

## Chapter 19

Zee breathed deeply of the briny air as they swam several hundred yards away from shore, following the coast. The HMT Krakenfish was gone from sight behind, but a half-dozen Navy ships cruised along with them, further out to sea.

Several of the knight pairs who had been patrolling the air by the ship flew closer, the dragons conversing while glancing openly at Zee and Jessup, their expressions somewhere between awe, fear, and disdain – as much as Zee could tell from the expressions of dragons, anyway. Dame Toomsil had told him early on that rider and dragon pairs shared all rank, privilege and station. She and Peloquin were both Silver Class Knight Chevaliers, and together they were a Silver Class Knight Chevalier pair. Peloquin, had tolerated him, even spoken to him on occasion, and was never rude or condescending, but the other dragons assigned to the ship had always acted as if he wasn't even there.

Zee repositioned himself on Jessup's shell, which didn't make the most comfortable seat. It could be a long trip, and Zee was sure he'd be sore when they arrived. "How long do you think it will take for us to reach the citadel?" he asked.

"Bells."

"Yes, but any idea how many?"

"Many bells. Citadel is on island, on other side of Tosh."

"We're going to have to work on your accounting of time and distance."

"Jessup would like to learn."

Zee chuckled, watching the dragon's high in the sky. The double rows of them in V-shaped formation behind the commandant, flying easily, moving lazily back and forth so as not to outpace them.

One of the flights at the starboard flank was practicing formation and maneuvering techniques, corkscrewing up into the sky, then diving down. Another flight was climbing,

banking and falling, dragons in a single line, then swooping up again, tracing a figure eight in the sky. The thrill of watching them never abated, even after all the years that had past.

He wondered if he would be frightened being so high up, at the mercy of a beast that could chuck him off with a buck and a tip. He'd do it anyway, without hesitation.

"You could have ridden on dragon, Zee," said his big-shelled and ten-armed friend. "Jessup would understand."

It was as if Jessup knew what Zee was thinking – which shouldn't surprise him. It had always seemed that way when they were younger. That felt like a whole other lifetime, long ago. But also, together with Jessup now, like just yesterday.

"I might get another chance. Right now, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the world than right here."

A purr rumbled through Jessup, then he asked, "Zee want to go faster?"

"How fast can you go?"

"Faster."

"Okay, we'll work on your reckoning of speed, too. Show me what you've got."

"Climb to back of shell."

Zee glanced over the spiny shell, then climbed around the base to the opposite side. "Is this good?"

"Jessup think so."

"We'll probably have to do some tests, but let's try this out for now."

To Zee's surprise, Jessup's spines retracted into his shell, leaving short points sticking out just above the surface – all but the ones Zee was leaning against and hanging onto, which Jessup had left them out for him. "Oh, that's fantastic," he remarked to himself. "Less drag in the water, too."

Jessup tilted his shell forward so his face was in the water, eyes swiveled forward, with the shell's point above the waves like the prow of a ship. Zee felt a shudder through the hard surface on which he sat, like water was rushing deep inside.

Jessup contracted the length of his arms and pulled them forward. "*Zee ready?*"

"*Sure, let's—*WAH!" Jessup shot forward with tremendous acceleration. Zee's fingers slipped from the spines and he flew backwards, flipping head over heels to splash into the gushing wake.

Zee tumbled underwater in a powerful surge, but righted himself and snatched the strap of the duffel containing the waterproof bag Dr. Aenig had given him as it slipped from his shoulder.

Jessup jetted away, arms held straight back behind him, water shooting from the center of his lower body. Then he stopped, arms blooming out like flower petals then rolled and tipped up to look back at Zee through the water.

“What happen, Zee?”

“*I fell off!*” There was no anger in his voice, just excitement and surprise. Zee surfaced. Jessup surfaced as well, and paddled toward him.

Zee slapped the water with his palms. “That was incredible!”

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“What happened?” Commandant Aureosa watched down over Vandalia’s shoulder as she circled back. The other dragons turned as well, maintaining formation.

“Mr. Tarrow fell off.”

“What were they doing?”

“The beast suddenly shot forward. Quite swiftly.”

The commandant watched Zee swim down and around Jessup, then surface to converse with him. “Do you remember our first flight together, Vandalia? After we were paired and the bond began to take hold?”

“An unforgettable thrill.”

“They’re feeling that now.”

“They are already bonded.”

“You believe so, too?”

“They have been for some time. But they have been separated. The bond has not had a chance to grow until now.”

“A murman and a kraken, naturally paired, and bonded. I wonder what they could accomplish, for better or for worse.”

“I, for one, would like to see it. For better, or worse.”

“Even if the kraken is dangerous, better to have it on our side than any other. Do you think we can convince the board?”

“I can be very convincing, as you know. And Mr. Tarrow comes with quite the recommendation.”

“Yes...” The commandant’s eyebrows knit. He shook his head as if still not believing it.  
“Remember, we’re sworn to keep that to ourselves.”

“Of course.” They continued to circle, observing the exhibition below.

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“I’d almost forgotten about your water chute, Jessup!” Zee finished tying the duffel strap to one of Jessup’s spines.

“Jessup’s water what?”

Zee slipped back into the water and paddled along while the kraken swam slowly, inspecting his friend’s arms. They’d grown longer in relation to his body than they’d been when he was a baby, each of them about thirty feet long when contracted to be pulled forward, forty when pushed back and stretched out.

“Your siphon,” Zee answered, returning to the surface. “It’s also called a hyponome.”

“Er...”

“You used it when you were a baby, to squirt water out the back for a quick burst of speed. Octopods have them too. It’s like a tube that can be contracted down it’s length.”

“Where Zee learn so much?”

“Dr. Aenig. We studied anatomy of sea creatures, among a lot of other things.”

“Studied big words.”

“I’ll teach you if you want, as much as I can.”

“Jessup would like that.”

“Do you still draw the water in through your nose and mouth?”

“Yes, but these are better.” Using the tips of two of his arms, he pointed to two areas on either side of the front of his shell, just about halfway up.

At first Zee couldn’t see anything but crescent-shaped creases in the shell, closed half-ovals roughly a foot and a half across. Then they opened at the flatter end and push out to form scoops. “Wow,” Zee exclaimed. “I bet that makes a big difference.”

“Jessup have more.” He pointed to the back quadrants of his shell on the same level. “Only open back ones under water.”

“Why?” Zee recalled sitting on the beach with Jessup while Midge snuffled in the sand nearby, then uttered, “Oh...,” with a childish grin.

Zee had passed gas, said, “Excuse me,” then giggled. Little Jessup’s eyes had gone wide, then he’d taken a deep breath, grimaced, and forced out a drawn out, flapping expulsion of air that ended with a squeak. Zee’s mouth had hung open in shock – and respect. Jessup had giggled, then the two of them had laughed until Jessup fell over in the sand, wriggling his arms helplessly.

Zee grinned at the much-grown Jessup. “I get it. Pass wind.”

“BIG wind.”

“Storm wind.”

“Hurricane.”

Zee laughed, wiping brine and tears from his eyes. Jessup’s laugh reverberated through the water.

When they’d recovered, Jessup asked, “How fast Zee go?”

“I don’t know, to be honest. Let’s see.”

Zee puppy-paddled in the direction they’d been heading. Jessup swam along beside him, a frown forming on his big kraken face. With Zee’s slim but muscular build and murman attributes, he wasn’t swimming all that slowly, but still.

“Zee kidding?”

“Yes, Zee’s kidding,” he said with laugh, and broke into a faster froggie-stroke.

Jessup watched, then his voice rumbled in Zee’s mind. “*Faster.*”

Zee felt the mark on his chest tingle, but thought little of it. It was doing that often since he and Jessup had been reunited. He began using a front crawler stroke, nearly leaping from the water with each powerful stroke.

Jessup increased his speed to keep up with him. “*Faster.*”

The warmth in Zee’s chest from Jessup’s presence increased, and it felt to Zee like he did swim faster. It was probably because he was trying harder so he could impress his friend – and, he realized, he’d never swum without his chains on. Not once, in his entire life. It was liberating in a way he’d never experienced before. Exhilaration filled him from head to webbed toes.

“*Faster, friend Zee.*”

Zee’s chest and gut heated more. He dove beneath the surface. Jessup submerged his eyes to watch. Using a porpus kick, which Zee only knew the name of because he’d described how he swam underwater to Dr. Aenig. And he did go faster.

“*Faster!*” Jessup said in encouragement.

Zee set his face in determination, turned on his side and sped through the water using his fastest stroke, undulating his body in a fishie kick. The connection between him and Jessup seemed to grow stronger. Faster and faster he went, zipping through the water, until he reached a threshold he could not break.

He pulled up and rose to the surface, where he forced the water in his lungs out through the gills on his neck and along the ribs of his heaving chest. “Yes!” He spun to find Jessup, eyes and mouth above the water, grinning. “What do you think?”

“Jessup think Zee is tiny.”

“Tiny compared to you!” He paused. “Well, and dragons. And pretty much everyone else.”

“Zee swims faster than other people.”

“I would hope so. I *am* one of the murfolk.”

“Fast tiny murfolk.”

Zee grinned. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Jessup remembers when Zee was giant.” He spread two of his arms wide above the water. “Very big Zee.”

“You were a baby. I’ve grown, too, just not as much as you. Now you’re the giant!”

“Jessup doesn’t feel so big.”

“No?”

“Ocean is *big*.”

Zee scanned the vast horizon, then submerged and swam slowly while viewing sea. The coral bottom below swarmed with colorful fish, turtles, small sheels and cooda. Further out, turquoise water, shot with rays of the sun near the surface, growing darker blue as it stretched on forever, and dropping to blackness in the depths. “*Yes, it is.*”

A sensation tingled on the back of Zee’s neck. “*Jessup...*”

“Zee...”

They both felt it. The kraken submerged, spines shooting out to snap into place on his shell.

Zee barely saw it at first, so swiftly did it move through ravines in the coral. The surface of its body shifted to mimic the colors and patterns of its surroundings.

A hammerhead orcapod. Zee had seen other predators in the water from atop Jessup’s shell, but they’d all beat a hasty retreat upon seeing the kraken. Not this one.

Zee considered how large the creature was, at least fifteen feet long. Its skull had a wide crossbar with its eyes on the ends, and it undulated like an eel, though it had eight slim arms like an octopoo. He barely had time to recall their enormous mouths with rows of razor sharp teeth, that orcapods always hunted in packs and realize this one appeared to be alone, when he was snatched by the ankle and dragged with incredible speed into the depths and out to sea.

Zee struggled as the orcapod pulled him fast through a field of kelp. More than a dozen more orcapods swarmed above.

Jessup roared as they attacked him, darting in and biting, evading his much larger arms. Their bites did him no harm, but that was not their intent. They had their meal. They just needed to distract the kraken long enough to escape with it. And that meal was Zee.

Zee curled his body to tug at the orcapod's arm with his hands, but it was too strong. He let go and kicked at it with his free foot, but it held, the beast dragging him further into the sea. Another orcapod shot in, mouth wide. Zee pulled with his caught leg and curled away. The new attacker sunk its teeth into the arm of the beast that held him, and Zee was free.

The beasts circled, gray eyes watching. The largest of the pack attacked. Zee flipped in the water and caught hold of its wide hammerhead. His arms were nearly wrenched from the sockets, but he hung on for his life.

The creature bucked and twisted, trying to shake him off. Others chased after them. One lunged in. Zee ducked, avoiding its teeth, but one side of its head rammed him with a glancing blow. Zee's hold began to slip.

Jessup roared and charged toward Zee, ignoring the pack that harried him. The orcapods were swift and agile, biting hold of his arms to be drug along with him.

Jessup wasn't been able to catch them, but help came to Zee in another, unexpected form. His krakenbond burned hot and heat swelled in his chest. Heat and strength, like when Jessup had encouraged him to swim faster, but far stronger. Zee could feel his friend's anger as well, but more than that there was supreme determination and focus. The will of a kraken. To be stronger, to be faster, to fight, and survive.

Zee squeezed his legs around his mount's body and gripped its hammerhead tighter. Gritting his teeth, he arched back and pulled, steering the beast toward the surface.

Jessup turned his attention to keeping the others away from Zee. An arm snapped out like a whip, knocking one to float twitching upside down. He took out a second with another whip-

strike. Wicked claws, like those of cat, folded out from the tips of his arms, and the short, sharp spikes extruded from his suckers. His multiple arms moved in coordinated attacks – raking his claws across their hides, coiling around them and crushing them. One bit hold of the end of an arm. He yanked it to his mouth, smashed it with his teeth, and swallowed it whole.

An orcapod swimming alongside Zee angled in to bite him. He threw himself to the side, wrenching the head of the one he was riding, rolling it in the water. The attacker pulled up just in time, having nearly bitten into its packmate's belly.

