

## Chapter 37

It was the last day of the work week and a dozen decrepit old warships were to be decommissioned and sunk, but the Dragon Corps and the academy weren't going to let them go entirely to waste. Zee and Jessup had spent the week helping to salvage anything useful. Jessup lifted cannons like they were toys and set them on carts on a pier. Zee stripped metal, assigned mostly to removing underwater fittings and propellers.

They spent most of the last day helping to tow the ships out of the harbor and anchoring them in the sea beyond the peaks and high break walls where they were to be used for a cadet wing strafing exercise.

Zee rode Jessup as they and several oartugs pulled the last of the ships into position. Jessup could have pulled it himself if he and Zee sparked their core, but as much as they wanted to, it wasn't an option out here where everyone could see. Under the guidance of a Silver Class Lead Instructor pair, they positioned the ship in line with the others. Jessup lifted Zee to the deck and held the ship steady while Zee dropped the anchor.

They cruised back toward the island where several Navy ships were anchored with sails furled, along with oartugs and barges, their decks teeming with spectators. With the ships placed, the dockworkers and maintenance crews were to have the rest of the afternoon off to watch the exercise. These exercises were quite a show, Zee had been told, and he and Jessup had been looking forward to it all week. Faculty and instructor pairs soared at ease overhead. High on the cliffs and fortified harbor wall, dock workers, tradespeople, civilians, and many of the academy staff and faculty were lining up to watch.

Zee caught sight of a tall bald man he recognized as Androo Cobbling on one of the barges and waved at him. Cobbling waved back, as did the shorter, stockier bald man next to him, Meik Tabacci. Robhat Haye's nodded, puffing on a pipe, and Mickal rot Fletcher lifted a flask before downing half its contents.

The sound of boots marching on stone floated down to the sea. Zee and Jessup looked up to watch all of the over one hundred BCT recruits marching along the wall in formation, two abreast. Cadet MTIs shouted, “Left! Left! Left, right, left!” It was a particularly hot and humid day, and the heat of the sun struck like a hammer. They had to be uncomfortable in their training aketons and armor, but they marched sharply, and Zee envied them. Directly above them, the BCT dragon recruits flew in a column, flying slowly in serpentine so as to match the speed of the Minnows below. Fennix flew toward the back of the column, keeping perfect distance and form.

A cadet dragon MTI roared, “Sing!”

The voices of the Minnies and Duckies rose together, singing the Dragon Corps Hymn. A sense of pride and longing rose in Zee’s heart.

*From the isle of Triumph’s Citadel  
On wings of wrath we soar  
To protect our nation’s sovereignty  
From the skies our might will roar*

*Through the light and through the darkness  
Over sea and over shore  
For our king and homes and citizens  
(Cadet MTIs shouted, “Who are we?!”)  
We’re the Kingdom’s Dragon Corps!  
Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!*

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Sallison anh Batcu marched smartly in the line of recruits, Jondon dil Rolio clomping along at her side.

The lead cadet MTI roared. “Minnies, halt! Single file! Left face!” They obeyed, and with only a few awkwardly bumped shoulders to mar their precision, turned to face away from the sea, toward the academy.

On the field below, the full academy wing was assembled. There were no first years among them since BCT was not yet complete, but the field held over three hundred cadet pairs in full battle training armor, organized in four groups with their constituent squadrons and flights.

At the front of each group stood their group leader, and facing them all were Cadet Wing Commanders High Mountain ber Sakai and Saralin. Sallison could hear their voices, but couldn't make out what they were saying from that distance.

From where he stood between Sallison and Mehmet can Yasso, Jondon said, "There's your sister, Mehmet."

A tall, powerful-looking third year cadet stood out front of one of the groups. "My dear loving sister."

Beside Mehmet, Chirt said, "May she fall off her dragon in shame."

The four of them chuckled.

As bad luck would have it, or more likely his own surreptitious maneuvering, Inkanyezi ekh Hanyayo stood next to Sallison. He spoke quietly without turning to face her, not wanting to draw the attention of the cadet MTIs.

"How is your archery training going, Minnie Batcu?"

