in dragon form, I would lose more blood faster, and have a larger wound to cover." He was still breathing a bit faster than normal. Atlas's eyes widened in a bit of a shock. Spinx's arrow was covered in poison that weakens the

ability to do magic? Now that made the necromancer sound even more dangerous. The magi could imagine what the fight would have been like if Spinx had fired an arrow at her. No doubt she would probably lose as she would have no magic to defend herself against him and the dragon lords.

Mekarth suggested, "Ever thought about sealing the wound without using magic, like burning it close?" Axle shook his head in response.

Atlas asked the dragon, "I got fire magic. But does it work? I mean the burning wound thing." She wanted to make sure, before she tried touching his brother with her fire aura-covered finger.

As Axle looked at the magi, Mekarth answered, "It will hurt like hell when it happens, but it will cauterize the wound closed and stop it from bleeding. It was used before antibiotics were invented by humans." Then he turned his head to his brother and continued, "But it's up to him if he willing to let it be sealed by fire." Atlas was surprised to hear that humans used fire to heal wounds. She found the knowledge kind of strange as she had known fire to only be a destructive element, not a healing one.

"Do it, but I'm not going to wake up a bit if you do it," said Axle as he removed the patch that was now thick in blood. The wound was evident that it was healing at a very slow speed. The man's wound was 3/4 the size of its original size, and Axle gritted his teeth in pain from the removal of the patch. "Just do it," he said, bracing himself.

"Fine then," said Atlas. She set the finger of her front foot ablaze and moved it to Axle's wound. The man groaned in pain as the wound was cauterized. After touching the wound, Atlas withdrew her finger and asked, "You feeling alright?" She wanted to make sure that Axle wasn't hurting too bad.

"Ya, just peachy," Axle said painfully. "Thanks though." The man slid what was left of his shirt on and fell asleep.

Mekarth turned to Atlas and said, "Well that went better than I thought. I thought he would snap on one of us. And thank you; the more Axle don't have to worry about, the more I don't have to worry about." Then he looked at her curiously and asked, "Um mind me asking; but Atlas, is it? Would you happen to be Atlas Firestar?"

"Yes, I am," Atlas answered. She was a bit amazed to see that Mekarth had caught on quick to her identity. She guessed it was probably because Axle told him beforehand with telepathy. Either that, or Atlas was a name that was almost unheard of in Shadow Wind, that if one were to hear that name, it would mostly likely be referred to as her.

Mekarth looked at Atlas and said in a lower tone, "So, Axle has a former gladiator as his companion; how... interesting." Then he asked, "Mind me asking, but how did you come across Axle?"

Atlas told him the story of how it all happened, "Well my nieces and I were staying over at a castle that I

unearthed after sensing its magical energy. We stayed over there for a week before I met Axle and Strider while hunting. They were being pursued by Marc, so I gave them shelter at the castle while I went to destroyed city to raid the supermarket for some human food to feed them." Then she frowned and continued, "But while I was there, Marc and his men somehow managed to get into the castle and they tried to kill everyone, including my nieces. I got back to save Axle and the hatchlings in time, but Strider wasn't fortunate though. He and Marc died when I got there. I took Strider's body with the others and buried him next to a building at the same city that I went to. Axle was sad to lose his friend like that; I can totally imagine what it's like for him. Soon, he told me that he was going to put some kind of object over at Trident Mountain. I volunteer to go with him and protect him in Strider's stead since I felt like he needed some protection from that Spinx creep. So that's where we are now. The two of, um I mean all four of us on the run trying to get to the mountain." She quickly remembered her nieces were on this journey since she herself decided to go with Axle.

Mekarth looked at her strangely and asked, "That a bit out of your way is it not? I mean you have your nieces to protect, and you took Cloud spot of Axle's guard. It seems a bit of a burden on your shoulder, even for a dragon. It is your choices, and I can't stop you from making it."

The magi said, "Well even if I knew what Spinx's powers are, I probably wouldn't have picked a different choice. I mean I'm not the kind of dragoness who would let others go unhelped."

They heard giggling noises and looked down at the hatchlings. The sisters were now chasing each other around the spring. Danielle, being the faster of the two, always caught Kylie. When the roles are switched, the balloon had trouble catching up to her sister. Mekarth looked back to the magi as he said, "I think I'll go take a nap for a bit as I think over what you said Atlas Firestar." The dragon laid his head down on the tip of his tail as he folded the wing over Axle and him. "Would not want to be weak if Spinx attacks."

