

## Expanding Horizons: Enchanted

### Chapter 52

Minerva waited for the tranquility of the forest to return. She held her breath in anticipation, but it never arrived. Even with Marci's banishment to the sky, she knew the damage couldn't so easily be undone. Heart hurting far more than her bruised body, she gathered Eris into her arms.

"Nnngh...!" the scholar groaned in pain.

"I know, I know... Just--" Frantic desperation left Minerva with little mental capacity. Stumbling half the way, she fell at the feet of the Sacred with eyes blurry from tears.

"*Please! You have to help her!*" she begged as consciousness slipped from Eris and she went limp. "*She's hurt!*"

The Sacred looked at one another. From beneath their curves, Minerva found it difficult to believe there were limbs under the pregnant bulk.

One of them said, "She's been burned beyond the--"

"*I DON'T CARE!*" Minerva yelled. "*HEAL HER! I KNOW YOU CAN!*"

Their expressions did not waver from the eternal emotion of an observing mother. The middle one leaned forward, her breasts mashing over her belly to hang and collide. She brought a finger to her lips and kissed it before running it down Eris's prone body.

Minerva knelt at her side and held her hand. "Come on, Eris... Please..."

A dull, blue glow played across her skin. Burns and cuts released bits that floated into the air and faded. Soon, her skin healed into a blemish-free surface. Deeper injuries and the blood trickling from her head were slower, but they too vanished in time.

All healed, save for the blackened gouge plunging into the center of her chest. It was dark and charred, as if someone had merged the topmost point where her breasts began for coal. It pulsed and hissed with black heat. Minerva stared at the spot in worry when it did not change. It seemed to chase away the Sacred's magic.

"Eris? E-Eris?? Can you hear me??"

She stirred. Weak, she opened her eyes and this time was able to give a smile. "I... Feel a lot better..." A laugh made her cough a sludgy, black smoke that caused her blackened chest to flare. "Those giant pregnant fairies didn't cover me in spit to do it, did they?"

A nod and a teary-eyed smile came from Minerva. "Yea, yea they did..."

To her surprise, Eris rose onto her elbows. Embarrassment took a small hold of her when she saw her nudity and she made to cover herself as best she could. "I-I'm...*really cold*..." She shivered despite Glomia's humid heat. Her attention fell lower then and she saw the blackened wound. It didn't hurt as much as it looked like it should. "What's--"

"A curse," the Sacred interrupted.

"Foul and full of hatred. Born only from those with venom in their heart."

"The fire dancer has burned her soul."

Eris mouthed the words. Her eyes weren't as bright as they had once been. "Burned...my soul..."

Turning upward, Minerva demanded, "You can fix it, right?? You have to!"

"There is no healing such a mark."

"You can not return what has been burned."

"No more than you could bring back a tree from ash."

Disbelief wanted to drag Minerva to the ground. Eris could hardly stay upright. She might have been healed of her physical wounds, but something ethereal still had its claws in her.

"B-But the tree can regrow! Can't it??"

"There is nothing we can do, Dragon Girl..."

"The power is not of our realm."

They eyed her. "Perhaps a dragon's power could aid."

Minerva perked. "As in dragon's blood?!" Anything was enough to give her hope and she jumped at the chance. "If we find more dragon's blood, can it fix her??"

They said nothing.

Anger started rising in her belly at their slowness. "*You promised to help us! I filled your damn bowl! You had your party! I SAVED YOUR FOREST!*" Scales itched up her arms as claws emerged and rage threatened to take over. "*NOW HOLD UP YOUR END OF THE BARGAIN!!*"

"Minerva--" Eris tried to calm, sitting up.

The Sacred's serenity was infuriating.

"There is still a source for what you seek," they began.

"It does not lie here."

"It cannot be--"

Minerva leaped to her feet. "*STOP SPEAKING IN RIDDLES! IF YOU'RE GOING TO HELP US, THEN HELP US!*"

Her roar silenced them. Eris cowered but stood up, leaning on Minerva as her legs returned.

The Sacred were still. "Very well." The middle one moved, drawing her arm upward as if scooping the air.