"Well enough to beat you when the trials come around."

"I look forward to the challenge."

"I look forward to putting an arrow in your rear portal." She'd raised her voice just enough.

"Minnie Batpool!" Sallison winced as a third year cadet MTI stomped up to her. "You've just earned yourself the privilege of night watch for five days straight!"

"Yes, Ma'am! Thank you, Ma'am!"

"Don't thank me, thank that ugly pucker of a turtle's under-tail you call a mouth!"

"Ma'am, yes, Ma'am!"

Someone snickered down the line. The cadet MTI glared and marched to scream in Derlick don Donnicky's face, spittle flying. "Did I say something that amuses you, Minnie Duckdinky?"

"No, Ma'am!"

"Maybe you think I'm sweet on Minnie Batcrap because I give her so much loving attention. Is that it?"

“No Ma’am!”

“Maybe I’m sweet on you, too. So sweet, in fact, I’m going to give you five days of scrubbing pots!”

“Ma’am, yes, Ma’am! Thank you, Ma’am!” She glared up and down the line, then marched off along the wall. Donnicky stared straight ahead, face red and scowling.

Sallison breathed out in relief. Night watch would be awful, especially when she’d still have train all day, but her punishment could have been worse. Her mouth had gotten her into trouble at least a half dozen times since she’d arrived. This time it was worth it, though, just from the look on Donnicky’s face. She chuckled to herself. Docklicker was pretty good, but Duckdinky was even better. She’d have to remember that.

Horns were blown on the field below and the cadet wing commanders took flight. One after the other, each of the groups took to the air and circled over the field.

A cadet MTI on the wall shouted, “About face!” They turned as one to face the sea and “enemy” ships the cadet wing would be attacking.

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An odd hum rose in the sky and a flat disk of yellow light almost twenty yards across floated over the wall. Atop it, three fourth year magicker cadet pairs stood at the edges equal distances apart, their wands glowing, as well as the superintendent, commandant, and academic dean pairs. The disk continued out over the water and rose higher for a better view of the exercises. The Ability was called Platform Disk, one that only magickers could do. Zee had seen it used for observation in cadet training, but he’d heard they were also handy for transporting injured dragons and knights in battle. Magickers could create small ones individually, but larger when working together.

A familiar voice sounded across the water. “Zee Tarrow! Mr. Jessup!”

Beastmaster Mahfouz waved him and Jessup over from where he stood at the railing of the nearest Navy ship, Mildrezod and another rider and dragon pair next to him.

They swam to the ship and Mahfouz introduced them to Citadel Tackmasters Sadir sem Samir and Timy, an Ice Diver, who were in charge of all beast harnessing and saddlery.

Mahfouz spoke to Samir loud enough for Zee and Jessup to hear. “There’s a challenge for you. How would you saddle that beast?” While Samir and Timy looked over the kraken, Mahfouz said. “Mr. Jessup, would you show them how your shell spikes operate?”

Jessup spoke to Zee through their bond, and Zee hopped off into the water. Jessup retracted the spikes Zee had been holding on to, then extended all of them.

Zee learned something new when Timy whistled. Dragons could whistle. At least some of them.

“You can control them all individually, Mr. Jessup?” Timy asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Jessup answered, then demonstrated, retracting and extending the spikes around his shell. Timy and Samir seemed thrilled.

Samir said, “This will make for a great challenge to think about.”

“You may have to do more than think about it,” said Mildrezod. “These two will be cadets one day, mark my words.”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” said Timy, “but that seems highly unlikely.”

Mahfouz said, “Would you care to make a wager? Twenty of my largest pumpkins for a dozen bottles of your best cherberry wine?”

“Thirty pumpkins and you have yourself a wager,” Samir replied.

“What do we get?” Timy said to both the beastmaster and tackmaster.

“Right,” said Mildrezod. She bumped Mahfouz with her snout. “And what are you thinking, wagering away my pumpkins?”

“We’ll think of something,” said Mahfouz, “right Sadir?”

“Of course.” The dragons grumbled and shook their heads while Mahfouz and Samir shook hands.