The beast in Zee's grip attempted to dive again. Zee shifted his grip to grasp the ends of its head, digging his nails into its eyes, and tugged upward. In a frantic rush to escape the pain, the beast put on greater speed. Zee caught sight of another orcapod gaining on them.

Zee pulled again. The brightness of the surface flared as they shot up out of the water. The power of his krakenbond heated more, and it was as if time slowed to a crawl.

The other orcapod flew out of the water after them, arcing straight at Zee, enormous toothy mouth gaping. A flicker of shadow, a dragon's cry, and the beast was snatched out of the air.

Vandalia yanked the beast higher, her talons sinking deep into the predator fish, then flung it into the air and loosed a torrent of fire.

Jessup's roar reverberated and a pulse of blue lightning flashed beneath the waves.

Sailing high on the back of the orcapod, Zee felt even stronger, like he could tear the monster's hammerhead right off – and he nearly did.

The beast's head twisted in his grip, the flesh at the based of its skull wrinkling and tearing, and its spine snapped. Zee kicked away from it, flipping backward, and dove into the sea.

Stunned, Zee floated beneath the surface, looking up at the wavering sparkles of sunlight on the waves. How had he done that? He'd never felt so strong. Been so strong. It thrilled him, and terrified him as well. And now it was gone. He barely managed to paddle to the surface.

Something blocked the vision of one of his eyes. He felt for it and pulled it away. The wrap Dr. Aenig had used to bandage his head. He touched the gash and felt the stitches, but there was no pain in the thin ridge of flesh, and no blood showed on his fingers.

Commandant Aureosa's voice pulled Zee from his reverie. "Mr. Tarrow! Are you hurt?!"

Zee turned in a slow circle, treading water and taking in the aftermath of the battle. A mist rose from the waves. Torn and crushed orcapods floated belly-up, steam rising from their bodies. One was charred to a crisp.



Dragons dove and circled. An Ice Diver blasted a twitching orcapod with ice, freezing it in a tiny iceberg. The closest was Vandalia, Aureosa leaning in the saddle with concern and incredulity on his face.

“I’m all right, sir!”

“And Mr. Jessup?”

The previous heat Zee’d felt had cooled and a quick pang of fear stabbed at him. Then he felt Jessup’s presence and the rush of water below. His friend rose out of the sea next to him. An arm gently pulled Zee close.

“Jessup okay, Sir.”

Aureosa ran a hand over his face and appeared to be considering something astounding. Zee wondered if it was because of the attack, or what he’d seen Zee do. Zee still couldn’t believe it himself.

Vandalia said, “Perhaps you should ride with us now, Mr. Tarrow.”

For Zee, it wasn’t even a consideration. “Thank you, Ma’am, but I’ll be all right. I’ll stay with Jessup, but no more swimming today.” She puffed smoke from her nostrils, but nodded.

“Are you well enough to proceed?” Aureosa asked.

Zee and Jessup’s eyes met and an unspoken communication passed between them. “Yes, Sir.” He put a hand on Jessup’s shell. “We can go faster now, too.”

Aureosa gazed at him for a moment. “We’ll be ready to move out when you are.” He and Vandalia soared higher, the dragon loosing a screech to rally the other dragons to them.

“Jessup glad Zee is not hurt,” said the kraken.

“I’m glad you’re okay, too. I see you can still produce electricity like a zap-eel. Good thinking, using that when I was out of the water.”

“Jessup didn’t know if it would hurt Zee.”

Zee’s brow furrowed. “What did you do, Jessup?”

“What does Zee mean? Zapping?”

“No. You made me feel stronger. More than that, I *was* stronger. A lot stronger.”

Jessup thought a moment. “Jessup doesn’t know. Just trying to help Zee fight bad fish.”

Zee considered. “Okay. We’ll figure it out, somehow.”

He climbed up on Jessup’s spines, then around to the back, speaking as he went. “They’re called hammerhead orcapods, by the way.”

“Bad fish,” Jessup repeated.

Zee smiled. “That works, too.”

Zee’s other bandages were in tatters. He settled into his place near the base of Jessup’s shell at the back and pulled them away to reveal only pink marks where he’d been injured by the seadragon, even the long stitched one on his hip and thigh where he’d been gored by the monster’s horn. His bruises were gone. How had he healed so quickly?

The dragons circled high above. “We should get going. We don’t want to keep Commandants Aureosa and Vandalia waiting.”

“Zee ready?”

Zee gripped the spines. “Zee ready.”

Jessup retracted all of his spines except the one’s Zee clung to. “Jessup start slower this time.”

“Good idea,” Zee replied. He was going to hold on a lot tighter, too.

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Vandalia and Aureosa observed the smooth, rhythmic movements of the beast’s arms as it sped through the water, the point of its shell cutting through the surf like a ship’s prow.

“The bond appears to be much stronger than we’d expected,” said Aureosa. “And I’m certain they’ve never forged.”

“There is great power between them,” Vandalia replied, “but it’s raw, and Mr. Tarrow doesn’t know how to control it.”

“That’s why the academy exists,” the commandant replied. “To teach them discipline, proper forging technique, and control.”

“For humans and dragons, Peleus. No one knows how to train a murman and a kraken.”

“Can it be that different?”

Vandalia remained silent as they watched the kraken’s arms move below the surface, waving together behind it, then blooming out and shoving back while it propelled itself forward with a stream of water that gushed beneath the surface behind the beast. Jessup would begin to slow after a hundred yards or so, then repeat the motion.

“I’d say they’re traveling at fifty knots, at least,” said Aureosa.

“Impressive,” Vandalia replied. “If they can keep up this pace, we’ll be at the citadel in no time.”



## Chapter 20

Zee marveled at the how fast Jessup swam, and it didn't seem that his friend was tiring in the slightest. The dragons could fly more rapidly, but this was far faster than the HMT Krakenfish could sail under the best of conditions.

Then he realized the Navy ships were keeping up with them. On the perch deck of the nearest ship, a man in a golden robe and a beret was slowly waving a wand. A dragon sat on its haunches behind him, pushed up on its front legs, slowly flapping its wings in time with the waving of the wand. The sails were full and taut, far more than the wind off the ocean could do.

"Magickers..." Zee uttered, then sent his voice to his swimming friend. "Hey Jessup, there are magickers on the Navy ships conjuring wind to make them go faster. Their moving as fast as we are."

"What is magickers?"

"Knights aren't the only types of bonded pairs at the academy. There are also magickers. They have higher magick affinities and go through different training because they're more suited to defense and healing than fighting, which is what knight pairs are best at. There aren't as many of them as knights, but they learn how to conjure barriers to protect ships and knight pairs, make potions and elixirs, cast spells, create wards, and enchant things. Apparently, they can make ships go faster too."

Positioned for speed as he was, Jessup's eyes were below the surface and he couldn't see what Zee was talking about. "*Men who wear dresses, have funny hats and little sticks?*"

Zee chuckled. "You could put it that way. The hats are called berets, the dresses are robes, and the sticks are called wands, but how did you know?"

"Jessup has seen them with dragons on ships."

An uncomfortable thought occurred to Zee. "You never had any trouble with ships, did you?"

"No trouble. Just sneaking to look at night. Zee said stay away, but Jessup wanted to look sometimes."

Zee breathed with relief and replied with a smile. "*Sneaky kraken,*"

"Sneaky Jessup."

“Do you remember when I couldn’t find you at the tidepool one morning, then you yelled from up on the rocks behind me?”

Zee felt his friend chuckle through his shell. “*Zee jumped high and almost fell in water.*”

“And you laughed so hard you actually did fall off the rock.”

Jessup continued to chuckle. “*Those were good days.*”

“The best.”

Having slowed while they were talking, Jessup picked up speed again. Zee sat with the sun and a grin on his face and the wind in his hair, perfectly content for the first time in ages.

Zee couldn’t remember the last time he’d done so little for so much time. On the ship, unless he was sleeping, which was less than the rest of the crew, every minute of every day was filled with hard physical labor, cleaning the latrines, scrubbing the deck and hull, and a myriad of other tasks. When he wasn’t working, all his time was spent studying with Dr. Aenig, training with Dame Toomsil and Tem, or practicing sword forms and strikes and exercising on his own. After the lady knight had left the ship, he’d sneak out of his hammock late at night and find space in the hold where he’d train for a few bells on his own, every night. This span of inactivity felt odd. It made him anxious. He took deep breaths to settle himself, like his ma had taught him so long ago to help with his breathing condition and resist the urge to scratch his rash. He didn’t have those problems anymore, but he used the technique often to calm himself when he was irritated, endure the pain of an injury, or focus his mind on his training.

“*There is pass,*” said Jessup.

The dragon’s angled toward shore ahead and began flying over land above a wide opening in the cliffs.

“That’s the Strait of yon Siddoway. It runs through the narrowest part of the island, about twenty miles. We never went through it on the ship. Only Navy ships and small tradeship ferries are allowed.”

“Kraken’s allowed?”

Zee laughed. “Looks like it. This one, anyway.”

A dragon flew down to circle a Navy ship exiting the strait. The ship maneuvered to give the kraken a wide berth. One of the ships that had been escorting them entered the mouth of the straight, most likely to clear the way and warn other ships they were coming through.

Zee said, "We should slow down."

"Zee come to front?"

"Good idea."

Jessup decreased their speed and tipped his shell up.

Zee climbed around and settled in place above the kraken's brow. "*We're getting good at this.*"

Jessup tipped his shell back further to lift his face above the waterline. "Zee and Jessup make good team."

"Yes, we do," Zee said with a grin. "The best murman and kraken team in the world."

"Only murman and kraken team in world."

"Well, there is that. It doesn't mean we can't strive to be the best we can be, though, right?"

"Zee always right."

Zee laughed. "Oh, my friend, if you only knew."

Jessup chuckled.

Knights and their dragons stood atop the cliffs on both sides of the mouth of the straight, peering down at the strange sight below. Members of His Majesty's Marine Force crewed large cannons as well, pointing and shouting to each other. Zee was relieved to see the cannon's remained aimed out over the sea, and not at them.

The air became thicker and warmer as they entered the gap,. The high dark cliffs contained more battlements manned by more marines, some with horses, others with enormous drakes and piles of boulders to drop on enemy ships.

They kept the ship ahead in sight and matched its pace. Ships slowed and moved closer to the cliffs, their crews gawking at the passing sea monster of myth and legend with a small man perched on its shell. Most were clearly amazed, but some cringed back in terror and made the sign of Zepiter over their hearts. Others scowled with hate in their eyes. Ships coming toward them on their left did the same. One pilot became so distracted he ground the ship against the stony cliff wall, raising cries from captain and crew.

Dragons from the citadel flew ahead to keep the peace and reassure the crews, but Jessup remained vigilant and cautious.

Zee projected comfort to his big friend as much as he could. "It's all right, Jessup."

"If Zee says so," the kraken replied, not entirely convinced.

“We can’t blame them. Until just now they didn’t believe you even existed, and if you did, you’d be vicious and terrible and want to eat them.”

“Jessup would not eat people, or dragons. Smell yucky.” Zee laughed. “Jessup can be vicious and terrible, though.”

“We’ll let them keep thinking that.”

That pleased Jessup. He growled at a particularly aggressive looking tradeship captain and his crew, sending ripples across the water and vibrating their hull. Zee smiled and nodded as they stepped back from the rail.

Zee had lost track of the bells when the cliffs began to recede back and the air became fresher on an incoming breeze. First were terraced rice paddies, then cultivated fields and pastures for livestock, humble homes and grand estates, then villages becoming closer together until they were a cramped sprawl. Then the grand coastal city of da Chmilenko came into view. The capital of Tosh. Though he had never been allowed to leave the ship, Zee’d seen major cities from port, but never the capital of his own kingdom. He soaked in every detail, trying to imprint it on his mind forever.

Four concentric walls of white stone encircled the city like tall stone serpents, one within the other. The walls, as well as the buildings, grew grander as they proceeded up the rise of the mountains. The highest structure of them all was the gleaming white castle of the king.

“There is big white pretty castle,” observed Jessup.

“I see it,” Zee replied softly. “You’ve seen it before?”

“Jessup has seen many cities, in many places.”

Spires and parapets of shining ivory stone speared the air. Colorful flags and banners flapped in the breeze. Dark Royal Ebons and Red Crimson of the King’s Guard perched on walls and towers with knight’s on their backs, while others patrolled the skies. The grandeur of it, the power it represented, struck Zee with reverence and admiration.

The straight widened and a low mist obscured their view of what lay ahead, though the sky above remained clear. Zee climbed up higher on Jessup’s shell to look back at the grand port of the capital, and the city and castle that rose behind it.

