

((Note: This section takes place during [Chapter 27](#)..))

Akuma landed with a running start in the forest, slowing. Pacing, he snarled, "Stupid humans. Stupid dragons. I hate them both. They both think they're better than the other. What hypocrites!" He frowned at his own words.

Nick replied, "This is the exact reason I spent the last few centuries in solitude. People are stupid, greedy little things, and it shows." He sat down and leaned against one of the dragon's horns, still a mouse. Akuma huffed and sat down in his spot. Then the rodent's little ears perked, hearing a loud flapping. "Did you hear that?" he whispered to Akuma as quietly as a mouse. Straining his eyes to look through the tree, he tried to see who was following them. The hybrid looked over.

Then a large cassare dragon quickly jumped on the ground hard, then jumped up again and again, making a loud, booming noise each time. He shouted, "Stop! Wait!!"

((Note: The following sections take place during [Chapter 28](#)..))

Nick watched as Akuma jumped into the fray and started to tear apart the hunters above in the tree tops. Finishing off the ground hunters, the mage boy knelt down briefly and wave a hand over the wounded cassare, casting a healing spell before leaping back to his feet. Akuma sneered into the mage's mind, *'Oh let it croak. The dragon's already brain dead.'*

Nick flinched in response. He knew the hybrid boy could do it, but he has never actually seen him use it before. *'Oh hush you, I'm not just going to let him die,'* he shot back with his mind. Not used to mind communication, Nick's mental presence was quite noticeable when he reached out with it, with stray thoughts and flashes emotions leaking through. Right now, he was feeling extremely annoyed at everything that had happened today. "This means nothing," he whispered harshly at the cassare as he turned and ran over to help Akuma with the remaining hunters. He was starting to resent both sides, seeing what the hybrid meant when he said they were both equally stupid. What the mage really wanted to do was get out of here; he was tired of the hunters, he was tired of people, and he was tired of dragons. Then the cassare joined the fight and brutally slaughtered some of the other hunters. The hybrid snatched Nick in his claws and flew away with him. Being in moderately good condition Nick grasped onto Akuma's side and back, hoisting himself up around his beating wings and into a comfortable position on the hybrid-turned-dragon's back as Akuma shifted awkwardly in his flight, making a faltering flutter for a moment. "Where are we off into a hurry then?" he asked as he pressed himself low against the gold dragon's back as they flew. The dragon adjusted and kept flying as the trees whipped by, almost like blurs to Nick. The dragonet veered now and again to avoid hitting any. Akuma suddenly dipped and landed on the ground fast-paced. He hopped across the ground a few times before slowing enough to be able to trot to a stop. About 20 feet away, Albel and Fayt had paused in what they were doing. Fayt sat on the grass, picking at what appeared to be an ice sculpture of a snowflake. Albel

stood upright, flexing his retractable claws in and out once. His blood red eyes drifted to Akuma. Of course, the gold hybrid would be the first to be seen; his dragon scales glittered brightly in the sunlight, which was not exactly camouflage. Nick stayed on Akuma's back, not saying a word out loud, but instead drilling his thoughts into the dragon's head, *'What are you thinking? Albel isn't the type you drop by and have a friendly chat with.'* A feeling of uneasiness leaked over Nick's mental link.

Albel's mouth curled into a sneer while his brother looked on with curiosity. The mage nodded a greeting towards Fayt, but did not even look at the black hybrid. "What do you want, fools?" Albel's deep voice sounded with the usual sharp tone to it as if he could carve someone to bits with his tongue alone.

Nick thought to the dragonet, *'What is it you intended to gain from this?'*

Akuma maintained a demented smile in response. He paused, folding his wings in sheepishly, looking at the ground. He said to the black hybrid, "Just...saying hi since we happened to...ah...fly past."

Albel growled, "I have no interest in talking to you maggots. Get out of my sight!"

Akuma nodded, "Of course, but ah..." He looked around in a jittery motion. He wandered closer to the other hybrid. Albel's eyes seemed to burn into the dragonet as he approached.

Fayt asked, "What is it, Akuma?"

Suddenly, a female voice shouted behind Nick and his friend, "Hey! You! Are you the duo Sir was talking about? Come here! The end of the war depends on it!"

