

Chapter 57: Meeting with Spirits

Atlas and Roquette landed on the ground above and began to trek through the woods on the hunt for food. The magi smelled out for animals while her friend looked at the trees and bushes for fruits as they went. After a while, Atlas smelled fox and tracked it down until she found it snacking on a berry bush. The reddish-orange creature saw her light and began to run away. She chased it down and cast an earth spear at it, stabbing it for the kill and watching it drop to the ground. The magi began to eat her prey as Roquette fed from the berry bush the fox ate from. But with their stomachs not quite full, the two then went to hunt for more food. Soon, Atlas caught a deer to eat and then a few minutes afterwards, Roquette picked off a few pears from a tree to eat. With their stomachs full, now would be an appropriate time to return back to the white's home. But the magi had something she wanted to do first. She told, "I'm going back to the ruins, Roquette. There are some books I want to collect from there."

Roquette said, "Okay, take as much time as you need." The two dragonesses walked their way back to the hole and Atlas descended down to the castle ruins. She went to the spot where the library would be at and began to dig through the pile of fallen bricks and ashes, while pushing away the larger debris. For any debris too large, she would use earth magic to make a huge stalagmite rise underneath it to move it away. Soon, she found a book titled '*Lessons in Combat*.' That sounded like a nice book to have for a fighter like Atlas. Though she was already good a fighter, having been trained during her slave days, that did not mean she cannot learn new techniques. The magi set the book in a place where she would easily remember to retrieve and continued to hunt for more useful books.

Atlas continued digging through the rubble to find more books. She found one about war tactics and figured that this would be a good book for Aeolus, since he is running his own horde. Another one she found was the Castle of Fire's history book, the very same book she had read to her nieces and taught the alphabet from. Before the magi could turn to set away the two books, she heard a familiar voice asking, "What exactly is this place? It's not marked on any maps I seen nor any rumors or legends that I have heard."

Atlas was nearly startled as she had not expected the mysterious helper from Shadow Wind to be here. She must have followed her here the same way she did after escaping Lucian. The magi looked at her, seeing the girl twisting and turning around to look at the walls and pile of rubble. The dragoness answered, "This is the Castle of Fire; it's a place that used to be ruled by dragon warriors a long time ago before the humans killed them. It being sealed underground was probably why you never heard of it."

"Oh, hello!" Atlas heard a greeting and turned her head to see a water dragon with wings and legs wearing eyeglasses. The azure drake himself had a book in hand, although the title was obscured as soon as he slipped it away into his bag. "It seems like we're all here for books, aren't we?" Stone scraped against stone as he took a step forward to peer down at the two, kicking some rubble in the process.

The magi answered, "Well I am. Don't know about her." She shrugged her wing to the girl like a human pointing at someone.

The woman turned and looked at the new dragon. Her cloak shifted a bit like a breeze came as she said something harsh and quick. There goes the attitude again; Atlas wondered what her problem is. As the woman started to walk by, she said, "I'm simply here to just watch over her and her companion." Then she told the magi, "Atlas, I will be scouting around." She left down the hallway, passing the water dragon.

Atlas watched the woman go and said, "Okay see you."

The water dragon said, "You know, I've heard this place once housed a grand library filled with draconic literature, in addition to the fierce warriors whom guarded it. There's almost something poetic about it now, wouldn't you say? Really though, I wonder, what kind of book draws one into a place as sad as this?"

Atlas told him the truth, "I wouldn't say a book. My nieces and I were staying at this castle for a day when a friend of mine and his human pal showed up. They were being chased by some bounty hunters, who invaded the castle to get to them. Those bad humans were the ones that wrecked this place."

The water replied, "Oh my! Invading a castle just to collect a bounty? You've must had quite the pretty penny placed on your heads. What did you do for someone to be so willing to go to such lengths just to ensure your capture, and how did you escape? By the looks of this place their invasion attempt couldn't have gone all too badly." His eyes were bright behind his glasses, and they seemed to jump between each of the newcomers.

The magi answered, "Some nasty necromancer hired these killers to steal my friend's heart, so that he can become immortal. I had to use my teleportation spell to get us out of here before the castle fell. But my friend's friend, he didn't survive. He died before I could save him."