The waves picked up and the coastline spread away to either side. Jessup sped up as their dragon escort regathered back into formation overhead, heading out to open sea once more. Zee continued to gaze at the castle until it, too, was lost in the mist.

Jessup called his name, bringing him out of his reverie.

Shrouded in mist, he turned, still high on Jessup's shell, holding onto the point at the top.

"What is it?" Moment's later they emerged from the fog. "Oh..."

In the distance ahead, a dark land mass thrust severely from the sea. The mountains of Triumph's Island. Home of da mon si Triumph's Citadel Academy for His Majesty's Dragon Corps.



## Chapter 21

The features of the island became more defined as they approached. It looked much like a king's crown fashioned of rough dark stone. All around it, dragon knights and cannons were placed on leveled areas of the peaks, and wide stone walls built between them. More pairs soared the air, individually and in flights, their scales and armor glinting in the sunlight. Five mountains thrust into the sky at one end.

Aureosa and Vandalia circled down within shouting distance. "Follow us, Mr. Tarrow!" said Vandalia, "We're going into the harbor. Once through the gates, proceed to the beach next to the docks."

"Yes, Ma'am," Zee shouted back. "Thank you, Ma'am!"

They rose and flew ahead. The rest of the knights flew over the high walled cliffs.

"My gods, Jessup," said Zee, his stomach in knots. "I can't believe we're actually here."

"Jessup can't believe it, too."

The entrance into the harbor came into view, its opening between the tips of two curved stone promontories that reached out into the sea like arms. Zee's jaw hung slack at the sight of enormous statues carved into the stone at the point of each promontory. Dragons rearing up, mouths open in a silent roar, their armored riders with swords thrust upward. Their inside wings connected to form a great arch tall enough for the highest mast to pass underneath. At the base of the promontories were two massive towers with iron gates several stories tall swung inward between them. Carved into one tower were the words, "Be strong," in the other, "Be Brave," together the slogan of the Dragon Corps.

Inside, the harbor was far larger than Zee had imagined, the pass they had come through the only access to the sea – and Triumph's Island was more than an academy. It was an entire port and military base. Nearly a full armada of warships and quite a few armed merchant ships were docked or anchored. The wharf bustled with activity. There were warehouses, cranes, long barracks, and a town as large as mon Tontuga, maybe larger.

The gate where they entered was near one end of the wide harbor. Straight ahead was a beach that sloped to a plateau, then hills that rolled to the base of the mountains, all marked by paths, streams, and one small river. The island was roughly oval in shape, with a ring of high ridges and

walls all the way around, right up to each side of the cluster of mountains at one end. Dr. Aenig had told Zee that Triumph's Island was an ancient volcanic caldera that formed a natural fortress. A gravel road lead up to the academy campus, which was comprised of multiple stone buildings. At the center of the campus sat the citadel itself. The largest building by far, and the oldest, with built all of gray stone. It had towers like might be seen on a castle, but the citadel had been designed centuries ago as a fortress. Flags flew from the towers and walls.

Already, people were crowding toward the beach.

Zee took a deep breath. "Everything's going to be fine. Don't be nervous."

"Jessup not nervous. Zee nervous?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Zee lie."

Zee chuckled. "Yeah, Zee lie."

"Jessup lie too."

Zee thought for a moment. "If they want to see a kraken and a murman, we might as well give them a show." He explained his thoughts to Jessup.

"You think this is good idea?" Jessup asked.

"Maybe not, but let's do it anyway."

Zee felt Jessup perform a mental shrug. "Okay."

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From Vandalia's back, Commandant Aureosa watched the boy and his kraken swim into the harbor, then submerge. "Hmm. What do you suppose they're up to?"

Vandalia circled around, peering at the sea with her superior dragon eyesight. "They're still there, moving toward the beach."

"Let's proceed, then."

Vandalia landed on the beach and walked forward on the rocky sand. The Gold knights, including the one that carried Squire don Donnicky, landed near them. A crowd was gathering on the subtle rise above the beach. They spoke in loud but conspiratorial tones. The school year had not yet officially begun, but most of the cadets had already arrived, including the new recruits. Half of the recruits already had their heads shaved for BCT, Basic Combat Training, which they would endure for their first nine weeks at the academy. Some stood together with their MTI's,

military training instructors, while a few dozen of the new dragon recruits grouped behind them and off to the side.

Normally the place would be buzzing with activity. MTIs and cadet MTI's screaming orders at the Minnies and Duckies, which was what the fresh human and dragon recruits were called, and returning cadets training on their own with swords or on their dragons in the air, but word had spread. A kraken was coming to the citadel.

The surface of the bay humped, spines breaking the surface, bringing gasps from the crowd. The beast submerged again, then all held their breath as the kraken rose.

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Jessup drove his shell straight up out of the water as they neared the shore, Zee at the top gripping the arrowhead-shaped peak. Zee lowered the nictitating lenses that protected his eyes while underwater, then forced water out of the gills on his neck and ribs, which vanished while his hands and feet returned to human form. He gaped himself, as shocked by the crowd as the spectators were of what had just appeared in their harbor.

People and dragons packed the area, and the arrival of the kraken had caught the attention of all in the basin. New recruits sat with jaws dropped in the middle of having their heads shaved. A crew of second-year cadets paused in setting up a long barracks tent on a hill. Third and fourth year cadets froze in weapons training. Young dragon recruits grouped together, glaring or with long toothy maws hanging open.

With cold realization it occurred to Zee that he wasn't wearing a shirt. That was something he'd never thought about on the ship. Half the crew worked shirtless much of the time, and they were accustomed to seeing a murman with scars all over his body. Even his gills, webbed hands and feet failed to draw a second glance on the Krakenfish after his first few weeks on ship. This was an entirely different situation, and one he was not prepared for. He steeled himself to the fact that he'd have to wait until he was on shore and could ask the Gold knight for his duffel bag.

Jessup's voice startled him. "*Do not be ashamed, Zee.*"

A comforting warmth flowed through him and the tightness in his chest waned. He wasn't yet fully accustomed to Jessup's presence and sense of what he was feeling, but it was quickly becoming like it once was between them. When he felt whole, and truly comfortable with himself. And now his friend was older, more experienced, and wiser. "*Thank you, Jessup.*" He

stood straighter and held his head high. Jessup was right. He had no reason to be ashamed of who or what he was, no matter what anyone else thought of him. Again, he said, “*Thank you.*”

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Sallison and Batcu stood among the newly arrived squires, strong arms crossed over her chest, gazing at the kraken in disbelief. Her father had sent a message that a kraken and murman were on their way to the citadel. She’d had no reason to doubt his messenger, but it didn’t prepare her for the actual sight of the beast. It was... impressive. Though that didn’t quite describe it. Awesome and terrible is what it was. But what really drew her gaze was the murman. Due to her father’s station, she’d seen murfolk on a few rare occasions, but this one was different. The other’s had been meek, would never meet anyone’s eyes, and only spoke when spoken to. This young murman was small for his age, like the others she’d seen, but he stood straight, had steel in his eyes – and his scars...

“Holy cowfish,” came the voice of the lumbering ox of a recruit next to her. All Sallison knew about him was his name, Jondon dil Rolio, which she’d only learned a few minutes ago while they sat next to each other getting their hair sheered from their scalps, and that he stood over a head taller than she was and outweighed her by probably a hundred pounds. In spite of his size and their unfamiliarity, she elbowed him. “Ssh.”

“What?” Jondon asked with surprise.

She spoke sternly but quietly out of the side of her mouth. “You don’t want to get into trouble on your first day, do you?”

He glanced around, then was visibly relieved that no MTI’s were near enough to have heard him. “Sorry, Sallison. Thanks.”

“Ssh,” she expressed again.

“Right,” he uttered.

Sallison’s attention returned to the murman. He had more scars on his small wiry frame than anyone she’d ever seen, many of which looked like they’d been earned in battle. He’d lived a hard life, even harder than the others of his kind she’d met, and she’d have bet he’d seen things, done things, knew things, the others hadn’t. And this murman had a kraken.

The beast swam forward to the beach and crawled up with its front arms on the shore. At least twenty five feet tall out of the water, it towered over Commandants Aureosa and Vandalia. Some at the front of the crowd stepped back instinctively.

The young murman climbed down to stand on the sand, where he paused, then said something to one of the Gold knights who had arrived with the commandants. The knight tossed him a small duffel bag. Steadily, confidently, he retrieved a shirt and pulled it on, down over the scars and strange gray mark on his chest.

Sallison's father had told her to stay away from them, but asked her to watch them carefully – as if she wouldn't have enough to worry about as a lowly minny preek at the academy. Somehow, though, she didn't think keeping an eye on them would be a problem.

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Zee stepped from one of Jessup's arms to the beach, only to suddenly realize he hadn't set foot on land in ten years. The grit felt odd beneath the soles of his feet, and he would have sworn the ground was moving. It wasn't, of course. He'd heard the sailors speak of having to gain their "land legs" after long periods at sea, but he never expected it to be like this. He swallowed the queasiness that rose in his gorge and stood straight, trying to convince himself he wasn't swaying. When he was nearly certain he wouldn't fall down, he spoke to one of the Gold knights. "Please, Ma'am, may I have my bag?"

Zee tried not to fidget and cover himself with his hands and arms while he waited for the lady knight to toss him his duffel bag. With supreme will to stay on his feet, he retrieved a shirt and put it on as confidently as possible. He nearly yanked it when it stuck on his wet krakenbond, but managed to maintain his cool and sighed internally with relief when it was finally in place.

Vandalia stepped closer. Aureosa nodded to Zee and said softly for only them to hear, "Welcome."

"Thank you, Sir," Zee replied, then returned his attention to the crowd.

Among those gathered at the fore were faculty and staff wearing robes of Dragon Corps blue with various colored sashes, as well as what looked like upper class cadets in green robes and berets. The cadets made an attempt to look casual, but held their wands at the ready. More magickers.

Though their Abilities were more suited to defense, protection, and healing, the more advanced magicker cadets, and especially the higher rated magicker faculty, could form barriers of power around Zee and Jessup, making it impossible to defend themselves or escape should things go wrong. Their wands were a foot and a half long, sharply pointed at the end, and had

short cross guards. They not only focused their power and directed their Abilities, they supposedly could punch through armor as well.

Seasoned knight pairs and more magicker pairs rode the sky, keeping a close eye – some of them wide in amazement – on the monster in their midst.

*Monsters*, Zee corrected, counting himself. Few of the people here would have ever seen one of the murfolk before, and none a kraken. Besides the shock in their eyes, Zee could see something else as well. Anger, disgust, and fear.

The crowd grew quiet and parted for a group of dragon and rider pairs approaching on the road from the citadel. Some rode upon their beasts while others walked beside them. They didn't come all the way down the slope to the beach, but closer than the crowd. Some looked like civilians, but dressed in the finest clothing, with the sashes of governors and senators. By the uniforms, ribbons and insignias worn by others, Zee figured they were some of the highest ranking members of the citadel's administration and staff.

One man at the head of the group stood apart from the others in his appearance. He was the tallest of them, wearing a grand white robe, with black hair streaked with gray in a topknot, and a braided beard. He looked to be of similar age to the commandant, the two of them being the eldest of the group.

The crimson embroidery on his robe, his blood red sash, and the horizontal red badge with three hash marks meant he was high level Red Titan class, and his shoulder boards marked him as a four sea star Magi General – the highest authority in his order.

“Is that Mihir han Wanchoo, sir?”

Aureosa looked surprised that Zee knew, though he shouldn't have been. The highly esteemed Dean of Magicks at the academy was well known across the kingdom. “He is.”

What at first appeared to be a lump of armor with thick bronze scales on Wanchoo's shoulder lifted a narrow snout and sniffed in Zee and Jessup's direction.

“I've only seen drawings in Dr. Aenig's books, but that looks like a quemara.” The creature fluttered its wings and a short flame shot from its pointed nose. “It *is* a quemara. I've heard they're very rare, and come from somewhere very far away.”

“Amoxтли is the only one I've ever seen,” said Aureosa as he dismounted. “I'll only be a moment.” He went to greet the newcomers while Vandalia stayed nearby.

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“Then it’s true, Peleus,” said the woman in the lead, Emir General Lora aye Hyooz, Gold Class knight, and superintendent of the academy. Her vest was golden mail, and her shoulder plate sported three sea stars. She peered through the lenses of her black-framed spectacles at the kraken and murman.

“As strange as it is to say, Ma’am Superintendent, yes.”

Dean Wanchoo said softly, “Absolutely fascinating.”

“Have we anything to fear?” asked a man with dark, closely cropped hair and a short, pointed beard, Philliam sim Tooker, a one sea star Earl General and the Dean of Academics.

“Would I have brought it here if I believed it was a threat to you or anyone else, Philliam?” the commandant replied.