Mahfouz grinned at Zee and Jessup. “Don’t let us down, lads. Mildrezod does love her pumpkins. She’ll never forgive me if I lose.”

“We’re doing our best, Sir,” Zee shouted as he climbed to the top of Jessup’s shell to watch the exercise.

More horns sounded, this time from buglers on another floating Platform, followed by the roars of three hundred dragons high in the sky.

The first of the four cadet groups came roaring down through the clouds. By their light blue aketons, it was Alpha Group. One squadron after another, they flew high along the line of ships, using bombardment Abilities to drop bombs of fire, ice and super-heated ambergris stones, many of which punched right through the top decks.

Beta Group, in yellow, followed, coming in from a lower angle, the larger Royal Ebons in the front clutching at masts, crushing them in their grips and breaking them in two. Zee noticed that the flights of higher class cadet pairs with the highest classes and greater Abilities lead each group, followed by third year pairs, then those in their second year, and each group was made up of roughly an equal number of flights from each year.

The third wave, Gamma group, came in strafing with flame, freezing rain, and ambergris lava. The wing commander flew at the head of the final group, Delta, and nearly destroyed the first ship with a Comet of fire.

The pairs behind him split to go around the rising flames, but when coming together beyond it, two pairs of second year cadets collided. One of them righted themselves and swooped up, though the dragon was having trouble with one of its wings. The other pair, however, crashed through the deck of the burning ship. Black smoke billowed out of the hole, and spectators cried out all around.

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Recruits gasped all along the line on the wall, and Sallison cursed.

Bugles blew, bells rang, upper class pairs with Ice Divers swooped to blast the deck with ice and magicker pairs leapt from the walls while the ship began to list to one side – but the murman and kraken were already speeding toward the burning ship. The kraken, whom she'd heard was named Jessup, roared to warn the cadet pairs, louder than any dragon she'd ever heard, then the mighty beast of the sea shot out of the water and crashed down on the deck on his side, the murman, Zee Tarrow clinging to the spines above his brow. In seconds Jessup had righted itself and straddled the top deck, heedless of the flames. He jammed his arms through the smoking hole in the deck and tore it open. The ship tipped more, and water poured in as it sank.

Zee Tarrow dove into the smoke and billowing steam, and then the ship was gone, the kraken riding it as it sunk beneath the waves. Cadet pairs circled over the boiling patch of sea that was strewn with charred, steaming debris. The Platform carrying the faculty and staff floated closer, as did several smaller Platforms with magickers who specialized in healing. The roiling water settled, and all were silent as tense moments passed.

Zee Tarrow splashed to the surface, holding the limp rider in his arms. Nearby, several kraken arms thrust up holding the dragon, followed by Jessup's shell and face. The dragon began to cough. The rider did not.

Zee wrapped his arms around the young man's chest from the back and squeezed violently. Water spewed from the rider's mouth, he sucked in air. Both the rider and dragon were scorched, but alive.

Seconds passed while everyone just stared. Then came the mighty voice of Beastmaster Mahfouz. "Hurrah! Hurrah!" Others took up the cry, until everyone was cheering.

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Only then did Zee fully realize what he and Jessup had done. They hadn't even thought about it, just decided subconsciously as one to race for the ship. The only words spoken between them in the time it took them to reach the ship was a reminder not to spark their core. They'd had faith the strength of their bond alone would be enough, and it had been.

Each holding the lives they'd saved in their arms, he and Jessup gazed at the cheering crowd, then their eyes met, and they grinned.

A staff magicker pair flew down and took the rider from Zee. More magickers floated a Platform to Jessup, just above the waves. They looked more tentative, but Jessup gently laid the dragon at their feet. One of them tended to the beast as the Platform sped away.

Zee swam to Jessup and climbed onto his shell.

High above, Cadet Wing Commander Beast Saralin roared, "Cadet Wing, form up! Report to Field Three. NOW!"

Any pairs who had not already rejoined their groups did so swiftly. The cadet wing commanders hovered as the groups headed back to the island, gazing at Zee and Jessup with expressions Zee couldn't read, then shot off to follow the rest of the wing.