"Necromancers trying to steal your friend's heart? That sounds like something out of a story they tell hatchlings so they don't go off at night." He shivered visibly at the mere idea of it. "What made your friend's heart so special though?"

"I don't know," answered Atlas. "I'd ask Axle myself, but right now he's...not himself at the moment." She wondered how long it would take for him to return to normal. She guessed that maybe it would be tomorrow morning.

He looked at the woman and asked, "A need for someone to scout implies that you're still being chased. Have you come here to hide from them again?"

Atlas shook her head, "No, they're all dead now. But we do have some other scumbags who are after us.

They're from a city called Shadow Wind and it's run by these guys. They're called "lords" in that place and we ran into two of them: Dracul and Arch. These guys are pretty mean with their murders and kidnappings. They even managed to take my nieces once, but it was a good thing that they managed to escape somehow. I had to go rescue them from the ocean." She hoped that no one would dare to touch her little ones like that ever again. They were the only ones that served as a reminder of her departed sister.

The water hopped down from his current vantage point at the top of the ruined stares to stand before the magi. From here it was clear that he wasn't that big for a dragon – only the size of a horse to be exact. For a moment he paused, moving a paw up to straighten his glasses. "At least they're dead now - although these Shadow Wind fellows don't sound too savory either. Luckily for me I haven't had to deal with any sorts like them."

Then she heard Roquette asking aloud from above, "Atlas, who are you talking to?"

The magi looked up and answered back to her loudly, "Some water dragon wearing eyeglasses. He's here for books, too."

The white replied, "Really? I guess that castle must be something."

'Yeah, it sure is,' Atlas thought in agreement. She looked back to the water dragon and asked, "So pal, what kind of books are you here for anyway?"

"I'm here for no book in particular. You see, I'm both old and young. There's a gap from both when I've lived and when I've been born," He explained. "I just need those gaps filled in. So I could need just one book, or all of them, depending on what they teach me."

"Really?" she asked, feeling peculiar about his situation. "So pal, you're saying you've lost your memories or something?"

"I haven't quite lost my memories – I don't think so anyways. I just... well, I've just been asleep for a very long time."

"So a coma then. How long have you been asleep?"

The water recanted, "I'm not too sure. No one was around to tell me when I woke up... There wasn't much but ruin and waste." Then he fell silent for a moment, his throat contracting visibly as he choked on what seems to be a welling surge of emotions before he managed to get himself under control again. "That's why I'm here, I figure reading some history books would help me establish a timeline of what's passed and where I am now. Have you heard of the city of Panoply by any chance?" He looked over the magi.

Atlas shook her head and answered, "I haven't. But go ahead and take as much books as you want. My friend and I were going to go back home after this." Then she thought to ask on the concern of his shelter, "Say, do you have a place to stay tonight? Maybe my friend will let you stay at her place."

The water seemed to think about it for a moment before turning a paw to snatch a book off the ground. "Well – I didn't have much planned in ways of shelter. I was kind of just wandering around in hopes of finding more answers, but so far all I've found is some more ruins. The rest of the world isn't like this as well, is it?"

Atlas answered, "Well if you're counting human cities, then yes. But the only one I know that's still intact is Windfall and that's where we're going."

The water's eyes widened at the prospect of that. "Windfall," he muttered the words to himself as if memorizing them before giving a minute nod of his head. "What happened?" The smaller drake pressed quizzically as he padded towards her.

Atlas answered, "We dragons were enslaved by humans for nearly a thousand years. So all of us around the world combined our magic together to create the Spell and free us. Then we went on a rampage and wrecked the shit out of their cities. Windfall, well Cypress as it was called back then, also got destroyed, too. But then the Aquarians came and helped the humans rebuild the place. Now it's supposed to be a city where humans and dragons are equal, but the humans there don't want to modernize and get along."

The water frowned, "Gee, those humans sound different than the ones in Panoply. What made them so cruel?"

The magi shook her head, "I don't know, but that's just the way there are. Well, not all of them anyway." Then she asked, "So want to sleep over at my friend's place?"