The cassare from before shouted, "Ohimia, stop! You fool, stop! You are making yourself look like an idiot!"

Akuma glanced back at them and then looked back to Albel, still smiling awkwardly, "Ehe..."

Nick shot a burst of healing magic towards the injured dragoness with her cut throat. Before turning towards the cassare with a look of disgust on his face. He spat out, "Do you really think disliking the stupidity of both races means having a complete lack of a conscience and forsaking your friends, or are you just screwy in the head?" Holding onto Akuma tightly he put his head close to his ear and whispered, "Just take us away from here please. It's all giving me a headache." He did not know what was wrong with this dragon, but it was all very exhausting. He hoped they would not be followed again.

Nick said nothing as Albel threatened Akuma, and only watched as Ohimia flew off. He did not speak until the dragonet had carried him up into the air and started to fly off. As the dragonet looked down at

the trees below, the mage asked, "What the hell was wrong with that dragon? Does he have multiple personalities or something? At first, he's just all like 'you two are the only hope to stop the war' and then out of nowhere he went full on psychopath." Leaning low on Akuma's back, he sighed. "So what now? Do you think there are still a bunch of idiots parading the streets of town, or should we go somewhere else?" he asked wearily. "Although, there seems to be idiots everywhere we go nowadays. It's like we're a magnet for weirdos and psychopaths or something," he half-laughed. The dragonet let out a frustrated growl as Nick held on during the flight away from the chaos. Luckily this time, they were not followed. The mage was rather annoyed by the whole thing after all.

((**Note:** This section takes place during [Chapter 31](#).)

Akuma dipped down near the mountain's edge, but still by the river. He fluttered his wings, landing softly on the grass. The steady beating noise faded until there was only the sound of the running river. Akuma sat down and reared up for a moment, shaking Nick off his back and causing the boy to fall into the grass below. He stood up again and turned around, pacing back and forth. "You're much more bleak than you usually are. Usually, I'm the one who gets an earful for shunning other people. And yet here you are." He chuckled at the end.

Nick sighed, "They were getting on my nerves and they couldn't take a hint..." He went on, "What the hell was all that anyways... They just barged in out of nowhere." Nick spat out in a mocking voice, "'You two have to save the world, you're the only hope!' I am neither a soldier nor a politician, what do they expect me to even do? Ugh!" Sighing again, he walked over to the river and crouched before the water, running a hand through the cold current. "Sometimes I just want to jump in and let the river carry me away so I don't have to worry about anything anymore." A summer breeze whisked by. There was a long moment of silence. It actually felt quite nice and peaceful with the quiet burble of the river and the gentle sun-warmed breeze.

The mage was about to turn around and say something when Akuma suddenly pushed him in with a SINGLE CRUEL COLD-HEARTED SHOVE. "I can help!" the dragonet called out.

Nick fell into the cold water and vanished below the surface. Though the current here was slow, it ran deep 15 feet. Laying on the riverbed, Nick did not move. He simply held his breath and looked up towards the surface, holding his breath. From the surface all that changed was a few bubbles. Nick continued to watch from his spot on the riverbed. His lungs were starting to ache, so he began to slowly ascend to the surface. Luckily his clothes were thin, so they did not really hinder his ability to swim. Seeing the hybrid's human face with his eyes narrowed peering over the edge of the river, the mage smirked. He suddenly popped up beneath Akuma and spat a cold mouthful of water right into the hybrid boy's face, making him snarl in response, before kicking away from the side of the river to distance himself from Akuma. "Come on in, the water's great!" he offered, suppressing a laugh as he kicked through the water, swimming in circles on his back. The hybrid wiped the liquid away with the sleeve of his hoodie before turning to glare at Nick.

The hybrid shook his head after a moment, baring his fangs at the mage. "You can splash around in the water all you want. I'm staying up here where it's warm. And dry," he added, moving back in the grass a few feet from the edge. He shuddered briefly, no doubt at the idea of water.