The large Platform with academy faculty and staff floated down to just above the waves.

All of them were silent as they watched Zee and Jessup, making Zee nervous. Dean of Academics Phillip sim Tooker even wore a scowl. Then Zee saw that Aureosa, Vandalia, Wanchoo, and Venkatarama were smiling.

Standing closest to Zee and Jessup at the edge of the Platform, Superintendent Lora aye Hyooz said, "Thank you for your service to the academy and our cadets, Mr. Tarrow," she nodded to Jessup, "Mr. Jessup."

Zee once more had to suppress the urge to salute. "You're very welcome, Ma'am. We only did what we knew was right."

She just looked at them for a short time. “Either way, it was above the call of duty for your position, and much appreciated.”

Jessup said, “It was fun.”

Her brow lifted, her glasses riding up on her nose, and she chuckled. She looked out to where the ships had been anchored. Three of them were still afloat. She turned to Commandant Aureosa. “We’ll need to have them scuttled.”

Aureosa in turn spoke to a young pair of staffers. “Inform the rear admiral.” The rider and dragon saluted and took off back toward the largest of the Navy ships.

Jessup and Zee communicated briefly through their bond, and Zee asked Superintendent Hyooz. “May Jessup do it, Ma’am?”

“Scuttle the ships?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She turned to Aureosa, who nodded, then back to Zee. “I don’t see why not.” Jessup thanked her again.

Vandalia said, “Be careful, Mr. Jessup. We have no one to send to save a kraken.” Jessup grinned.

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The recruits walked in step along the wall. They were heading back to the field, but the MTIs didn’t seem to be in much of a hurry. All eyes were still on the sea. The faculty Platform rose, then Zee and Jessup were swimming toward the ships that hadn’t sunk. None of them, including Sallison, said a word as they watched.

As the murman and kraken approached the first ship at high speed, Zee Tarrow leapt from the beast with a “Whoop!” and back-flipped into the water. Spikes shot out all over Jessup’s shell, and he submerged just before striking the vessel amidships. There was a resounding crunch and the ship lurched sideways, practically broken in half. It was nearly sunk by the time Jessup shot out of the water with a roar to fly in a high arc and hit the deck of the second ship with the point of his shell. He crashed right through. That ship did break in half.

The kraken’s underwater roar could be heard by all. If they knew Jessup, they’d know it was a happy roar.

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Meik Tabacci clapped Androo Cobbling on the shoulder as they watched. “There’s our boys.”

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Dame Toomsil sat upon Peloquin on the wall next to Tem and Timandra. Through their bond, Timandra said to Tem, “*There’s our boys.*”

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Mahfouz grinned while Samir stared in shock. Mahfouz said, “There’s our boys, Mil.” Mildrezod puffed smoke from her nostrils.

Jessup’s arms reached out of the sea to wrap around the last and smallest of the ships. The water below the ship lit up with blue light, electricity crackled over Jessup’s arms, then pulsed brightly. The ship burst into even more flames. The arms squeezed, crushing the hull and deck like they were made of twigs.

Samir’s Ice Diver dragon, Timy, exclaimed, “Holy Mother of Zepiter.”

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Zee and Jessup swam lazily behind the ships as they entered the harbor. Jessup was quite proud of himself. He told Zee he’d always wanted to see what he could do to a ship, and explained in detail how he’d used what he’d learned about a ship’s construction at the docks to destroy them. Zee clapped him on the shell with encouragement.

Once they’d entered the harbor, Zee leapt from Jessup onto the dock where Tabacci, Cobbling, Hayes and Fletcher began clapping and whistling, along with many of their work crew.

Zee blushed and Jessup rose up, a wide grin on his face. “Jessup wants to break more ships.”

“Maybe another day, Mr. Jessup” Tabacci said with a laugh, “but only when they need breaking, all right?”

Tabacci put a hand on Zee’s shoulder. “Come, Mr. Tarrow, let’s get you and Mr. Jessup paid for the week.”

Cobbling added, “And how about we finally have that pint?”