From where he sat on his dragon, Tooker looked down in suspicion. “You might, Peleus. You just might.”

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Commandant Aureosa started back toward Zee, and Zee caught his breath as he spotted a familiar face in the crowd off to the side. Dame Zara mon Toomsil. Her scale mail was now gold instead of silver, and her shoulder plate showed she’d been promoted from Knight Chevalier to Knight Commander. He wanted to go to her, but didn’t think it would be proper. She nodded curtly before returning her gaze to Jessup. Maybe later, he hoped.

Upon arriving next to Zee, Aureosa turned back to the crowd, his commanding presence hushing them. “Cadets, recruits, staff members, and esteemed colleagues, may I present Mr. Zee Tarrow, of the murfolk,” he paused only a moment, then announced more loudly, “and Mr. Jessup, the kraken!”

Silence was the only reply. Zee and Jessup exchanged nervous glances. Zee gathered his resolve and raised his hand. “Greetings.”

Many in the group seemed surprised Zee could speak, but when Jessup raised an arm in the air and said, “Hello,” it was as if someone had slapped them all with cold fish.

The commandant narrowed his eyes at the new recruits, cadets, and MTIs. “They will be treated with due respect during their stay, however long that may be.” He let that sink in, then said more loudly, “Understood?”

It was like the spectators, including the riders in the air, were suddenly released from a state of hypnosis, their highly disciplined military training returning in a flash. Except for the

dignitaries and higher ranking members of the administration, they all snapped to attention and saluted. As one, their voices rung over the harbor. “Yes, Sir, Daimyo General Commandant, Sir!”

The commandant gave them a moment to further remember who they were, members and future members of His Majesty’s Dragon Corps. “All right then.” He returned the salute. “Carry on!”

MTIs shouted at those under their command to get back to work. The crowd scrambled, and all over the basin people returned to their duties. The members of the administration, dignitaries, and upper level faculty gave Zee and Jessup a last, long look, then turned and headed back toward the citadel. Dame Toomsil hung back a moment, watching Zee, then took one more look at Jessup, and followed the others.

A young staff MTI, however, marched straight toward Zee, a fierce scowl on his face, hand on the pommel of his sword. He paused to salute Commandant Aureosa, who returned the honor. It took a second, but Zee realized he knew the man. Temothy jal Briggs, Dame Toomsil’s old squire.

Tem was even taller now, and his frame more filled out with muscle. The red scales of a dragonbond fully encircled his left wrist, he wore the bars of a Knight Chevalier, and his mail was Silver, his badge with two hash marks denoting mid level. If Zee had once been able to nearly hold his own with the squire in sword training, he’d have no chance against the knight who stood before him.

“Hi, Tem,” Zee said, taken by surprise. “What are you doing here? And Dame Toomsil?”

Tem fixed him in a furious stare, but a glance back at the commandant swiftly took the edge off his foul demeanor. Still, he spoke as if it defiled him to do so. “I am assigned as an Assistant MTI of the Sword for the academic year, overseeing the cadet MTIs. Knight Commander Toomsil will be a Lead MTI of the Sword.”

He looked Zee over, then up at Jessup. Seeing the kraken from this close, his bearing faltered, then returned as he brought his attention back to Zee. “Why you are here at the citadel is beyond me, but also beyond my station, and therefore none of my business.”

Zee could tell that Tem wasn’t happy about it, though, and badly did want to know why they were there.



Tem jabbed a finger at Squire don Donnicky, who still sat on the back of one of the representative's dragons. "You! Minnie scum! What are you waiting for? Maybe one of your daddy's servants to help you down from the big bad dragon?" The squire paled. "Get your slimy bass-butt down here!"

Donnicky hastened off the dragon, dropping his bag and pitching forward in the sand in the process. "Unbelievable," Tem groused.

Zee fought to keep from smiling at Derlick's distress. He was pretty sure the squire had never been spoken to that way in his life. Zee had endured it every day on ship.

The squire leapt up, cheeks flushed, brushed himself off, then ran to stand at attention before the MTI and threw a salute. "Sir! Squire Derlick don Donnicky reporting for processing, Sir!"

Tem leaned forward, screaming in the young man's face. "You call that a salute, Minny Docklicker?!" Donnicky winced at the butchering of his name and the spit that flew in his face. "And you're no squire. You're an insignificant Minnow now. Lowest of the low, your value only that of prey for the bigger fish of the sea."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"You won't last a week!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Are you ready to fail, scum-sucker?!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Tem leaned closer and Donnicky realized his mistake. "I mean, Sir, no, Sir!"

Tem thrust a hand toward a line of other recruits on a nearby hill. "Then get your worthless minny self to processing, Docklicker, ASAP!"

"Yes, Sir!" Donnicky dropped his hand from his brow and started toward the line, then remembered he'd left his duffel in the sand.

Tem shook his head as the squire ran back to get it. "Minnies..."

Zee had heard that BCT was extremely difficult. For their first twelve weeks at the academy recruits were treated harshly, screamed at, humiliated, driven to exhaustion every day without enough sleep and little time to relax. To Zee, that sounded like every day of his life for the past ten years – and students of the academy, recruits or cadets, didn't have to wear chains locked to their bodies all day, every day, and though punished if they got out of line, they were never whipped.

Commandant Aureosa said to Tem, “A moment of your time, Knight Chevalier MTI Briggs?”

“Of course, Sir.” Aureosa and Vandalia lead him a short way up the beach to converse. Aureosa appeared to be asking Tem questions, while glancing at Zee on occasion. It made Zee nervous.

Donnicky ran up next to Zee, clutching his duffel and confused. Realizing how close he was to the kraken, he quickly rounded to Zee’s other side. There he stared at Jessup, then frowned at Zee.

“This was meant to be my special day, Tarrow,” he hissed. “Not some circus with a performing gilly and his demon from Postune’s hells.”

Zee paused a moment, then looked him square in the eyes. “You want to tell the demon that?”

Fear flitted across Donnicky’s features, then he scowled and stalked toward the other new recruits.

“I could tell him for you, if you wish.”

Donnicky stiffened to a stop, then hurried on his way.

Zee regretted his response immediately. He’d never spoken to anyone like that on ship. Then he felt the ire emanating from Jessup and saw him watching Donnicky. His friend had a temper, and it affected Zee. He’d have to be careful about that.

“It’s okay, Jessup,” he said to his friend. “I shouldn’t have said that. We don’t need to be making enemies, at least not so soon after we got here.”

“Jessup doesn’t like him. He is basshole.”

Zee had heard every curse word and foul name a person could be called while working on the ship, but Jessup had been alone in the ocean for ten years. “*Where did you learn that word?*”

“Zee said it once, when Jessup was little.”

“I did not.”

“*Did.*”

It was certainly possible. He’d heard his father say it plenty of times when he didn’t know Zee was listening. “*Okay, maybe I did, but it’s not a nice thing to say about someone.*”

“He is not nice person.”

“No, he’s not, but please don’t say things like that out loud.”

Jessup let out a small sigh, which wasn't so small coming from a kraken, and Zee felt him calming.

Jessup was right, though, and shad-dammit, he was not a demon. He was a big, sweet fellow, and Zee's best friend. A real friend, unlike Donnicky had been. He turned to Jessup, looming up behind. He supposed he could imagine how others might see him as pretty frightening, though. He *was* a kraken. The mythical beast they'd all been taught to fear since childhood, that stalked the oceans looking for ships to sink and people to eat.

"We'll show them," Zee said to his friend. "We'll be the greatest rider and beast they've ever seen." If they were accepted, that was.

A flapping of wings and a dragon's snort sounded. Up the beach a stout brown Rock landed hastily. Its rider, a burly man with broad sloped shoulders, bald head and a prodigious black beard leapt from its back. Together they hastened toward Zee and Jessup. The man would be scary in appearance if it wasn't for the look of joyous wonder in his eyes. The dragon also stared up at Jessup, equally enthralled. A cadet landed on her dragon and hastened behind them, carrying a clipboard and quill.

Commandant Aureosa and Vandalia returned, and Zee saw Tem berating a group of huddled minnies as he strode toward them.

"Zee Tarrow," said Aureosa, indicating the bearded man, "this is Knight Commander Kareem eh Mahfouz, Beastmaster of the Citadel." He nodded toward the dragon. "And Mildrezod, of equal rank and position."

The beastmaster and Rock finally closed their mouths and tore their eyes from the kraken. The man took Zee's hand in both of his and shook it with enthusiasm. "It is a great pleasure to meet you, Mr. Tarrow."

"And you, Sir," Zee replied, entirely unaccustomed to anyone being glad to meet him. The man became suddenly more interested in Zee and began squeezing his forearm, then his shoulder.

Zee wasn't sure how to react, but the Rock spoke in a matronly voice, "Greetings, Mr. Tarrow. Welcome to Triumph's Island."

"Thank you, Ma'am. It's an honor to be here."

She eyed the beastmaster, who was feeling Zee's neck like a doctor checking for swelling. She cleared her throat, brown smoke puffing from her wide mouth. "Excuse Commander Mahfouz's manners. Or lack thereof."

Mahfouz realized what he was doing and stepped back, holding up his hands. "My apologies, Mr. Tarrow. I'm an aficionado of physicalities, you see. I've never had the opportunity to observe a member of the murfolk at such close proximity."

"He's very excited," Mildrezod added with a slight roll of her elliptically-pupiled orange eyes, "if you can't tell."

"Again, my apologies."

"It's all right, Sir," Zee replied. He put a hand on one of the arms Jessup had folded in front of himself. The top of it came up to Zee's waist. "This is Jessup."

The beastmaster stared up at the kraken. "It is magnificent..."

"Mahfouz!" Mildrezod admonished.

"Sorry! He – *you*, are stupendous, Mr. Jessup."

Jessup's eyes swiveled to Zee. "'Stupendous' is good?"

Before Zee could answer, Mahfouz clapped and rubbed his hands together as if he couldn't wait to get them on the beast. "Oh my, yes, Mr. Jessup. Very good."

Mildrezod said, "It means tremendous, beautiful even, in a striking and dramatic sort of way."

"Oh," said Jessup. "Thank you, Sir."

Mahfouz held up his hands, palms forward. "May we approach, Mr. Jessup?"

Jessup looked to Zee, who shrugged, then replied, "Okay."

The beastmaster stepped up and slowly laid a hand on Jessup's arm. He breathed in sharply, then slid his hand back and forth on the kraken's thick hide. "He's warm, Mil!"

To the terrified cadet with the clipboard, Mildrezod said, "There's your first note, Beastmaster Apprentice Terlan. Kraken's are warm-blooded."

The cadet tore her eyes from the kraken. "Yes, Ma'am." She scratched at the paper on the clipboard with a quill.

Jessup didn't flinch as the beastmaster poked at his arm, but Zee asked, "*You okay with this?*"

"*Jessup fine.*" The corners of his mouth stretched upward. "*Jessup 'stupendous.'*"

Zee grinned. “*Yes, you are.*”

Aureosa, who had been watching with interest, said “Mr. Tarrow, I’ll leave you and Jessup in the beastmasters’ capable hands.” He climbed into his dragon’s saddle. “Vandalia and I have important matters to attend to.” To the beastmaster, he said, “Commander Mahfouz, we’ll send someone to fetch you and Mildrezod for your report.” Mahfouz was so enthralled with Jessup’s nose slits he didn’t hear him.

Mildrezod shook her head. “I’ll remind him.”

“Thank you,” said Vandalia.

“Excuse me, Sir,” said Zee. “What about Jessup and me?”

“We’ll be back with an answer as soon as we can,” was Aureosa’s only answer. Vandalia took to the air and flew toward the citadel. Zee’s anxiety returned two-fold. He and Jessup’s eyes met nervously once more.

## Chapter 22

“Preposterous,” grumbled Senator Ralf san Cubberly. “We’ve been summoned to an emergency meeting of the Admissions Board, for this?”

“I only received the letter yesterday morning, Senator,” Commandant Aureosa replied. “With the new academic year starting soon, time is of the essence.

Philliam sim Tooker, Dean of Academics, said. “You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly serious, Philliam,” Aureosa replied. There was no rancor in his voice, but the set of his features made his sentiments clear.

Comments rumbled among others in the room.

“This is unheard of.”

“A murman and a kraken, at Triumph’s Citadel Academy?”

“A *dragon* riders’ academy.”

“And the boy has such a low name.”

“Utterly ridiculous.”

High in the largest tower of the academy, the Board of Admissions, including six of the highest ranking members of the Academic Board and the seven members of the Board of Visitors, most of them riders themselves and graduates of the academy, were seated equally spaced at a grand round table. Their dragons sat behind them, each pair’s voice considered as one, and together holding one vote.