Nick stuck his tongue out at Akuma and shed his cloak, balling it up and tossing it at the lounging hybrid, who rolled out of the way to avoid it. It landed on the grass with a sopping **thump** behind him. The hybrid's lip curled. "Come onnnn," he let out, swimming closer to the side of the river bank. "There is a shallow bend in the river not too far down from here where the current slows down," he went on, flipping over onto his back and kicking against the current to stay even with Akuma, who was now on his feet. The river was nice and cool, not to mention surprisingly clear. "I'll teach you how to swim so you won't have to be so afraid of a little water all the times. You're a strong kid, you can get over it."

Akuma looked down at Nick in silence. His golden eyes drifted down the stream. He asked accusingly, "And how do I know this isn't just some sick joke you've concocted?" His claws tapped impatiently against his side.

Nick looked offended as he went on sarcastically, "Yes this is all some horrible joke I've just been dying to carry out since I met you." He let himself be carried downstream, beckoning to Akuma to come on over. The hybrid slowly followed the mage downstream, keeping away from the edge of the river. He frowned again as the water started to slow out to a peaceful setting on his way. A barrier of rocks broke up the current and Nick had to climb over them into the much shallower, calmer water. Here, the water would come up to about mid-chest on the hybrid, and the current was almost unnoticeable. "Come on, the water's shallow here, the only way you'll drown is if forget how to stand up, and that's assuming that I'd ever let you drown anyways," he tried to convince Akuma to come over into the water.

The hybrid edged closer to peer into the water. He looked to Nick and then the water again in seemingly thought. The hybrid straightened up again and slowly unzipped his hoodie, dropping it to the grass. He crouched down and eased into the shallow water, baring his fangs at the coolness. His hands finally let go of the grass and he stood still in the water, looking over to Nick. His face was that of aggravation and distrust.

Nick smiled as Akuma got into the water. He stared at the hybrid and looked around thoughtfully for a second. He actually had not thought of how to teach someone to swim before, it just came naturally to him. "Alright so...let's see," he said out loud to himself. "Umm, I guess I'll just show you the motions first and you can try to mimic them." He went on as he started to swim towards Akuma freestyle, stopping in front of the hybrid boy who blinked as the cold water splashed around, peppering him with a mist that was followed by a gust of wind in the summer heat. "Breathe out through your nose while your face is in the water, and when you need to take a breath just do this," the mage explained as he went back into freestyle stroke and took a breath, exaggerating his last arm movement so Akuma could see. "Make sure to breathe through your mouth while taking breaths by the way, wouldn't want to suck up any excess water up your nose. That's not fun." Thinking a bit more, he got an idea and came back over to Akuma, moving his arm parallel with the water and keeping it there, extended. He explained how to do it, "Hold onto my arm and practice the last part of your stroke that way, instead of moving your arm down

through the water to reset, just keep it holding onto my arm and do the next stroke from there. That way you can practice the stroke without worrying about keeping afloat."

The hybrid's eyes tracked down to the water again. He slowly lowered himself down into the water. The water reached his shoulders and then he flailed. Nick lunged forward to grab him, thinking the horned boy had found a sudden deep spot in the water to drown in. When Akuma grabbed the grass at the edge of the river, the mage backed off a bit, letting the scared hybrid boy recover in silence. Nick was surprised that the hybrid boy had even agreed to get in the water. He was quite proud of Akuma getting in, despite his previous traumatizing experience with water. The hybrid stayed there for a couple minutes, calming himself in the still water. Akuma detached himself from the edge finally, looking back to Nick. He frowned and moved over, taking the offered arm hook and starting to try the paddling motion in a slow pace, seemingly more experimentally. He was doing better, albeit sloppy, but it was expected for a beginner. It would all become muscle memory soon enough anyways.

Nick tried suggesting thoughtfully, "Try scooping your hands to push more the water with each stroke."

Akuma nodded and murmured, "Yeah, working on it..." After a while, his strokes became more purposeful in his motions. Akuma spent a while doing the motion before stopping, breathing quietly. He sighed quietly, dipping his face down and getting a drink from the river. He straightened up and climbed out onto the grass again. The hybrid made a quiet thrum noise as he shut his eyes to rest. Nick pulled himself out of the water as well, having enough of it for the day. He watched Akuma for a few moments, making sure he was okay, before plopping down on the grass beside him, laying down and closing his eyes, letting the warm sun begin to dry him. "Better than ice water. Or ice. Or snow," the hybrid uttered quietly.