## Chapter 38

Robhat Hayes raised the toast for their third round. “To Zee and Jessup, the newest heroes of the citadel!” Everyone at the table cheered, mugs were clacked together, and Zee took a sip of his ale, blushing for the third time since they’d sat down at the trestle table in the Blind Pig.

This was Zee’s first time at a tavern, and he found that he liked it. The ale and all the attention, however, not so much. He’d tried ale on ship and hadn’t liked the taste. It wasn’t nearly as bad after two, though. “Jessup’s the real hero. I was just along for the ride.”

Tabacci shook his head. “I don’t think a single soul in the whole watery world would call jumping into the burning hull of a sinking ship ‘along for the ride.’” Zee grinned and watched the bubbles pop on his ale.

“Where is the big fellow, anyway?” Cobbling asked.

“He said he’d cruise the harbor and wait for me, maybe go out and start loosing the chains and anchors from the scuttled ships.”

Tabacci said, “The lad’s a worker, bar none.”

Cobbling snorted. “I beg your pardon?”

“Especially barring you, Androo.”

Only half hiding that he was pouring liquor from his flask into his ale mug below the table, Fletcher said, “He didn’t want to come to the pub?” Zee chuckled, but when Fletcher looked up, his expression was serious. Fletcher glanced at Hayes, who was staring at him blank-faced. “What?”

Zee’s gaze wandered past Fletcher to a dark corner at the back of the bar where three people sat. One of them had a short beard and a wide-brimmed hat with a feather, speaking closely to a tall woman in a cloak with her hood pulled up. Daggers lined the belt of the man in the hat. He looked dangerous, even with the paunch at his belly. Sitting opposite them with his chair turned so he had a clear view of the bar was the tallest man Zee had ever seen, bald with a scar from the crown of his head down the side of his face to his chin. The sword leaning against the table next to him had to be longer than Zee was tall. If the man in the feathered hat appeared dangerous, this guy looked absolutely deadly.

Tabacci said softly, “Don’t stare, lad.”

“Sorry. I didn’t realize I was.”

“The man in the hat is Shawnegan tan Kinglehorst, a notorious black marketeer. The tall fella, Tomassi tal Clewsano, is King Shawnegan’s muscle. He’s no bonded knight, but still one of the most feared men amongst the rogues and thieves of Tosh.”

“King Shawnegan?”

“That’s what folks call him, or he calls himself, who knows how it started. I’m telling you this so you steer clear of them, understand?” Next to Meik, Androo gave Zee a serious nod.

“Thank you. I’ll remember that.” Still, Zee couldn’t help but take another look as he heard a chair slide back in the corner. The woman stuffed a pouch in her cloak and stood. As she walked by, Zee caught the glint of silver scale mail under her cloak. She kept her head down and left the bar, pulling her hood tighter against the rain that had begun after Zee and Meik’s crew had arrived.

Zee shot a questioning look at Meik, but the door burst open to loud cursing. Two young men and a young woman entered, flapping the rain off their cloaks. They wore civilian clothes, but Zee recognized them as three of the five third-year cadets he’d had a run-in with while training in the forested hills. One of them was Lukas, the tall cadet that had done most of the talking and taken a swing at him.

The cadet stomped the rain off his expensive boots, grumbling. He peered around the bar with a frown, but Zee looked away before his eyes fell on him. The cadet strode to the table in the corner. After a once-over from Clewsano and a wave of King Shawnegan’s hand, he took a seat.

Cobbling said, “You know that cadet, Zee?”

“We met, briefly. I just know his first name, Lukas.”

“It wasn’t a friendly meeting, I’d wager,” Robhat said, ale dripping in his beard.

“Not really, but it’s fine.” Zee shrugged. He’d been so busy forging, training, and working, he’d honestly forgotten all about it.

“Kid’s a piece of work,” said Androo.

Meik said, “Name’s Lukas tar Tarzian, spoiled brat of the High Admiral of His Majesty’s Navy, who also owns more land and factories than anyone in Tosh but the kingdom itself. The only more powerful people in the kingdom than Admiral tar Tarzian are the king himself and his

vizier.

“And the brat knows it,” Hayes said, then feigned spitting on the floor.