Wind started to blow. It came from all directions through the trees, whipping at Minerva's hair as it swirled to the center of the clearing. Leaves and petals danced. The wind started to accumulate, forming a sphere of whirling green large enough for several people to stand within. Nothing could be seen through the flurry of leaves and flowers, but Minerva could sense powerful magic at play.

"Through this you will find what you seek."

"A journey across the world in an instant."

"Far from here."

Minerva stared at the swirling green sphere. "It's a portal..."

"To where...?" Eris asked.

Looking up, Minerva knew the Sacred weren't about to tell her. She stepped toward the portal. Eris followed.

"Eris, no."

"I'm coming...!"

"No, you're not. You can hardly stand. We don't know what's through there! But if there's dragon's blood, it can't be safe."

"That's why... I'm coming too..." Speaking took a lot out of her. Color may have returned to her face, but her eyes were dull. "You need me..." A smile cracked. "If you try to stop me, I'll fight you..."

There was no seriousness in the threat, but Minerva knew that there was more to Eris's wound than a physical blemish. If it really had affected her soul, then anything that could keep her happy was as good as medicine.

"Fine," Minerva agreed. "You can come."

Footsteps approached from around the portal. Eris glanced up to see Tria being held up by Karnor. "And Tria...!" she rasped.

Hesitation weighed on the fairy's face. "I..." Tria looked at the ground. Tears fell from her eyes. "I think I'm going to stay here..."

Their group quieted. Eris looked heartbroken. Even Minerva frowned.

"But... Don't you want to come with us? We've made it so far..." Eris squeaked. "We're almost there...!"

"I do! I-I really do... But..." She squeezed Karnor's hand. "I think I was meant to stay here... I've found something I didn't think existed..." A painful laugh came through her tears. "Plus, I don't think I'm meant for all this traveling." She wiped her eyes. "I'm a really long way from home, a-and... I think this might be my home now. I didn't mean to go so far... I just wanted some milk, but then..." She sniffled and fought through a cracking voice. "*Then we started having so much fun together--*"

Tria broke down. She rushed at Minerva and Eris, embracing them as emotion overwhelmed the trio.

Eris squeezed her tightest. "*This whole thing is really your fault, you know... You destroyed that brothel, not me.*"

Tria nodded. "*I probably would again, too!*"

Even Minerva felt her eyes welling. "You were the *biggest* pain in my neck."

"And then you turned me into an even *bigger* pain!" Tria stepped back but didn't let go. They stood in a circle with arms laced. "Promise you'll visit?"

"We will...! We will...!" Eris bawled.

Wiping her eyes, Tria asked Minerva, "A-And before you leave, do you think I could have just one more taste of--"

"No."

The curt answer was enough to make them laugh and ease the goodbye. Tria stepped back into Karnor's arms. Something fluttered from overhead. Looking up, they saw a group of fairies carrying the girls' clothes from the guest quarters. Both Eris and Minerva were more than happy to return to civilized clothing, especially given that they had no idea where they were about to end up.

They faced the whirling portal. Leaves twisted and whistled in a flurry of rustling green.

"Good luck," Tria wished. "Thank you for everything..."

They gave a final smile. With Eris leaning on her shoulder, Minerva led them into the portal. Leaves whipped around them as if caught in a storm. They held tighter for fear of being lost in the ripping gale.

It all vanished in an instant. The forest's sounds and warmth disappeared with the wind like waking from a dream.

Snow crunched underfoot. Deathly chill bit at their exposed skin. Minerva gasped at the frigid cold as it tried to steal the air from her lungs. A stinging breeze cut against their cheeks. Opening their eyes any amount hurt against the wind.

"Where are we...??" Eris yelled, almost falling over into the knee-deep snow. Shivers sent her nipples to harden like ice.

Minerva looked around. For as far as the eye could see, there was only snow and ice. Rocky outcrops jutted from the snow drifts like black scars on the land. Orange and pinks splotched the horizon with an approaching sunrise. So far she could tell, there were no mountains or trees.

They stood together in a frozen wasteland extended, endless and savage in its desolate, expansive horizon.

*To be continued*