The water flipped through the book before closing it again with a resounding *thump*. "I think a place to stay would be nice."

Then Atlas looked up at the white and asked, "Hey Roquette, do you mind if this guy sleeps over at your place tonight?"

Roquette answered, "Not at all, I don't mind having another guest."

The magi replied to the water, "Alright, we're going home now." She called to her white friend, "Come down here, Roquette. We're about to go back to Windfall shortly."

Roquette responded, "Coming!" She jumped down and glided to the ruins below, where she landed near the two dragons.

"Get your books, we're about to leave." While the dragon went to get some books, Atlas went to recollect hers before rejoining the group. She looked to the water dragon and asked, "Okay, ready to go?"

The water confirmed, "I am ready."

Atlas said, "Alright then. Let's go home." She teleported the three back to Roquette's house. The magi looked to her daughter, Akil, who was still sleeping on the floor. The younger dragoness was still fine from the time Atlas and Roquette left to hunt for food. The magi hoped that she will wake up alright in the morning. She would have to tell Akil their new objective of searching for Luco in Sundown.

The white asked the water dragon, "So mister, what's your name?"

He answered, "My name is Amius. And you are?"

The white answered, "I'm Roquette."

The magi interjected, "And I'm Atlas. Nice to meet you. Make yourself cozy here."

Amius smiled, "Thank you, it's good to meet two nice dragonesses like you."

After a while of carrying Azera, Kathia and the halfling made it back to Sundown. By now, her arms have been tired of carrying the swordsman. The refugees looked at the halfling with suspicion and hate as a few of them threw some things at her, but taking care on not hitting Kathia or Azera. When they got back to the tent, the halfling was bleeding from her head and her arms. Kathia dropped the mercenary off at her tent and went over to the place where the campers had their meals whenever it was time. Jason was sitting at one of the tables eating a bowl of soup. He said to her, "Hey Kathia, you almost missed dinner." He pointed to the cauldron hanging over a fire and continued, "It's over there."

"Thanks Jason," she replied to him. The girl went to grab a paper bowl and fill it with mushroom cream soup. Then she sat the same table as the archer and started a conversation with him. "So, did anybody miss me while I was out?" asked Kathia, after eating a spoon of the soup.

The archer put his spoon back into his bowl and replied, "Yes, we had some folks calling for you to tell you that dinner was ready. One lady checked your tent and you weren't there, neither was the guy. We thought the necromancer got you again."

The girl did not mean to get the refugees worried and apologized, "Sorry, I guess I should have told you

guys where I was going before I left. I'll try to remember that, next time."

Jason took another spoonful before asking, "So where were you two anyway?"

Kathia answered, "Going after that half-breed who left the camp. Azera, the guy with the silver hair, he wanted me to go with him because there was something about that half-breed he wanted to know about. They're both back now, but getting them here wasn't easy."

Jason gave her a curious look and asked, "Really? How so?" Kathia ate more of her soup and told her friend about what happened after the fight between Azera and the halfling. How she had to fight off and kill three knights with a dragon entering the fray. The archer was impressed with how she handled the fight in the woods. He commented, "Well aren't you becoming quite the fighter yourself. Hey, how you attend my class tomorrow and I can show you how to handle guys in armor."

An excited spark appeared in the girl's brown eyes. The man's lesson would be useful should she ever get into another fight where she was getting low on magic. "Sure, I'll be there."

Jason smiled and replied, "Great, I'll be looking forward to have you there. Hopefully, nothing else turns up that'll keep you away."