"Right then," said Atlas. She went back to the hot spring and took a nap there with her head resting over the edge.

After their lunch was done, the Vulture horde left the camp ruins in search of the next camp to destroy. It took them three hours to find the next one, but this time it had been destroyed before the horde got there. By the looks of it, the place had been damaged heavily by fire with objects and people toasted black or melted. Aeolus knew that this was the work of another dragon or a group of them, which means they would have more recruits to his horde. He told his horde to spread through the campsite and roar out calls to attract the dragons responsible for this. It took ten minutes until a crimson pygmy returned and flew over to the horde leader, to whom he reported, "Aeolus, I got telepathic message from the dragons who destroyed the camp. They're on their way over to meet us."

The disaster replied to him, "That's good. It makes things easier for us." That way they wouldn't have to

go looking for the place to meet them. The leader telepathically spoke to his horde and said, *'Everyone, that's enough roaring. The dragons responsible for this are coming over here to meet us. Let me know when they get here.'* The horde stopped roaring and everything went silent as the dragons focused on looking out for the newcomers.

Twenty minutes later, Aeolus got a telepathic alert from one of the dragons, *'Aeolus, they're here! Three of them; two magis and a storm dragon.'*

Magis and a storm dragon; these were two of the best breeds the horde needs. If these dragons were to join his horde, then Aeolus would have two diurnal magic users for daytime raids, which would allow Eitri much needed rest to use his energy for nighttime. The extra storm dragon would allow for more lightning bolts to blast the buildings and electrocute the humans. *'Send them over to me,'* the disaster dragon said. The dragons split up to make a path for the magis and storm dragons to get through to the horde leader. Aeolus gave them his courteous greeting, "Greetings, fellow dragons."

"Greetings to you too, Aeolus," said the male magi dragon with black rocky patches on his body. He was obviously half-magma dragon by appearance, and Aeolus guessed that he was how the camp got to be burnt. The magi/magma dragon began introducing his group, "I am Kekul and my mate's name is Enamora." He turned his head briefly over to the pure-bred magi dragoness, who bowed her head politely to the horde leader. Kekul looked to the storm dragon next and said, "And my long-time friend here is Cirrus." Cirrus just simply smiled in response. Kekul looked back to Aeolus and continued speaking, "So it is to my understanding that your horde is in need of recruits to destroy all the humans in Solomos?"

The disaster dragon answered, "Yes, as a matter of fact. But that's not the horde's only purpose."

"It's not? Then what else do you do?" asked the magma magi, needing to know more before he dared to get himself involved at risk.

Aeolus explained, "We are also building up a large army to outmatch the human army's exceeding numbers. They are a threat in that they're hunting down dragons everywhere and killing them on sight. One village I know has gone into hiding to protect themselves from the humans, and there may be many others doing the same thing. As long as the army's around, no one is safe."

Cirrus asked, "And you want our help to wipe them off the face of the earth, right?"

"Yes," Aeolus answered. "But there are a few things you should know about the army first. First of all they have five halfling magic users among them. Our only night magi, Eitri, couldn't handle them alone and our horde back then was too small to fight the human soldiers. So since then, we've been looking for dragons willing to add to our morale. Dragons with magical abilities such as yourself are a great deal to the horde as we need them the most to combat the halflings and destroy the humans faster." He said, "With your help, the threat to dragonkind will be destroyed and you will all be heroes. We'll make

Solomos a safer place for us all. So what will your answer be? I'm willing to hear from you."

Kekul seemed interested and said, "That sounds like something we can handle. But what's the catch? What do we get in return after this?"

"What kind of reward are you looking for?" inquired Aeolus.

"Let's see..." the magi magma said as his green sparkling eyes looked away and he thought about what he wanted in return. He engaged in a telepathic communication with his two buddies and discussed their desires. After they all came to a decision, they looked back at the disaster dragon and the mixed dragon asked, "Say, do you live in some kind of society? If so, what's it like?"