The board room took up the entire floor of the tower, its walls of gray stone hung with banners colorfully embroidered with emblems of the academy’s cadet wing, fighter groups, and squadrons. At the center of the table was inlaid the emblem of the Dragon Corps, a crown with the wings of a dragon, its carved insets of shell shimmering under the light of a majestic chandelier.

Aureosa leaned back in his chair, elbows resting on the arms, and steepled his fingers, but it was Vandalia who spoke, seated on her haunches behind him, her regal head high over his shoulder. “We’re merely proposing a motion to consider the prospect before the esteemed members of the Board of Admissions.”

Dean Tooker's dragon, a wide-bodied Rock, huffed in indignation from where he sat behind him.

"You're mocking us, is what you're doing, Peleus," Tooker retorted. He shot a look at Superintendent Lora aye Hyooz. "You agreed to this?"

She met his gaze steadily. "I have learned enough that I would like to hear more, even if I've not yet decided one way or the other. And if I were to consider it, so must the board, in case it comes to a vote."

Chaplain Antoon oh Connor said, "Why in Zepiter's holy name would we possibly consider such a thing?"

"To put it bluntly," said Vandalia, "it's time we faced a difficult truth. The military might of Tosh, though still renowned throughout the known world, is not as mighty as it once was."

Board members scoffed.

"That's absurd," said Senator Cubberly.

Superintendent Hyooz rapped her mallet on the table. "Order, please," The room quieted.

Mihir han Wanchoo, Dean of Magicks, leaned forward, hands clasped on the table, consternation on his face. The members of the board gave him their full attention. "Through the dragon and rider bond, all of us draw our strength and Abilities from the residual golden power of Zepiter, our creator. This we know. The cold hard truth, dear colleagues, is that either that power is waning, and has been for centuries, or our ability to channel it fades. Either way, it amounts to the same thing. We are not as strong as we once were, and we grow less so with each passing year. I fear it is the same with our allies."

More grumbling rose from the group.

"Open your eyes," said Aureosa. "The academy can barely scrape together a hundred new recruits each year, for a full cohort of merely four hundred. When Wanchoo and I were here before the last great war came upon us, the dorm mounts housed a thousand strong. In elder days, they were filled with thousands of dragons and riders. We now use a fraction of their capacity."

"Today there are but three Red Titans in all of Tosh," said Wanchoo's dragon, a venerable white Ice Diver named Venkatarama. "In our day, there were over a hundred. We also had nearly twenty Black Titans, though only Slan hai Drogo and his mighty Blue Tasarabat, Mogon, ever reached high level. Now we have no Black Titans at all."

There were nods of reverence at the mention of Drogo and Mogon, as well as a few fleeting scowls.

“Wanchoo and I were younger than Drogo,” said Aureosa, “third year cadets forced to graduate early at mid level Bonze class and enter the war not fully prepared, so dire had our situation become. We followed Sky Marshall Drogo and Mogon into that final and fateful battle. We were outnumbered ten to one on the open sea. The loss of riders and dragon’s alike was nearly catastrophic – but we won.”

“We all know the history,” said Senator Em ell Spencer, “We appreciate your sacrifices and many still mourn the loss of Drogo and Mogon, but what does this have to do with the murman and kraken?”

“Peleus, Mihir, Rama and I, along with Drogo and Mogon, are looked upon now as having been part of a greatest generation,” said Vandalia, “yet our predecessors of a century before would have put us to shame. More importantly, and this is not meant as a boast on our behalf or a slight to anyone here, but none have progressed as quickly or as far since. We are weakening in numbers and in strength.”

A tempest of protests whirled about the table.

“We have been at peace!”

“We maintain exactly what is required.”

“Let us not forget, the cost of training and maintenance of the Dragon Corps is no small expense.”

Aureosa said, “What if such a war came upon us today, at this very moment, in our current condition?”

Dean Tooker opened his mouth to speak but closed it with a scowl.

“The sea has ever been a dangerous place,” Aureosa continued, “but we’ve all here the reports that larger and more aggressive beasts have begun to prowl the depths and attack our ships with greater frequency, some not seen in these waters, or anywhere else, for a century. Mr. Tarrow and the kraken were attacked by a sizeable pack of hammerhead orcapods just today on our way here, right off our coast.”

“They are usually only seen in cooler waters,” said Cubberly.

“What was the outcome?” asked Dean Tooker.



“The boy and the kraken killed them all.” Aureosa let that sink in, then continued. “There have also been a steady increase in earthquakes, increasing in strength, and storms of unprecedented force. Ships have been vanishing without a trace, more with each passing year. And not just ours, but those of our allies as well.

“Your speaking of the Wraiths,” snorted Senator Cubberly. “Phantom pirates on ghost ships that appear out the fog to take vessels and slaughter their crews, leaving any survivors petrified with fright for life or babbling crazy. Bah! Nothing but tall tales spoken by nattering fishwives.”

“Don’t be so certain,” said Venkatarama. None attempted to argue.

Aureosa said, “Either way, trade routes are being disrupted. Our forces are spread more thinly with each passing month as ships are assigned more knights for protection. Yet no one speaks of it. It is time we did.” Aureosa turned to Dean Wanchoo.

Wanchoo stared at the table as if looking beyond it and dreading what he saw. “There is a darkness rising in the world, my friends. Venkatarama and I have felt it. A tingle at the back of the neck and a chill of dread in the heart. We know not its source or purpose, yet we sense a great threat is coming.”

Venkatarama added, “It may already be upon us.”

“Until two decades ago,” Dean Wanchoo continued, “the murfolk were a myth. Now they are among us. They are few in number, and we know little about them, but they’re as real as any of us sitting at this table. Now, we have been delivered a kraken, free of the foul taint that weighs upon our senses. We cannot but believe these events are related, in some way beyond our sight.” His gaze passed from one board member to the next. “This must not be taken lightly, nor judgment made without great consideration.”

“Honored colleagues,” said Aureosa, “if we are to push our cadets to greater heights, to challenge them as they never have been before; if war is coming from a threat of unknown source, scope, and power, and if the ancient terror of the sea is as formidable as the stories tell us, perhaps a kraken is exactly what we need.”

“I would also add that the murman and kraken are already bonded,” said Vandalia. “It began when the kraken was a hatchling and Mr. Tarrow was just seven years of age.”

Board members looked up in surprise.

“Seven?”

“That’s unheard of.”

“So are krakens,” said Vandalia.

None had a response to that.

“This could give them an advantage over the other cadets,” said Librarian Taya Ion Greylock, a magicker specializing in scholarship.

“All the better to challenge the others,” Aureosa responded.

Dean Tooker said, “Our traditions of training must not be compromised.”

“Adjustments would have to be made considering their affinity for the sea and ours for the air, but I assure you they would be held to the same high standards we expect of all our cadets.”

Senator Spencer cleared her throat. “Has the boy squired, Peleus? Not in all the history of the academy has anyone been admitted without having completed their squireship.”

“And who would he squire for, Senator? Unless you happen to know of another kraken rider in the kingdom.” No answer. The commandant looked around the table. “Any kingdom?”

Superintendent Hyooz broke the silence that followed with a rap of her mallet.

“Commandants Aureosa and Vandalia have proposed a motion that the murman, Zee Tarrow, and the kraken, Jessup, be considered for admission to the academy for training as rider and beast.”

“Seconded,” came the voice of Venkatarama, confirmed by a nod from Dean Wanchoo.

“Should the motion pass,” Hyooz continued, “we will review the application materials he has prepared and hear applicable testimonies. Any objections before we proceed with a vote?”

A glowering figure with a well groomed mustache and beard laid his hands on the table.

“Before we waste more of everyone’s precious time, I am compelled to raise a formal objection.”

“Proceed, Governor Briggs,” Superintendent Hyooz replied.

“If this murman is indeed one Zee Tarrow of the HMT Krakenfish, by all rights, the kraken belongs to me, Lord Commander Farig jal Briggs, Governor of Akhtar Province.” His Royal Crimson snorted in support behind him. Board members grunted and more than a few eyebrows were raised.

The superintendent said, “I have been briefed on the possibility of this claim, and the only written document that exists is a bill of lading for shipment of an item that is left unnamed. Unless, of course, you have another?”

Governor Briggs scowled.

“If you wish to have the kraken,” said the commandant, a smile quirking on his lips, “go and take it.” Briggs’ features faltered and his dragon shuffled where it sat. “You’ll have to do it yourself, of course, without incident,” the commandant continued. “We could not sanction otherwise.”

Briggs fumed but kept his temper in check and his voice steady. “I will send word to my full guard and retainers. The beast will have no choice.”

“And bring all the might of your personal forces to Triumph’s Citadel Academy? I doubt the board would sanction that.” Some members glared at the governor, others shook their heads, and a few suddenly found a bit of fruit from the serving plates particularly interesting.

A tall, slim man cleared his throat quietly from where he sat leaned back in his chair. He was the only member of the board who did not have a dragon, but his pointed silk cap and shining blue gown spoke to his position. All attended him with respectful attention. He spoke softly and with impeccable calm, but anyone hearing it would say his voice carried tremendous authority, even if they didn’t know he was Davis han Ashura, Vice Vizier to the King. “Neither would His Majesty.”

Briggs raised his gloved fist as if to pound the table, but thought better of it and laid his palm on its polished surface with fingers spread. He spoke in a measured and even tone, but his outrage brewed underneath. “The gilly set it free after it was found ten years ago on one of the beaches of my province.”

“A province in the sovereign nation of the king, Governor Briggs,” the Vice Vizier reminded him.

Briggs’ nostrils flared as he stared at the table, then his expression changed in a flash to one of gracious amicability, and he looked to the Vice Vizier. “You are correct, of course, Vice Vizier Ashura. My apologies.”

Ashura tipped a regal nod.

Superintendent Hyooz gazed around the table. “Anyone else?”

Chaplain oh Connor’s scowl had grown deeper as the meeting proceeded, and now the designated representative of the Church could no longer hold his tongue. “I must speak, or I have failed in my divine duty. The Creation Scrolls are very clear about the difference between humans and dragons, and murfolk and creatures of the sea. Merely speaking in this manner is blasphemy, and to act upon it would be heresy.”

More murmurs arose from the group, a few making the sign of Zepiter over their hearts.

Superintendent Hyooz said, “Thank you for voicing your concern, Chaplain. We are all familiar with the Creation Scrolls and have taken them to heart since childhood, as have countless generations before us.”

The chaplain nodded smugly. “As do all the righteous and faithful.”

“Nevertheless, unless there are any other objections, I must call for a vote to consider the application of Zee Tarrow and the kraken.” Connor fumed but stayed silent. No more objections were raised. “All in favor, raise your hand and say, ‘aye.’”

Aureosa was first to speak, hand raised. Wanchoo followed, then Librarian Greylock. The chaplain voted “Nay.” The others hesitated until Vice Vizier Ashura tipped his palm up and spoke in favor. They acquiesced, with Governor Farig being last.

“The ‘ayes’ have it. Commandant Aureosa, please proceed.”

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Jessup held several arms out in front of him while Mildrezod inspected the short curved spikes that protruded from the center of each of his suckers, then the larger, more wicked claw he had folded out from the tip of each of the arms. She called out descriptions of her findings for the beastmaster apprentice to record.

Meanwhile, Beastmaster Mahfouz climbed Jessup’s shell, examining the spines. He let out a low whistle of appreciation. “You have impressive defensive capabilities, Mr. Jessup!”

“Thank you, Sir,” Jessup replied.

Mahfouz reached for the arrowhead-shaped point at the peak of Jessup’s shell. Blue electricity zapped to his hand, giving him a jolt. He jerked his hand back with a cry. “Holy Zepiter!”

Zee winced. “I’m so sorry, Sir! I should have told you about that, but I didn’t know it would do it involuntarily.”

Jessup apologized as well. “Sorry, Lord Commander Beastmaster.”

Mahfouz shook his hand out. “That’s perfectly all right, Mr. Jessup. I should know better than to be careless with a kraken.” Mildrezod chuckled. Mahfouz mumbled as he climbed down. “Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating.” When he reached the ground, he spoke to their apprentice. “The kraken can produce a shock like a zapeel, Cadet Terlani. Be sure to note that.”

“Got it, Sir.”

The hail of a dragon drew their attention toward the citadel. A Greatwing lit on the sand, Dame Toomsil in the saddle. Both dragon and rider gazed at Jessup as he retracted his claws and tucked his arms back.

Zee couldn't help grinning at the knight who had helped him so much on the ship. "Good greetings, Dame Toomsil."

Her eyes met his and she smiled, though it seemed reserved. "Hello, Zee."

"I bet this is the last place you ever expected to see me."

"With a kraken, yes. Otherwise, not particularly."

Zee felt himself blush at the gesture of confidence.

She turned her attention to Mahfouz and Mildrezod. "Beastmasters, the board has requested your presence."