But Nick interjected happily, "Oh but all of those things are equally wonderful in their own ways." He always felt good after a swim. As he spoke, he felt his stomach rumble and he added, "Maybe we should get something to eat soon."

Akuma opened one eye. "Could nab a deer," he murmured, stretching.

((**Note:** This section takes place during [Chapter 32](#).)

A figure watched from the tree line, smiling mischievously. "Awww, you two make such a cute couple," retorted a female voice in a mocking tone as the hybrid's other eye opened. "You two gonna kiss already or what?" As Akuma sniffed and looked around, a barefooted teenager moved closer and she came into view, her red hair shining brightly in the light. "Or maybe you're too tuckered out from all that playing in the water? What were you two doing under there? There was an awful lot of splashing going on over there." The figure placed her hands on her hips and smirked, standing not too far from the two. Her left eye was blue with a round pupil and her right eye was a yellow draconic one. She wore a chain necklace with an emerald-eyed golden dragon head charm, a light chestnut-colored shirt under a

long-sleeved pink & orange striped jacket with a brown fur neck, and a pair of khaki pants with rolled-up legs to her knees tied by strings.

Akuma looked her up and down before saying, "You have some weird fetishes."

The girl raised an eyebrow at him. "I'm not the human hugger here, buddy," she said moving her finger in a spiral motion before jabbing it in the horned boy's direction.

He asked accusingly, "Who are you? I've never seen you before. I thought the rest of us were dead."

The girl merely shrugged, "I am Ember, and no we're not all dead, obviously. I might ask you the same question, who are you, and why are you tolerating this human? Are you using him for free food and shelter?" Her voice was mocking as she mentioned Nick.

"Hey, I have ears you know!" Nick called out, narrowing his eyes as he stood up.

"Oh, I can fix that if you like," the fiery-haired girl smirked, producing a fanged smile. Nick simply scowled, waiting to see what Akuma thought of this strange girl.

The horned boy looked back to the mage for a moment, his pupils thinning out to slits briefly in the flicker of sunlight. His expression was calculating before he looked back to Ember. "I'm Akuma, I've been in the Northeast for my whole life. I've seen the other hybrids around, but never you..." He paused again, explaining about the mage, "This is not...exactly a human. Some mutation of one, an immortal if you would. More pleasant than humans or dragons." Then he grimaced and shrugged, "As for free food and shelter, what do I care?"

It seems the horned boy hesitant to call the mage his friend, but Ember could read him like an open book. She looked pleased and let out a shrill high-pitched laugh. "Ohh hooo, look how quickly he's willing to sell you out! How precious," she poked at Nick tauntingly.

Akuma scowled at Ember's words. "I'm not selling anyone out. He's hardly human and that's a fact no matter how you look at it. We look human too, but you know we're not." He added, "With the elitist streamlines, what do you expect? Albel doesn't respect anyone that can't fight him and I'm not dumb enough to fight a streamline. We're called duds for a reason."

Winking as she let out a sneeze smoke instantly filled the air, obscuring her. When the smoke cleared, she was gone from her previous spot and was now standing behind them. "Streamlines aren't that scary, they're actually kind of dumb. You wanna talk about a free meal? Try snagging one out from under one of those big oafs' noses. Half the time they'll think it was someone else and go after them instead," the red-headed hybrid jeered. "We're called duds because we couldn't do what the humans created us to do, not because we're weak. Well, most of us anyways," she went on, eyeing Akuma as if sizing him up.

The horned boy rolls his eyes and explained, "Right, I assume you've never actually tried. Our smell, for one, is so uncommon you would be especially noticed when/if you approach. Secondly, yes, we are in fact weaker. Maybe not by human standards, but yes, by draconic standards."

Ember still had a smirk on her face. "It seems like you forget that we are assassin types, not warriors. When the only streamlines there are to compare us to are warriors then it seems like your argument doesn't hold much water. And you seem to forget that humans can't really smell anything worth a damn," she said pointedly in response to Akuma.

Just then they heard a certain black hybrid demanding, "You. Where did you come from?" Albel trudged over to the trio, looking at them sternly, particularly Ember. Akuma jittered at his presence but looked at Ember as well. "Dion never said anything about another hybrid escaping."