"I hope not," Kathia responded. Then after they finished their dinner, Kathia grabbed another bowl and poured the last of the soup in it to give to Azera, when he wakes up. She went back to her tent and cast a bubble barrier around the bowl to keep any buzzing insects out and to trap the heat inside. Then she picked up the book on necromancy to see how to control the undead. She needed her horse back and she was not about to lose her money's worth, considering how expensive the steed was. The girl got to the page where it told how the spell was done. She read that the spell would be difficult for beginners trying that spell as most of the times the corpse it was cast on would disintegrate into ash. Experienced users of this spell would have better chances of obtaining control over the dead bodies, but most of the time, the corpses will change to look like zombies. Only Experts will have the best chances of corpses looking just like they were before death. Kathia deemed that she would have to practice the spell lots of times before she would be able to control dead bodies. She knew her first experiment was not going to be her horse as she did not want to ride a pile of ashes. Then Kathia remembered that she had to heal the ghost hiker. She thought, *'Oh yeah, that's right. I need to fix him.'* She began to look through the whole book to see if there were any spells to restore spirits. But there was nothing to that would let her do this. There was a way that ghosts can heal however; they would gradually heal in the spirit world, but it would take on average either a few days or a week and a half depending on how much of themselves were damaged. The girl was disappointed that there was no faster way for him to heal, but at least the hiker had away to recover. Kathia put down the necromancy book and began to look at the spell for beginners' book to see what else she could learn.

A conventional spell caught her eye and it was something she could use to make her life better. It was called the "recharge electricity". Basically, what it does is use electric magic to pour into an electronic

object's battery and restore its energy. Kathia took her smartphone to use as practice. She has not recharged it in two days and feared that the battery may have died. She followed the instructions for the spell and electrified her hand with magic. She held her hand over the smartphone's hole for the battery and let the electricity flow into it. Then she turned on the phone and saw that its battery was at 100%. The spell worked perfectly. The next Kathia's phone battery is low, she would be sure to use the recharge spell. The girl looked at the next spell in the book and saw the night vision spell. This was a spell that would allow the mage to see in the dark. She read the instructions on how to use it and charged her magic energy into her eyes. She waited to see if the dark sky outside would brighten up in her view. But after several seconds, nothing happened. She tried again a few more times, but her vision remained the same. It seems like this was one of those spells that was inaccessible to her and it was the first one to be. Though she was unable to cast it, she could still teach it to her students to see if any of them can use it. As Kathia was looking at the next spell, a ghoulish-sounding voice behind her rasped, "You there... Turn your face to me..."

The girl felt her ears go heavy after being stricken with fear at how eerie the tone sounded. As she whipped her head around, she asked, "Huh? Who's there?" She was met with a scary sight in form of a floating skeleton wearing a black cloak with rips and holes at the edge of the sleeves and bottom. He was armed with a scythe and there were cyan eyes glowing in the eye sockets. Kathia let out a frightened scream and turned her body without thought as she frantically crabwalked back a bit from the monster. The girl's voice shook, "W-who are you?!"

"I'm the reaper of heaven," answered the creature, unfazed by the human's fear.

"A reaper?!" cried Kathia in panic. "Don't tell me you've come to kill me!" She did not want to be sent to heaven just yet. She was too young for this and she has many plans in her life she wanted to do before she died; raising humanity from the ashes being one of them.

The reaper told her, "Relax child, I've only come to give you a warning."

"A warning?" asked Kathia. Her fright diminished a bit, but it was not totally gone.

The reaper asked, "You know that hiker you brought into the fight with these men?"

The girl knew he is referring to the ghost hiker. "Yes, what about him?"

The reaper told, "I found him missing parts of his body... He said he put himself in harm's way, just so you could ensure a kill... Now I shall tell you my warning." He flew in closer to the girl until his head was a foot apart from hers. His eyes bore into hers intently, making her feel a sense of dread as if he was going to place a curse on her or something. He seriously boomed, "NEVER LET A SOUL BE DESTROYED!" Kathia shrieked, taking his words to heart so she would avoid whatever punishment he had in store for her. The reaper continued, "Reapers like myself have a purpose to collect souls wandering on this planet... Our scythes act as teleporters to the afterlife and there are three of us with stomachs like that:

the reaper of hell, the reaper of limbo and myself included... When a soul gets completely destroyed, it cannot regenerate and will be lost forever... Therefore, it is the gravest sin of any necromancer to eat a soul or let it be destroyed... If you are sliced by the reaper of nothingness...then your soul will cease to exist and everyone will lose their memory of you." The girl grimaced at the thought of suddenly not existing, that means no one will remember her accomplishments and her company will have no heir. "Do you understand?"