"You were there?" Zee asked.

"I've had my say, yes."

"How's it going?" Mahfouz asked.

Dame Toomsil hesitated. "It's... going."

Zee swallowed anxiously.

"Hello, Peloquin," Mildrezod said to Dame Toomsil's dragon, rather awkwardly. "It's good to see you."

Peloquin appeared to be caught off guard. "And you, Mildrezod."

Dame Toomsil and Mahfouz exchanged glances and shared in shaking their heads. Zee wasn't sure what was going on, but it appeared there was something between the dragons. Or they wanted there to be something. Or at least one of them did.

Mahfouz climbed up on his dragon. "Come along, Mil."

"All right, all right." After a final glance at Peloquin, she took a running leap and flapped toward the citadel.

Peloquin watched her go, then turned back to see Zee staring at him. A scowl formed on his toothy dragon mouth. "What?"

"Nothing, Sir. It's just good to see you both."

Dame Toomsil said, "It appears much has happened since I left the Krakenfish, Mr. Tarrow." She looked back to Jessup. "And you have a new friend."

"An old friend, actually."

“So I’ve been told.”

Zee introduced Jessup and greetings were exchanged.

Dame Toomsil glanced toward the cadets training on the field in the distance. “I should get back to my duties.” She hesitated, then Peloquin carried her closer with a few steps. “Zee…”

“Yes, Ma’am?” Conflicted emotions twisted across her features, but all she said was, “Good luck.” Then to Jessup, “To both of you.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Zee replied, while inwardly trying to figure out what she had really wanted to say.

Her smile looked forced as she nodded. Peloquin took off and flew toward the training fields.

“Nice lady is worried,” Jessup observed, watching them go.

“I thought so, too,” Zee replied, anxiety churning in his gut.

“Are Jessup and Zee in trouble?”

“I don’t know.” He leaned back against his old friend. “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

Zee wondered, what if they decided to send him back to the Krakenfish? Would they try to keep Jessup? Send him away? Some of the administrators and their dragons hadn’t looked very happy at the arrival of a kraken – the *existence* of a kraken. Could they try to kill him? Was that what Dame Toomsil had wanted to say? Was she trying to warn them?

Hot resolve flashed through him. He would never let that happen. And he would never go back to wearing chains. He and Jessup could be across the bay and deep into the open sea in no time. They’d fight to get there if they had to. Zee would fight for Jessup with all he had. He’d die for his friend. And, he realized, if it came down to it, he’d kill for him, too.

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Mahfouz stood in front of his chair at the board room table and Mildrezod sat behind as they finished their report to the group.

“To conclude,” said Mildrezod, “We’d say the kraken is a truly magnificent beast.”

“He also appears to be in good health,” Mahfouz added, “and of surprisingly temperate manner, in spite of their reputation. Mil and I are in agreement. We would be up for the challenge of partaking in Jessup’s care should he and the murlad be accepted.”

Superintendent Hyooz glanced around the table. “Any further questions?” Board members displayed pensive fidgeting and frowns of deliberation, but no one spoke. “We’ve now heard

from all who are listed and read the letter from the ship's surgeon, which brought the murman and kraken to our attention in the first place."

Dean Tooker waved a hand dismissively, nearly tipping over his wine glass. "Who is this Dr. Aenig who speaks so highly of the murman and recommends so adamantly that the academy break all tradition and protocol? Why should we take his word seriously?"

"Having spoken to him at length," answered Commandant Aureosa, "I believe him to be highly intelligent, well educated, and in earnest." He was replying to Tooker, but his eyes were on Dean Wanchoo.

Wanchoo gazed at the doctor's letter while absent-mindedly tracing the broken wax seal with a finger. He looked up, returning from whatever thoughts had been running through his mind. "Yes, yes. I would not dismiss the surgeon's testimony so easily."

Chaplain oh Connor spoke, making no attempt to hide the threat in his voice. "Should a majority of the honored members of the board decide to indulge this madness, I will be making a full report to the church. The High Clergy will not be pleased."

Vice Vizier Ashura's response was delivered calmly but was no less threatening, and directed at the chaplian. "Whatever the outcome, I will be making a full report to the king."

Many in attendance shifted uncomfortably in their seats. All present knew there was no love lost between the royal family and the Church of Zepiter.

"Should Commandant Aureosa's proposal fail to pass," said Governor Briggs, "having a rogue kraken roaming the seas, let alone a bonded pair, is a risk we cannot accept. We must destroy the beast, and possibly the murman as well." Several members were clearly uncomfortable with the idea. Others nodded in agreement.

"You make a valid point, Lord Commander," Vandalia responded, "and one that Peleus and I have also considered, but there is an alternative."

"As a point of order, however," Superintendent Hyooz interjected, "these are issues to be discussed after the vote, depending upon the outcome."

Briggs acknowledged her statement with a tip of his goblet.

Senator Cubberly picked at his fingernails. "A murman and a kraken, cadets at the citadel..." He leaned back in his chair, still gazing at his hands. "We'd be the laughing stock of all our allies."

"The laughing stock, Senator," said Aureosa, "or the envy?"

Board members exchanged glances, considering.

Superintendent Hyooz tapped her mallet on the table. “Respected colleagues, I propose a vote to accept or refuse the admission of the first murman and kraken in the known history of Triumph’s Citadel Academy. Do I have a second?”



## Chapter 23

Zee slid from where he sat on one of Jessup's arms as Vandalia and Aureosa approached from the citadel, followed by Beastmasters Mahfouz and Mildrezod, as well as Dean Wanchoo upon a regal-looking Ice Diver. Knights and magickers who'd been keeping an eye on the murman and kraken flew closer to circle above. Other's gathered on the rise above the beach.

Zee spoke silently to his friend. "*Be ready, Jessup.*"

"*Jessup ready.*" It was all that had to be said between them.

Further out on the grounds, new recruits, instructors and cadets watched surreptitiously while pretending to go about their business. Dame Toomsil and Tem observed from the edge of the training fields.

The trio of dragon and rider pairs landed on the beach, and Vandalia stepped to the fore. Commandant Aureosa wore a scowl, then straightened in the saddle and made a declaration for all to hear.

"Zee Tarrow, it is the position of the majority of the Admissions Board that you will not be accepted for rider basic combat training at Triumph's Citadel Academy at this time."

Zee's heart fell at the crushing news.

"Mr. Jessup," the commandant continued, "it is also the position of the majority of the Admissions Board that you will not be accepted for beast basic combat training at Triumph's Citadel Academy at this time."

Zee didn't know what to think or how to feel, other than a deep sense of defeat. Surprisingly, the feeling he got from Jessup was more calm than he would have expected, until he also saw and felt a rising tension amongst the guarding knight and magicker dragon and rider pairs.

At first Zee expected the worst. He and Jessup would have to fight their way out. Then he realized they were as afraid of how he and Jessup might react as he was of the actions they might take. They viewed the bonded murman and kraken as a serious threat. Zee took strength in that. He relayed that feeling to Jessup through the bond, and felt his friend's confidence growing.

"However," Aureosa added quickly, sensing the building tension, "we would like to offer you an alternative. We'd like offer you both positions as maintenance contractors for the military. Your value, Mr. Tarrow, is obvious, and an aquatic beast of such strength and

intelligence as Mr. Jessup could prove of great benefit to the base. Your compensation will be in line with contractors of your abilities and experience and housing will be provided. The labor is demanding, but you are no stranger to that, Mr. Tarrow, and I can assure you the bells and working conditions will be more fair than what you experienced as a conscript on the HMT Krakenfish.”

Zee looked to Jessup and spoke through their bond. *“Not what I expected, but what do you think?”*

Before Jessup could answer, Commandant Aureosa said, “May we approach?”

Zee was surprised he would ask permission. “Of course, Sir.”

Aureosa dismounted from Vandalia and they stepped to Zee and Jessup, followed closely by Beastmaster Mahfouz and Mildrezod, Dean Wanchoo with his quemara on his shoulder, and Wanchoo’s dragon.

Zee couldn’t help staring at Wanchoo, whose expression was impossible to read, and the quemara that dozed on his shoulder.

The group came close, and Aureosa spoke more softly. “You recognized Dean Wanchoo earlier, Mr. Tarrow, but may I formally introduce Magi Generals Mihir han Wanchoo and Venkatarama, Deans of Magicks.”

Realizing he’d been staring, Zee hopped to square his feet, and saluted. “It is a great honor to meet you, Magi General Deans.” Jessup saluted as well.

The Ice Diver dragon nodded and Wanchoo saluted back, then clapped his hands together and held them there, a wide grin spreading across his face. “It is my great honor to meet you both.” He gazed up at Jessup. “It is an auspicious occasion to lay eyes upon a kraken, one which I would never have dreamed.”

Venkatarama said, “And to meet the murman who has bonded with him. Auspicious indeed.” Zee blushed, further embarrassing himself.

The quemara shook itself and snorted, little flames flickering from its nostrils. Wanchoo said, “And I must not forget Amoxtli. She can be cranky, but is quite gentle once she grows accustomed to someone new.”

The creature reminded Zee of an armored dillo, though slimmer, and its scales gleamed shining gold. It narrowed its eyes at Zee and stretched its neck forward to sniff at him,

appearing not to like what it smelled. It cocked its head at Jessup, then leapt from Wanchoo's shoulder, spreading thin golden wings, and flew straight at him.

Jessup grunted in surprise and flinched back at the sudden approach of the bold little creature, but it swerved and flew up and around his shell. Short flames shot out of its nostrils as it wound its way up.

"Don't be concerned, Mr. Jessup," said Venkatarama. "She is quite harmless, usually."

Jessup's eyes swiveled to Zee, who could only shrug. The quemara landed on the point at the top of his shell.

Mahfouz watched with concern. "Oh... I—"

Mildrezod shouldered him, cutting him off.

Jessup looked to Zee again. Zee could tell what he was thinking and said silently. "*Don't you do it.*" Jessup sighed.

The quemara emitted several high pitched squeaks.

"Fascinating," said Wanchoo. "Amoxtli has already taken a liking to you, Mr. Jessup."

Confused, Jessup said, "Okay."

Commandant Aureosa chuckled, then sighed deeply and addressed Zee.

"I'm sorry to have gotten your hopes up, lad. Many on our board keep their heads in the sand, blind to the possibilities. They are stubborn and resistant to change."

"You should know, however," said Dean Wanchoo, "not everyone voted against you."

"Yes, indeed," Mildrezod added.

Mahfouz indicated to Dame Toomsil. "Dame Zara mon Toomsil gave you a glowing character reference as well."

Aureosa said more quietly. "We are not giving up just yet."

"Oh..." Zee replied. That they had all supported him was both humbling and an honor, and hearing that he and Jessup might still have a chance, somehow, filled him with hope and determination.

"What do you think of our offer?" said Aureosa. "I can assure you that you will be safe here. You have my word."

Vandalia tipped her head to Jessup. "Both of you."

Zee looked to Jessup and spoke privately through their bond.

Jessup thought a moment. *“Safe is good. Jessup can work.”* A side of his big mouth tipped up and he repeated what Zee would say when they’d start their beachcombing so long ago. The words Zee had learned from his pa. *“Time to get our heads back in the dirt.”*

Zee smiled, pleased that Jessup remembered. All day he had been mulling over the attack by the hammerhead orcapods, and what happened to him when he was swimming and Jessup was encouraging him. He shouldn’t have been able to swim that fast. He definitely shouldn’t have been able to nearly twist the head off a full grown hammerhead orcapod. The power that had come over him, channeled into his muscles, his bones, his very being. It had come from Jessup. But, he was convinced, it also came from him. He and Jessup were truly bonded, and that’s what it was like. He wanted desperately to learn to control it, and to a greater degree, he wanted more of it.

The academy was his best chance to accomplish that, but maybe this was the best alternative. He could watch the cadets and learn, and maybe he and Jessup could train on their own. The words of Dr. Aenig came back to him. *“Show them what you’ve got, Zee Tarrow. I believe in you.”* Aenig had contacted Aureosa, and the commandant had listened. They’d been rejected by the board, but Zee would show them. He’d prove he was a real rider – a krakenrider – whether they wanted him or not.

He stood at attention and gave the commandant his and Jessup’s answer. “We’ll stay, Sir. Thank you.”

Aureosa looked pleased, and relieved. “I’m happy to hear that.”

Dean Wanchoo turned to the pairs who were standing guard. “You are all dismissed.”

The knights and magickers looked to each other in hesitation, but saluted, then flew off to their regular duties. Zee looked to the rise where Dame Toomsil and Tem had been standing, but they were already gone.

“The question now,” said Aureosa, “is where to put you two while the staff makes arrangements for more permanent lodging.”

“Jessup and I would like to stay together,” Zee replied. “If that’s possible.”