The girl's eyes seemed to twinkle. "Oh ho ho, that is a very good question indeed." When she laughed, it was shrill and high-pitched. "Dion never told you about me, because he never helped me escape. I've been deep, deep in the forest for a long time now," she purred. "They've been looking for me for a long time, but you can't catch smoke with your bare hands."

"Not... really," Akuma shifted his weight. "If you didn't hang around Dion, it's no surprise you don't know why there aren't any around. Ah...other streamlines killed them. They were never perfected. We're a more delicate model." He frowned, looking at himself. Albel's eyes smoldered somewhere between challenging and amusement.

Ember raised an eyebrow as she saw Fayt emerging from the forest next, walking over to the group. She exclaimed, "Ah, so it's a big ol' family reunion now it seems!"

The white hybrid asked, "There you are. Where'd that crazy dragon go?"

Akuma asked, "Crazy dragon?..."

Albel chuckled darkly, "She ran off with her tail between her legs as expected. Classic 'ohIhavetogo'."

Fayt looked over at Ember. He looked taken back before making an audible sniff. "Another Hybrid? I wasn't sure there were any..." he looked at Akuma and Nick curiously as if they'd just produced her out of thin air.

The horned boy shrugged and explained, "Apparently, Ember here has been around for a wild. An escapee."

Leaning forward slightly, the girl's eyes widened. "Oh, I remember you!" she exclaimed pointing a finger towards Fayt. "You're the only streamlined that wasn't constantly trying to tear me shreds." She laughed as she said it, as if the thought of the streamlines trying to kill her was amusing. Nick watched the whole thing, not sure how to take it. Turning to Akuma, he raised an eyebrow questioningly, as if asking him what his opinion on the whole thing was.

Albel blinked once at Ember. Fayt cocked his head to the side, "Ah... don't think I even remember you..."

Ember smiled and sounded pleased, "Good, I made a point of making sure I was unmemorable."

Akuma looked at the black hybrid more closely and asked, "Why are you all wet?"

Albel grunted in response, "The birdbrained magi tried to come after us again. Turned tail and ran without putting a scratch on us." He made a bark of laughter.

Akuma contemplated quietly, "Wait, she just came in out of the blue?"

Fayt answered, "Actually, it was because of when you dragged that dragon to us previously."

"Oh.." the horned boy looked at the ground.

Ember's interest peaked. "Who is this magi character?" she questioned curiously.

Nick shrugged, "I've only met her twice." With a tingle of anger in his voice, he continued, "And last time I saw her, she was trying to kill Akuma for the sole reason of being a hybrid."

Ember laughed at that. "Well, it sounds like someone's got her panties in a bunch. Not really surprised though, everyone loves the hybrids!" she said, adding in the last part sarcastically.

Akuma's eyes flickered to Nick with something of a glimmer. "Think she'd try it again?..."

Fayt half-nodded, ticking his head to the side and mused, "Quite possibly. She does seem to have something against hybrids despite the warnings she received." He stared at the clouds overhead.

Akuma cleared his throat quietly, shielding it nonchalantly with his hand, "Maybe...we should...stick together then." Everyone's heads turned to him with Nick and Ember raising eyebrows. The horned boy looked away, seemingly feeling awkward, "I mean, we're not that social true, but. We're all that's left of our species. Isn't it safer from humans and dragons to stay together?..."

Ember pointed out, "Oh sounds lovely. Have you forgotten that Albel here doesn't exactly play nice? I'd give it a day before we annoy him and he kills us all."

Albel looked over briefly, snorting out a small billow of fire from his nose. Akuma rubbed the side of his head, explaining, "What I mean is that should change. If we're all that's left like I said, we should be helping each other if we want to survive. Because apparently there's nutjobs like Atlas running around trying to kill us. You may fend her off easy enough sure, but some of us aren't so lucky. I mean, look at Chi. She's near helpless."

Fayt raised a finger to his maw in thought. He murmured, "The idea does have some merit of safety. Something of a clan for that matter."

Albel scoffed, "Why should I concern myself about you weaklings?"