From the sound of it, the three dragons sounded like they wanted to join and live in a dragon group like a clan, village, or kingdom. Aeolus knew of two places as he explained, "Well I used to be a part of the Gallion clan, a noble clan by the way, until the humans killed some of us and separated the rest of us as slaves." The memory of the raid and massacre flashed through the horde leader's mind as he remembered the deaths of his father and his sister, Selenia. He put that terrible memory to the side as he continued, "The clan was a large one and it was wealthy in that we lived in a lush, beautiful forest and we had a stash of gold and gems. We even ruled over the land and the smaller clans that lived in our woods." The gold wasn't considered currency as they had no need to sell and buy, unlike the human cultures. But the gold and gems were considered good luck charms among dragons. The more you had, the luckier you were, or at least supposed to be.

Before the leader could talk about Doubloon's village, the three dragons smiled in content as Enamora got amazed and asked, "Ooh, you're a noble dragon?"

"I am," Aeolus answered.

Kekul was enthusiastic and said, "Now that sounds like a clan I want to join."

"I see you're eager to want to join my clan. But first you'll have to show me your character and prowess in every destruction we take part in, then I will decide if I want you in my clan or not," said Aeolus. He wasn't going to let strangers in that easily.

The magma magi said, "That we will." He looked at his buddies and asked, "Right guys?"

"Oh yeah sure," said Enamora.

Cirrus exclaimed, "Of course!"

"Very well then, you three are in," said Aeolus. "Welcome to the Vulture horde." The horde left the camp with the new recruits to search for the next camp. On the way, Aeolus thought about rebuilding

his clan. The talk with recruits had made him think about the future after humanity's extinction. Gallion clan needed to be large again and he was going to invite some of the horde members into his clan. Plus, he also needed to retrieve the gold, gems, and crystals stolen by the humans to show proof of his nobility status. In case he can't find them, then raiding museums and jewelry stores not occupied by other dragons would provide treasure to give him his merit. The disaster dragon's thoughts turned to Zeditha and wondered if these new magis would have the ability to teleport over to her. "By the way, I have one question for you," he said.

The new trio was listening as Kekul asked, "Yes? What is it?"

The disaster dragon asked, "Do any of you know how to teleport?"

The magma magi nodded his head and answered, "Why yes, we do. Well Cirrus can't do it, but my mate and I can."

"That is good," said Aeolus, who was glad to hear it. "Because I have a first task I need you to do."

Kekul asked, "And that would be?"

Aeolus gave the trio a mental image of Zeditha and the baby in telepathy and answered, *'I need you kill a human infant that the traitor, Zeditha, has rescued from us. Fight her, if you need, to accomplish your task.'*

Enamora, having observed the dragonet's lithe body, commented, *'She looks like she might be fast.'*

The disaster dragon replied, *'She is, which is why I'll have you team up with the crimson flares to get her.'* He broke off telepathy for a bit to call the crimson flares over, "Ursula, Firefry, Lokola, Serhon, Biskel, to me!" The crimson flares walked over to their leader as they went around their comrades and passed under their legs. Once they all reached them, Aeolus briefed them on the mission, "Crimson flares, I am going to send you with our new recruits to fight our traitor for the human infant. We need that child dead. Since Zeditha has been shown to fly fast, I feel your speed will help to easily catch up to her. Plus, your numbers will help to overwhelm her. She shall be no match for all of you."

Firefry voiced his opinion regretfully, "That's great and all, but I'm kinda going to feel sorry we had to do this to her. I mean, she did free us from the humans."

The disaster dragon reasoned, "That is true, but what's more important is that the baby dies. As long as one human is left unchecked; it will go to others who are still alive and reproduce their race back, which means they will use their population to bring us back to the dark ages. We can't let that happen!"

The other crimson flare agreed and said, "Aeolus is right; all humans are dangerous to our kind. We have to kill them all; even if it means going against Zeditha."

Aeolus felt thanks for the other flare for his support and told Firefry, "See? Even your friend here knows that. So I suggest you put your feelings aside and do what's most important. The future depends on it."

Firefry hasn't let go of his emotion, but he was willing to submit to doing his mission. "Alright, whatever it takes. I will see the human dead," he said.

"Much appreciated," the disaster said. Then he looked to the new magis and commanded them, "Kekul, Enamora, warp your team over to Zeditha now."

"Got it!" the magi mates said at the same time. Then they used their teleport spell on themselves and their teammates and warped out of here, leaving behind clouds of purple smoke.