“That rules out a hotel.”

Mahfouz seemed to be discussing something with Mildrezod through their bond, then said, “We may have just the place.”

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Commandant Aureosa and Dean Wanchoo watched Zee and Mahfouz walk along the shore toward the port and town, while Mildrezod lead Jessup out through the harbor in the same general direction.

“We’ll need to keep a close eye on them,” said Wanchoo. “I can only vaguely sense the nature and level of their power, but their bond is as strong as any I have felt, and growing stronger. Unchecked and untrained, they could prove a danger to themselves and others, even if it is not intentional.”

“Agreed,” Aureosa replied.

“Will you write a letter to the surgeon?”

“I will. In fact, I intend to maintain correspondence with him, if he is willing.”

“I believe that would be wise.” He placed a beefy hand on Aureosa’s shoulder. “Come, my friend. We have future riders of the realm to educate.” From Wanchoo’s shoulder, the quemara squeaked and blew out a tiny flame. “Even Amoxтли agrees.”

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Zee enjoyed the tour through the port and town, and Mahfouz proved to be an enthusiastic guide, but the walking itself was miserable. The ground still felt like it was moving with every step. It made him queasy, and his legs wobbled. He asked Mahfouz how long he thought it would take Zee to regain his land legs.

“Some recover within bells or minutes,” Mahfouz replied, “others it can take several days, even a week or longer. How long were you at sea?”

“Nearly ten years, Sir.”

“You never once stepped foot on shore in ten years?”

“No, Sir.”

Mahfouz let out a low whistle. “After that amount of time, I just don’t know.”

That didn’t comfort Zee much. His legs were tired and shaking. He’d run on the ship when working on deck, but it was never more than short sprints, and not that many in a row. He was determined to recover as quickly as possible, to get his land legs back, then build his stamina and leg strength. From what little Commandant Aureosa and Dean Wanchoo had said, he and Jessup might still have a chance to get into the academy, even if it was a small one. He’d never make much of a cadet if he could barely walk straight, let alone run for physical training.

They made their way out of town, past the lumber yard, foundry, and woodworking shops, and continued along the shore. After the over mile-long trek, they came to a stretch of old shacks at the edge of the water, each with a rickety wooden dock attached. Jessup was waiting in the water next to one of the docks, and Mildrezod sat atop the rocks piled on the slope of the shore near the shack.

Mahfouz held a hand toward the shack with a gleam of pride in his eyes. "This one is mine. It's not fancy, but it's right on the water, relatively private, and the roof doesn't leak. You are welcome to it until we come up with something better."

"What do you think, Mr. Jessup?" asked Mildrezod.

Jessup waved a couple arms in the water as if testing it. "Okay with Jessup, Ma'am."

"The harbor gates are closed at night," said Mahfouz. "Nothing larger than a small sheel can slip through the bars, and the harbor is patrolled by knights regularly throughout the day. It's as safe a place as you'll find anywhere in the sea."

Inside the shack, to one side was a cot with real sheets, a blanket and pillow; in the corner a small table with a chair, lamp, an alarm clock, and a pitcher and basin for cleaning up. Piled to the other side were fishing poles, netting, broken oars and old buoys.

"I stay here on occasion when on the outs with the missus," said Mahfouz.

"Which is more often than he'd like to admit," added Mildrezod, her head poking in through the open door.

There were knot holes in the walls, and light cut through seams between the planks, but it was a palace compared to a threadbare hammock on the berth deck of a ship packed with smelly, snoring sailors.

Zee set a sack he'd been carrying on the table and laid his duffel on the bed. "This will be great. Thank you, Sir."

Mahfouz handed him another sack. They had picked up food for Zee's dinner and breakfast on their way through town, as well as a bar of soap and some lamp oil.

Exiting the shack with Zee, Mahfouz said, "We'll leave you lads to it. As the commandants said, someone will meet you and Jessup here tomorrow morning at oh eight hundred bells to direct you to where you'll be placed for employment."

Zee spied a dragon carrying an armored knight flying down to perch on a boulder about a hundred feet away.

“They’ll probably have someone watching at all times for a while, just to make sure you’re up to no mischief,” Mildrezod informed him.

“No mischief, Ma’am, I promise,” Zee replied.

“That’s somehow disappointing,” said Mahfouz. “Not even a little?”

Zee smiled. “Maybe a little. But nothing bad.”

“That’s better.”

“Now Mahfouz,” Mildrezod admonished, “don’t be encouraging them to get into trouble on their very first day.”

“Who’s encouraging?” He climbed into the saddle on Mildrezod’s back. “A lad his age should enjoy his youth.”

“Like you did?”

“Definitely not like I did. Then he *would* get into trouble.” With a raised hand, he added, “Goodnight, Mr. Tarrow, Mr. Jessup.”

Zee and Jessup responded in kind, Mildrezod took to the air, and soon the Beastmasters were gone back over town.

Zee turned to the knight, still sitting on his dragon, and waved. Jessup waved as well. Both dragon and rider looked surprised, but the knight awkwardly raised a hand. Zee figured he should put them at ease as much as possible. He did plan on a getting up to little mischief, but it would have to wait until after dark. With the long summer days, the sun hadn’t yet reached the jagged horizon at the west side of the island. There were still a couple bells of daylight left. His stomach grumbled, reminding him he hadn’t eaten all day.

He sat on the dock, feet dangling in the water, chatting with Jessup while eating his meal. Jessup had said he wasn’t hungry. He only ate once a week or so. That made sense to Zee. The dragons on the ship would only fly out to snatch fish from the sea every few days. Though Jessup was bigger, he could probably eat a lot more at once, and with no worry of it weighing him down.

Zee realized he hadn’t actually spoken to Jessup about what a dragonbond was, or in their case, a krakenbond. When he explained it, Jessup wasn’t surprised. To him, it was only natural that he and Zee were bonded that way, which pleased Zee more than he could say.

Ships maneuvered in the harbor, the shouts of their crews echoing across the water. Dragon knights changed guard on the high seawall that rimmed the harbor. Sound floated from the port

and town. Even with all the activity, the setting felt peaceful, which was something Zee had rarely experienced on the ship.

“I know this isn’t exactly what we wanted,” he told Jessup, “but I still can’t believe I’m here, and with you. All in one day, from being alone, scrubbing the hull of the HMT Krakenfish, to Triumph’s Island with Jessup. Life is funny, isn’t it?”

“Zee is funny,” said Jessup.

The reply caught Zee off guard, and he laughed. Then his mood sobered. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

“Jessup always knew he would see Zee again.”

The warmth from their bond swelled in Zee’s chest, and his eyes began to tear up. He took a deep breath and wiped them away. Part of him wanted to relax there with Jessup all evening, but his life had been nothing but work on the ship, training with Tem under the tutelage of Dame Toomsil, then on his own, and studying with Dr. Aenig. He was already getting fidgety. The ever-present desire to better himself, to learn, grow stronger, and to be a cadet, was fiercer than ever.

He looked to the knight and dragon on guard, then scooted down the dock closer to Jessup and spoke through their bond. “*We need to sneak out and get the bag we hid at the bottom of the harbor. The one Dr. Aenig gave me. Any ideas?*”

Jessup thought for a moment, then flashed a mischievous grin and nodded. “Jessup will swim down and get it while Mildrezod leads him to where Zee and Jessup will stay. Then Zee and Jessup won’t have to sneak back to get it.”

“Er... what?”

Jessup opened his mouth and lifted his big flat tongue, revealing the bag tucked underneath it.

“Oh... Oh!” Zee laughed. “You crafty devilfish! Mildrezod didn’t suspect anything?”

Jessup ducked his mouth underwater and retrieved the bag with the tip of an arm, then snaked his arm through the water and lifted it to set the bag on the dock at the cabin door, out of sight of the guards. “*Dragons can’t see under water. Jessup is crafty devilfish.*”

“Yes, you are.” Zee laughed and kicked the water, splashing his friend. Jessup slapped an arm down, the resulting geyser drenching Zee.



Zee sputtered, wiping his face. “I should know better than to get into a splash fight with a kraken.”

“Yes, you should,” Jessup answered through a grin.

Dusk approached night, and a great creak and rumble drew their attention to the harbor entrance in the distance. The enormous gates swung ponderously closed, moved by massive chains on sets of turnstiles turned by muscular Royal Ebons and their riders. Great latches were dropped, which flashed with golden light as they locked into place. Zee marveled that they must be secured not only by iron, but magickal wards as well.

Thoughts of magick and dragons and Jessup and bonds spinning his head, Zee told Jessup he’d be back later to say goodnight in person, grabbed the duffel, and went inside to see what Dr. Aenig had given him.

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By the light of the oil lamp, Zee opened the duffel and the long waterproof bag inside it, finding three items further wrapped in oilskin to protect them further from the sea. The first he unwrapped was his stinger, the tool he had used to protect himself when scrubbing the hull of the HMT Krakenfish. Zee smiled at the man’s thoughtfulness, but his appreciation grew even more when he opened a small sack of coin. He dumped it on the bed. It may not have been a fortune, but it was more money than Zee had ever seen. As a conscript on the ship, he been paid a king’s copper a week, and got no share in the bounties distributed to the crew. It had seemed like a lot to him, certainly more than he’d ever had, but since he couldn’t leave the ship he had nothing to spend it on. He’d saved it all and brought it with him. What the surgeon had given him was much more than that. He hoped it wasn’t all the money Dr. Aenig had, or a large part of his life’s savings. Either way, he vowed he would pay the man back one day.

Another package contained a stack of blank paper, ink well, and several pencils and quills. Zee had always used the doctor’s for his studies. Such a simple thing, but it filled his heart with gratitude.

He unwrapped the last package and his breath caught in his throat. It was a book, as he had expected, but one he had never seen on Aenig’s shelves. It appeared to be very old, the cover made of a thick, dark green material, and stamped with gold foil on the front was the impression of a webbed hand. The hand of a murperson.

Slowly he placed his hand on the impression to compare them, and watched in wonder as the webs formed between his fingers, something that only happened when he was in the sea. The heat of his bond with Jessup swelled inside him and his krakenbond began to tingle. He tore his hand away in surprise, breathing heavily,

Jessup's voice came to him through the bond. "*What is happening, Zee?*"

"Did you feel it too?"

"Jessup felt warm inside, from Zee."

"That's our bond. It happened when I touched a book Dr. Aenig gave me."

"What is a book?"

Zee slapped himself in the forehead. Of course Jessup wouldn't know what a book was. "*I'll show you.*"

Zee went outside and held the book up in the clear light of Zhera's twin moons. "This is a book. People read them for information or pleasure."

"Are we bonded with book?"

"I... don't think so. But it could have something to do with bonding."

"Zee read book and see."

Zee chuckled. Jessup liked to joke around, but he could also be extremely pragmatic. "I'll do that and let you know what I find out."

"Okay."

Back inside, his hand had returned to normal and the intensity of the bond had faded, but a slight tingle of the krakenbond remained. He slipped his hand under his shirt and touched the rough gray patch on his chest, then quickly stepped in front of the old shaving mirror that hung on the wall behind the wash basin, pulling his shirt over his head.

That morning Dr. Aenig had pointed out that the krakenbond had grown in the short time Zee had been reunited with Jessup, but now it was even larger, and the ten arms had lengthened, spreading farther over his left pectoral. He stared, wondering if the book had done that, or if it had grown throughout the day without him noticing. He placed his hand on the book again. The webbing grew between his fingers, the warmth returned, and the tingling of his krakenbond increased, but he couldn't see the bond growing. Removing his hand once more, he wondered if the bond between him and Jessup was making up for the time they'd been apart.

Zee hurried into the chair at the table and moved the lamp to see the book better, trying not let his excitement get the best of him. It could be a book of fiction or old myths, like the others he'd read. He'd be happy if it was a detailed murfolk history – but he had a crazy feeling it could be a handbook about murfolk and kraken bonds, maybe even a forging and progression manual. The forging of Empyrean from the Aether was critical to growing stronger and faster, developing Abilities, and progressing through levels and classes. Zee knew very little about it other than dragon and rider pairs did it on a regular basis to increase their power and advance.

He held his breath and opened the book. Inside the front cover was a slip of stationery with handwriting on it. Zee recognized the surgeon's familiar scrawl and a lump formed in his throat.

To Zee,

Never forget who you are, and always believe in what you can be.

Yours truly,

Drall

Zee knuckled the moisture from his eyes then flipped to the first page of the book. He released his breath with a frown, which grew deeper as he turned more pages. He flipped to the middle of the book, then to the back. All of the pages contained strange, unfamiliar symbols. Now Zee understood why Aenig said he'd hoped he and Zee could figure it out together.