Kathia nodded slightly, "I-I understand." She did not know that necromancers could eat souls, but now that she learned the consequences for it, she would not dare to devour a spirit.

"Good..." The reaper continued, "As for your hiker friend... I have sent to him heaven and you can no longer summon him... He will recover the fastest there..." Kathia was disappointed that she would not get to use the hiker, who was just getting familiar with and saw as useful, again. But at least it was a good thing for him that he was in safe paradise where will get better soon. The reaper finished, "I will be gone now... Remember...my warning." Then he flew backwards past the tent wall and disappeared.

As the girl sat here with mind going over the recent conversation, a man opened the tent flap and asked, "Kathia, I heard screaming. Are you alright?"

She turned her head back to him as far as her neck would allow and saw the guard on the side of her vision. She answered with a lie, "I'm fine, it's just a cockroach. It's dead now." There was no need to worry him about the reaper.

"Okay, well call us if you need us," said the guard before he closed the flap and left. Kathia heard him tell the other guards that everything was alright. With her mind still recovering from the reaper, the girl thought to busy herself with something else to clear her head. Maybe she could summon a ghost to tell her what happened in Windfall since she left. Using her magic energy, she began to summon a helpful ghost, "Spirits of the afterlife, I need one of you to tell me the recent events of Windfall."

The ghost of humans heard the necromancer's call and the few of them began to approach the gate to the living world. But then, a certain feared mafia boss pushed his way past the other ghosts as he growled, "Out of my way, worms! I have a future hero to train." The ghosts, knowing his infamy in ruthlessness and brutality, backed away from him in fear. Even the ghost ahead of him stopped going to the gate and let the mafiaman pass. The boss went through the gate to meet Kathia.

Kathia saw a ghost materialize before her in the form of a bald-headed man with a rough scowl on his face. His tough exterior intimidated the girl somewhat; he looked like a gunman who's killed people before. It looks like the reaper was not the only scary person to visit her tonight, but thankfully this spirit

looked nowhere near terrifying as the last one. The ghost asked her, "Your name is Kathia, right?"

The girl answered, "Uh yeah, and you are?"

The ghost answered, "I am Keith Handal and I've come to tell you everything you need to know about Windfall. And trust me, you are going to be angry when I tell you the first one."

This sounds like bad news and it filled Kathia with concern for her home. She asked, "What is it? Tell me?"

Keith asked, "Kathia, you know how the dragons took away our modern weapons and vehicles, right?"

"I do," she nodded.

Keith told her, "Now they've taken away another thing and they'll do it tonight. This time, they'll be banning most of our electric-running technology."

As he predicted, the girl became mad as her brown eyes burned hot with fury and her teeth clenched like a growling dog. "What?!" she yelled.

The ghost nodded, confirming his words, and said, "That's right, they've driven us further back towards the Stone Age and they'll continue to do so. Perhaps our life-saving technology will be next."

Kathia ranted, "Those scaly bastards! How could they be allowed to get away with this? That chicken-shit mayor is spreading his ass out for them in his bed!"

"Infuriating, isn't it?" asked Keith in agreement. "Makes you want to overthrow him, doesn't it?"

"Yes!" She wanted to go into his office, grab him by the front of his dress shirt, yell at him and then punch him in the face.

"Well I have some good news for you. There's a new anti-dragon group called the Equalists. They just formed yesterday, but they're inspiring hatred against the lizards and getting new members for their organization. You should ally yourself with them if you want to end the mayor's tyranny. And here's what's better, the idiot dragons in armor are collecting refugees and bringing them into the city. That's more recruits and you and the Equalists will have for your army."

Kathia smiled at the information, knowing that the more humans there were the more that they will outnumber the dragons. It will be just like the first war against them that started slavery. She cheered excitedly, "This is great! I'm so glad we got allies fighting for us in Windfall, while we're still training for war. I want to meet them tomorrow!"

Keith, still in his calmness, said, "Don't be too excited, something like that was bound to show up eventually. But still, you should keep that enthusiasm alive for when you see them."

"I will. I'll be going right to the city after I train my class." And should the Rittevon Construction Company come here, she will meet with them first, too.