Zee glanced at where Tarzian conversed in low tones with Kinglehorst, who shook his head in disagreement about something.

Meik leaned closer. “Shawnnegan travels about selling all manner of illicit goods, but his most popular wares here on the island are black market elixirs and pills for bonded pairs. They only enhance the power of a rider and beast for a short time or aid in healing, so they’re not strictly illegal for full fledged knights. It’s frowned upon to obtain them in this way, though. If a cadet is found with them, it’s grounds for immediate expulsion.”

“Kid thinks he’s above the law,” added Androo. “And he’s a bully to boot.”

Zee turned to where the other two cadets sat at another table, mugs of ale untouched, eyes nervously roving over the crowd. Looking out for anyone from the citadel, Zee figured. If they’d seen Zee, they either hadn’t recognized him or didn’t care.

Out of the corner of his eye, Zee saw Tarzian pass a pouch to Kinglehorst and receive one in return. Tarzian put the pouch in his pocket and stood, a satisfied smirk on his face, then turned and his eyes fell on Zee.

Zee returned Tarzian’s gaze squarely. He couldn’t help it. There was something about the arrogant sneer on the cadet’s face, or maybe Zee was just done with turning away and keeping quiet, as he had for all the years on the HMT Krakenfish. It could have had something to do with the two and a half mugs of ale he’d consumed, too.

Zee considered what might be going through Tarzian’s mind. Maybe that no one else in the bar would say anything if there was a confrontation. Or maybe he was now aware Zee knew the commandants and was worried he might tell him. Tarzian could just ignore him, or nod, maybe even buy him a drink. Instead, he resorted to what bullies always do. Intimidation.

Tarzian sauntered across the tavern and stood sneering down at him.

“What are you looking at, gilly?”

Feet shuffled and chairs scooted as nearby patrons moved away. Zee swallowed, wondering if he’d gone too far.

Androo said, “He’s not looking at anything, cadet. We don’t want any trouble.”

“Shut your fish-hole, peasant,” Tarzian spat, his voice oozing with haughty condescension.

Something sparked in Zee – not his core, that would be a very bad idea – but anger. Real anger. He'd once heard a Lord Governor use that word when talking down to his da.

Tarzian spun back on Zee. "You and your monster think you're heroes, now? We would have saved them. You just wanted the attention, because you're nothing. Lowly sea scum, not worth the filth you spring from."

Meik began to stand from his chair, hands raised in placation. "Gentleman, please, there's no cause for—"

Meik was only half risen when Tarzian reached across the table and shoved Meik in the chest, sending him tumbling back over his chair. Just like he'd tried to shove Zee.

Zee was now certain he hadn't gone too far. In fact, he hadn't gone far enough. He could take the insults, but he wasn't going to let this bully push his friends around. Zee'd had no friends for a very long time, and he wanted to keep them.

He stood and pushed between Tarzian and the table, causing the cadet to step back. The two cadets who had entered with Tarzian jumped up from where they sat, but they stayed where they were when they saw Tarzian's hand go to the haft of his sword.

"You draw that weapon in here and we're done, forever."

The voice was King Shawnnegan's, who stood near the back door with Clewsano. The big bald man was even taller standing than Zee had thought when he was sitting.

Rage flashed across Tarzian's features, but he move his hand away from his sword.

Clewsano glared at the cadet, then opened the door, followed Kinglehorst into the rain, and closed it.

Tarzian's sneer returned. "I don't need a sword to teach a gilly a lesson." He snatched Zee by the shirt and hurled him toward the front door with more speed and strength than any normal person could muster.

Patrons leapt out of the way as Zee crashed through a table and chairs. He pushed to his elbows, but paused. Jessup was questing through their bond, having sensed Zee's emotional state.

Zee spoke first. "*It's all right, Jessup, just stay where you are, please. I'll let you know when this is over.*"

He felt Jessup's concern and frustration, but finally his friend answered. "*Jessup understands. Zee do what Zee has to do.*"

*“Thank you. I will.”*

Zee checked himself mentally. No serious injuries, just some scrapes and bruises. He'd had worse. Zee hadn't felt Tarzian spark his core. His strength had come strictly from being bonded. Tarzian's dragon had to be close.