Akuma shrugged and said in a light tone, "Well you don't like humans or dragons and how they treat our kind. So why not make sure our species sticks around instead of hiding in the shadows. Surely you like to flaunt your prowess instead of keeping it secret." Albel's eyes glinted with something of interest. He looked around at the others slowly as if contemplating how burdensome they would be. "Seeing as how we're in Northeast Rudvich, we are in an ideal place as is for survival of our kind. With the treaty enacted and all."

Nick watched as all this went on and bit his lip. He felt a bit uncomfortable in the midst of all of this. Bringing his hands to chest level and pressing his two index fingers together nervously, the mage piped in, "And where do I fit into all of this?" He coughed a bit before throwing in something else. "Not being a hybrid and all." He looked over at Akuma, who looked back at him. Was he about to be replaced? It was so sudden it had caught him off guard. He already felt like Albel detested his presence, this could not spell out good news for the boy.

Ember glanced at him and grinned a wicked grin. "Don't worry, every great empire needs some slaves. We've got a good place for you," she laughed as she said it. Fayt smiled painfully at the joke. Nick shot a venomous glare at Ember for her comment. The fiery girl only responded by sticking her tongue out at him.

The horned boy looked back to the others, "He was tainted by an arcane wasteland. It mutated him like some radioactive rat. In a way he's like the human version of a hybrid. And uhh, human-looking ambassador for town?" He shrugged.

Albel snorted and smirked, "Or a good scratching post."

Fayt sighed, "Well I suppose this might make Dion happy. Hybrids actually getting along. If Dion is tolerable as a human, then this one could be too. Could always use the helping hand of a mage anyway. You hunt with Rika just fine." He nudged Albel.

The black hybrid grumbled, "Whatever. I suppose the idea may be...humored."

Akuma made a wary smile, looking around at them, "That was the hardest part I guess... Chi will go along with anything. Though this means we'll actually need a place to stay for all of us. Uh...maybe the mountains?"

Fayt hummed quietly, "Or woods. Chi is experienced with forest...housing...we can ask her."

Nick gave the hybrid boy and the streamline a half smile. "Sounds as good an idea as any. I say we go get Chi, although the mountains might make a better home. Hybrids aren't exactly the most liked; a home in

the side of the mountains is more defensible than a hut in the forest." He wondered what Atlas would do the next time she tried to attack, if she tried at all. Albel and Fayt were pretty formidable on their own, but with himself, Akuma and Ember thrown into the mix as well. It was a pretty nasty combination. They just about covered every element in their group.

Fayt half-nodded at the suggestion, "There's always the exception to material, but it seems like a good enough plan."

Suddenly realizing something, Nick asked, "Does anyone know where Chi is?"

Fayt glanced up smiling at him as Albel and Akuma rolled their eyes. The white hybrid answered, "She lives in a treehouse in the forest. I'll show you, this way." He started to walk. Akuma and Albel followed after. "Actually, this is a bit ironic you see... Chi is a uh...friend of nature-type dragons around. I have a bit of an idea er...favor when we get to her place," he smiled still at the tree line of the field.

Nick nodded; he remembered where she lived now and said as much. "Oh! I know where that is now that you mention it. If you don't mind, I'll catch up with you there; there's a few things I have to grab first." With that the mage ran off, returning at his house in the city and grabbing a knapsack, filling it with several tied off pouches from various drawers, a few crystal vials with thick rubber stoppers in the top, and of course his big leather-bound book. He kept all of his research within it. Hoisting the bag over his shoulder, he ran off to catch up with the others.

((**Note:** This section takes place during [Chapter 33](#).)

When Nick had finally caught up to the others, they were just arriving at Chi's house. Fayt announced to them, "I'll be a minute."

As Nick came closer, he slowed down, finally stopping next to the ladder as the white hybrid went up to get her. The mage boy leaned against the tree, catching his breath from his run. "I've got everything I need now." He wheezed as his breathing slowly normalized. He was a mage, not an athlete. Even though he was not horribly shape, it was a decent jog with a heavy knapsack on his back. When Chi and Fayt returned with Zeditha flying out as well, the mage smiled at the sight of the baby, but said nothing. He was curious to see what Fayt had planned.