The ghost frowned, "About that, Kathia. I've been watching how you've been training these students and I'm not impressed with it." Scowling at her, he continued, "You're supposed to be making soldiers out of them, not magical housekeepers. You don't need a newbie's book to tell you what spells you should start with."

The girl felt unnerved by how scary the man's anger looked. She apologized, "Sorry, I just thought I could prepare their bodies for stronger magic first."

"And you could do that with easily do that with the weakest fighting spells. From now on, you are to teach them spells useful for combat, so we can get to war with these scabies faster, got it?"

Kathia nodded, "Yes sir."

The ghost relaxed his expression and offered, "Good, and since you're trying to learn more spells, I can teach you mine so you can pass them on to the people." His mouth formed a sinister-looking grin.

The girl asked hopefully, "Really?"

"Yes, I'm a very dangerous man with a history of violence and deaths. I used to run a mafia in Cypress, the one that kills any dragon sympathizers we hear about and the one cops don't dare to cross. You probably might have heard of us."

"I do," said Kathia. She had learned about the mafia's existence on the internet before and how ruthless and powerful they were. Although she appreciated having someone to teach her magic, it felt unusual and a bit scary, and perhaps even wrong, to be taught by a vicious criminal. But for the sake of all of mankind, she had to take whatever help she can get. Then seeing as how he is now a spirit, she asked, "But if you're dangerous, then how did you die?"

Keith's eyes narrowed and he spoke lowly in a vengeful tone, "Because a man I failed to kill as a child in my region of birth slaughtered me and my mafia. He and his dragon. I don't know how he escaped my men, but he grew up strong and agile. If I am to teach you my magic, you have to promise me that when we liberate Cypress, we get that man and his dragon killed."

"I will, but who is this man?"

"His name is Ronan and you'll know him when you see his gray cloak and his desert dragon. Now go to

bed, a warrior must keep him or herself well-rested." After the ghost vanished, Kathia went into her sleeping bag and took a long rest until morning.

Aeolus heard a commotion outside the cave and it woke up his group. As they opened their eyes, Pyro asked, "Guys, what's going on?"

The horde leader answered, "I don't know, but I'm going to check it out." He went outside the cave and saw which direction his horde was looking at. There was obviously something or someone of interest. He followed their stares and saw that Enamora has returned. "Enamora," he called her name and the dragoness looked at him. He asked, "Has the mission failed? Where are the others?"

The magi answered, "No, we're still trying to rescue the villagers. I got frozen by an M. Slaver dragon and Yopple warped me here for help."

"An M. Slaver?" asked Aeolus. He has never heard of a dragon like that before.

"I don't know what it is, but from the sound of it, I think they keep slaves and maybe even boss them around."

Aeolus replied, "It sounds obvious they would do that." The only thing that was most interesting was the "M" part of the name. Perhaps the "M" stood for magic, meaning that these slavers used magic to control their slaves.

Enamora told him, "Oh, and one more thing, Aeolus. Today, we discovered some important things you should know when we invade Shadow Wind."

"Interesting," replied the horde leader, finding it good that the rescue team at least got intel on the city. "What are they?"

The magi answered, "There are hidden magic traps inside the city. Yopple's presence was able to keep them from activating. And also, if you're using magic inside the city without a special slave collar, Dracul's forces will track you down and find you."

Aeolus frowned and said, "I heard about the consequences of magic in the city from, but the magic traps is something new. Sounds we should have a cassare dragon with us at all times when going into Shadow Wind." That way so that both the traps and a dragon's accidental attempt at magic would be disable. Shadow Wind's defenses were sounding impressive, but in a bad way since it would make things difficult for the horde. But then again, who said that defeating the evil lords would be easy?

Enamora agreed, "Yes, we should."

Liath asked the leader, "So does this mean we won't be able to spy on Dracul?"

Aeolus answered in disappointment, "Unfortunately no. But at least you and the pygmies can keep the crystals to help you out in fights." After a long pause, he said to the horde, "If there's nothing else to discuss, I have a few dragons I need to take for some special training." He telepathically told the selected dragons to meet him out far from the village, where he would train them to shapeshift into humans.