It could be a language, perhaps a language of the murfolk, but the symbols were of random sizes, bunched in odd designs on the page. It looked more like a code. Zee had no idea how to translate a language, but he and Aenig had done some code deciphering exercises, games really, and he knew a few approaches to cracking them. Solving it would be much harder without the surgeon's help, but he had no choice. He took up his new writing supplies.

Bells later he'd filled sheets of paper and gotten nowhere. He saw the time and realized he'd stayed up much too late.

Frustrated, Zee went outside to check on Jessup, who asked how the book was going.

"It isn't," Zee said. "It's gibberish."

“What is gibberish?”

“Something that makes no sense.”

“Zee will figure it out. Zee is smart tiny murman.”

Zee laughed. “Not smart enough, apparently. Maybe you should give it a try.”

“Jessup can’t read. All writing is gibberish.”

“That’s something else we can work on if you want. I don’t know if dragons read, but I don’t see why you couldn’t. Would you like to learn?”

“Jessup likes when Zee teaches him things.”

“All right then, it’s a deal.” Zee held a hand out over the water.

Jessup lifted the tip of an arm to Zee, who took it and they shook on it.

Zee considered staying outside with Jessup for the night. Maybe even underwater. He’d never slept in the sea before, but saw no reason why he couldn’t. Tonight he needed to get a good rest, though, and didn’t think it would be wise to experiment. Tomorrow would be a big day. The beginning of a whole new life. It wasn’t as a new recruit at the academy like he’d hoped, but he was still going to train every chance he got, harder than he ever had before. And now he had Jessup and a bond to progress. He was going to do everything in his power to make sure they were ready.

Thinking about tomorrow made him excited and scared at the same time. He reached out through the bond to sense how Jessup was feeling. He was calm, even content. Zee let it flow through him and it helped settle his nerves.

“Will you be able to sleep out here?” Zee asked.

The kraken yawned, his mouth a dark cave with teeth. It would be a terrifying sight if the beast wasn’t his best friend. “Jessup can always sleep.”

“Glad to hear it. Goodnight, my friend.”

Jessup rumbled with contentment. “Good night, friend Zee.” Jessup sunk into the water, settling on the bottom, until only the tip of his shell could be seen.

Back inside, Zee wound the clock like he’d done with Dr. Aenig’s a hundred times, and set it for oh seven hundred bells. He would get four bells of sleep, but that was as much as he ever got on the Krakenfish, and rising at seven would be a luxury he hadn’t known in a decade. His frustration over the book had subsided and he settled into the most comfortable bed he’d known in ages. Jessup’s calm reached him, relaxing his mind and body. The earth still felt like it was

swaying beneath him – or wasn't swaying, which was equally foreign to him. Instead of dwelling on the odd sensation, he imagined it rocking him to sleep.

## PART 3

## Chapter 24

Zee finally got the stubborn bolt threaded into the brace of an oartug rudder when he heard the ring of a heavy bell. Even under water it rang loud and clear. For a moment he thought about the bell his mother used to ring for him to come up from the beach or in from the barn for dinner, and he missed her and his da terribly.

Zee's supervisor, Androo Cobbling, tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the surface. Their shift was done for the day. The man wore a diving helmet with an air tube that went to a pump on the surface, something Zee never had to worry about.

Zee held up a finger for him to wait, then retrieved a wrench attached to his tool belt with a line and tightened the bolt. Together they headed for the surface.

As timing would have it, Zee and Jessup had started on the first day of the work week. Today was the fifth day, and now they would have two whole days off. Not only that, they worked just nine bells a day, and had an hour for lunch. Crazy. It felt incredibly strange, having so much time of his own, but he'd been putting it to good use.

He was running every morning before work, and in the evening after. "Running" might not be the right word for it, but he'd worked up to a slow jog, and even that was grueling. He would sneak close to the BCT training fields on occasion and watch the new recruits. He still couldn't run as fast or as far as the slowest of them. He was better at the other exercises they had to do, though, thanks to the work he'd performed and the daily routine he'd put himself through on the ship. He could do as many pushers and crunchers as the best of them, and more pullers than anyone he'd seen.

Jessup would go to the beach with him and practice walking on land. It was a struggle for him, having to coordinate all those big flopping arms. He was getting better at it, though, and could drag himself along at least as fast as Zee could walk.

He and Jessup also swam in the harbor, testing their bond, seeing what they could do and pushing their limits. After the first three days, dragon knights no longer came to stand sentry near the shack and follow them if they went anywhere other than to work, and no one challenged them when they left the harbor to swim in the sea. All they got was a reminder to be back before dusk from one of the guards at the gate. Mostly all they'd learned so far was that they were definitely stronger and faster when together, and if they really pushed themselves, it felt like

their strength and speed would increase. They also discovered they would lose that extra strength and speed the farther apart they got, until they were back to normal. Normal for a kraken was still incredible to Zee, though.

In the evenings, Zee taught Jessup the alphabet, scratching out letters on the flat rocks near the shack with soft limestone, and Zee continued trying to decode the book Aenig had given him, but he still had no luck. He'd get to a point where he thought he was close, but when he looked back, he'd swear some of the symbols had changed. After each session he was ready to give up on it for good, but the next day he'd be right back at it.

Workers laughed and joked all along the docks, all heading in one direction. They were generally a well tempered but serious bunch, and Zee noticed the change.

"What's everybody so happy about, Androo?" he asked his supervisor. It felt odd to call anyone older than him by their first name, especially someone he worked for and had been assigned to acclimate him to working on the docks, try him on various jobs to see where he might fit best, but everyone he worked with insisted on it. There were military technicians that worked on the ships, but the majority of labor at the base was done by civilians employed by a contractor. Most of them were just regular folks like him. Well, not murfolk, but very few of them had fancy names like the wealthy and influential families in the kingdom.

"Today is pay day," Cobbling answered, "which means tomorrow is our first day off for the weekend, which means tonight most of this rabble will be crowding the taverns spending a good chunk of their wages on drink."

Zee shook his head and grinned. Nine bell days and two days off every week. He couldn't get over it. He hadn't even known jobs like that existed.

Zee stepped up to where Meik Tabacci, general manager of the contracting firm Zee had been assigned to, sat behind a table out front of his office, handing out bags of coin and crossing names off a list. Behind him, a member of the Marine Force Military Police leaned against the building, looking bored. Apparently there was little worry about being robbed on base.

Tabacci leaned back upon sighting Zee. "If it isn't Zee Tarrow, our resident murman. How was your first week on the job?"

Before Zee could answer, Cobbling stepped from behind him in line. "He's a hard worker, and speedy, Meik. He hasn't complained once, which is more than I can say for the rest of this lot." A few of the closest workers laughed. "And he's shaddamn good at everything I've tried



him on. Best hull scrubber we've got, handy with any tools I give him, knows basic woodworking, and never shirks the most crab-crap of labors I force upon him."

"Maybe I should give him your job."

Androo laughed and slapped Zee on the back. "Give me a promotion and it's all his."

The difference between the way these people interacted with each other and the way the sailors on the ship did was like night and day. There was camaraderie and joking on the ship, but most of the time everyone was tired, angry, or afraid. Zee was sure the captain and Corl had a lot to do with that. Fair treatment and good leadership counted for a lot, and Zee had liked Meik Tabacci and Androo from the first day he met them. Zee would have to remember that if – no, *when* – he became an officer in the Dragon Corps.

Some of the workers had given him the eye or whispered when he first started working with them, but most all of that had abated already in the short time he'd been there, and no one had challenged or insulted him directly. After their initial curiosity, fear, or indignation wore off, most of them treated him like any other worker with a particular set of skills. His most prominent skills, of course, being able to breathe in the ocean, swim faster, and see better under water than anyone else.

Tabacci shoved two small pouches of coin toward Zee. Zee picked them up, but noticed everyone else was only getting one. Some looked more full than others, but just one.

Tabacci answered his question before he could ask it. "That's for the week. One for you and one for Mr. Jessup." Reacting to Zee's blank expression, he added, "If we had a dragon in our employ, you can bet your barnacled sea-bottom we'd be paying it too. And from all reports, that monster of yours can do the work of three cranes and four tugs in half the time. I might even have to give him a raise, shaddammit."

Cobbling chuckled and nudged Zee, clueing him in that Tabacci was paying Jessup a compliment, and only partly joking.

"Thank you, sir," Zee replied. "I'll be sure to tell him."

"You do that. Now, get your beast settled and meet me and a few of the lads, including Cobbling here, at the Blind Pig for a pint."

Zee just stood there. Did the boss just invite him to join them for drinks?

"The Pig?" said Cobbling. "I prefer the Bucket."

"The Dripping Bucket smells like piss."

“That’s because people piss themselves. It means they’re having fun.”

“You go to the Bucket and piss yourself, then. Zee and I will be putting a few back at the Pig with dry britches.”

“Are you buying?”

“First round.”

“All right then,” Cobbling responded, then turned to Zee. “See you at the Pig? You’ve earned it.”

Zee didn’t know what to say. No one but Aenig, Dame Toomsil and Derlick don Donnicky ever wanted him around on the ship, and certainly not for pleasure. Now these people wanted him to spend time with them, just drinking and talking?

“Thank you very much for asking, Sir,” he sputtered, “but I’ll need to speak to Jessup.” There was also his evening training to do, and he still hadn’t solved the mystery of the murfolk book.

“No harm nor foul if you decide against joining us,” Tabacci responded, “You keep working like you are, and the invitation is always open.” Zee nodded and turned to go. “And Zee, enough with the ‘Sir,’ lad. It makes me feel old.”

“You are old,” said Cobbling.

“Shut it, Androo, or I’ll have that coin back quicker than a dartfish.”

Cobbling snickered.

Zee said, “All right, Mr. Tabacci, no more ‘sir.’”

“For Zepiter’s sake, boy, it’s Meik!”

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More military police sauntered casually on the wharf, a few chatting with town constables, so Zee felt perfectly comfortable counting his wages as he walked. He came to a complete stop when he peered into his sack. It was more than he had earned as a conscript on the ship in a year. And Jessup’s pay doubled that.

Zee may not have been a cadet, but he couldn’t believe his good luck. Once again his thoughts returned to Dr. Aenig, the man who had made this all possible, and again vowed he would seek him out one day, pay him back the coin the surgeon had given him, and hug the man.

Up ahead, half submerged near the shore between two piers, Jessup lifted a rectangular boulder the size of a horse cart and placed it among the others he’d laid on the bank already.

Atop the bank stood a sturdy crane of wood, steel, rope, pulleys and chain, and two more of the big blocks of stone. Two operators leaned against the rig, chatting and watching Jessup work.

“It’s about time, Mr. Tarrow,” Mickal rot Fletcher said as Zee approached. “He never quits until you show up.” He offered Zee his flask. “Have a nip?”

“No, but thank you, Mickal.” These men had already given him the ‘sir’ speech when he first met them. He nodded down at Jessup. “Is he still doing well?”

Robhat Hayes puffed his pipe and jabbed the stem down the slope. “That beast will put us out of a job.”

“There’s plenty of crane work to go around, Hat,” said Fletcher. “We don’t have to work so fast when riprapping, and he’ll keep the folks at the quarry plenty busy. It’s a win-win if you ask me.”

“True enough,” Hayes replied, taking Fletcher’s flask and throwing back a swig. He grimaced and coughed. “Is that varnish remover?”

Fletcher sniffed the flask and took another swig. “Maybe.”

Zee hadn’t bothered greeting Jessup when he approached. They always knew when each other were near. “You ready to go, Jessup?”

“Just two more,” said Jessup, reaching for the next stone.

“How many is that, today?”

“Seventy three. Plus these last two will be seventy five.”

“That’s just this afternoon,” said Hayes. “It took him some time to unload the stone from the ferries after lunch.”

“Jessup docked four ships this morning,” added the kraken, “helped load two, and caught one big sheel that sneaked in through the gate.”

“You’ve been busy,” Zee replied. Not only did Jessup seem to enjoy working, he was making tremendous progress with his counting and math.

Jessup laid the next stone. “Jessup likes busy.”

Zee sensed someone approaching in the air and was already turning when Mildrezod called out, “Ahoy! Mr. Tarrow!” After only the short short time he and Jessup had been back together, he’d noticed he was able to feel the presence of other bonded pairs when they were within a certain distance. He’d known other dragon and rider pairs could do it, but to realize he could feel it himself had been a surprise. He could tell it was stronger or weaker in different pairs

depending on their class and level, but had a hard time discerning between them if there were more than two pairs close together.

Mildrezod landed far enough away to keep from blowing sand in their faces and strode to them. From her back, Beastmaster Mahfouz greeted the crane operators, then said, “Your new quarters are ready, Mr. Tarrow.”

“I wouldn’t call them ‘new,’” said Mildrezod. “But they seem fit for a young murman and a kraken.”

“We think you’ll like it,” Mahfouz added.