Crouched and helping a dazed Meik to a sitting position on the floor, Androo shouted up at Tarzian. “Using the strength of a bond on civilians is strictly forbidden. You could be expelled for that.”

Tarzian retorted, “And who's going to say anything?” No one spoke. Then, to Tarzian's surprise, Zee stood and clapped dirt and debris from his hands. Eyes locked on the arrogant cadet, Zee stepped clear of the debris. Customers door exited quickly behind him, leaving the front door open to the pouring rain. The rest of them crowded against the walls. Zee knew what Tarzian was thinking. Zee should have been squirming on the floor with broken bones, been out cold, or worse.

“I won't say a word,” Zee said, “but I will answer.” It was possibly the first time he'd spoken to someone that way in his life. It felt good. Jessup was having a good influence on him after all. Well, maybe not good, but right.

Tarzian jeered, “Fine. My dragon is right outside.”

Power pulsed from the cadet as he sparked his core. No one else in the tavern felt it since they weren't bonded, but Zee did. Zee didn't know what class Tarzian was since he'd never seen him in armor or with a class and level badge, but if he had to guess, he'd say low level Bronze. There was no way for Zee to know how much he and Jessup had progressed, but he didn't care, not even when Tarzian thrust his arms down and out to his sides and his right hand burst into flames.

Zee glared at him from beneath his brow. “So is my kraken.”

At that moment, lightning flashed outside with a sharp crack, flaring though the windows and the open door behind Zee, followed by a sharp crack and rumbling of thunder. Zee didn't know if Jessup had something to do with it, or if he could even do such a thing, but the timing had been perfect.

Tarzian and his flightmates had been involved in the exercise today and seen what Zee and Jessup had done, maybe even witnessed Jessup's destruction of the ships.

The warmth of their bond heated and power swelled within Zee. Jessup wasn't coming to the tavern and he hadn't sparked their core, but he was closer. Much closer. Right across the wharf in the harbor. Channeling his strength to Zee. And he was angry.

Zee clenched his fists at his side. Blue light burned in his eyes. His hair rose from his shoulders and waved slowly. Electricity crackled over the krakenbond on his chest, then spread down his arms to flare around his hands. Zee had no idea how it was happening, but he went with it, covering his surprise with a feral grin.

Fear flitted across Tarzian features. He peered through the front door and windows, perhaps imagining the kraken's hulking figure appearing out of the gloom, sizzling with electricity, then tearing The Blind Pig's entire front wall out onto the street before snatching him up with one of his monstrous arms and eating him.

At least, that's what Zee hoped he was thinking.

Tarzian withdrew the fire from his hands and doused his core. The fight had left him, but the hatred in his eyes remained. The two other cadets joined him.

"We'll see you soon, gilly," Tarzian said through a hateful smirk.

"Not soon enough." Zee concentrated on letting go of the lightning on his fists and it fizzled out.

Tabacci got to his feet. "I will keep my mouth shut for now, tar Tarzian, but a word from you about any of this; if there is any hint that you've filed a complaint against a certain young murman, and I will have plenty to say about what you've done, why you come here, and how often, regardless of the consequences."

"And he won't be the only one," Cobbling added. Everyone at the table stood, glaring at Tarzian, including Robhat Hayes, then over half the people in the bar rose or stepped forward.

Mickal rot Fletcher looked around from where he still sat, then groaned. "Oh, fish it." He rose from his chair as well, raised his mug to Tarzian, and chugged his drink.

Tarzian cast a last glaring look at Zee, spat on the floor, and stomped to the back door, the other cadets in tow.

Breath escaped, the confrontation past, and everyone looked at Zee.

Fletcher said, "Next time, we're going to the Bucket."

## Chapter 39

The following Firstday morning, Zee slid his and Jessup's stamped time cards into slots outside Meik Tabacci's office and stepped away from the line of workers.

"Mr. Tarrow!" came Meik's familiar voice.

Zee turned to see Meik on the wharf with Kareem ah Mahfouz and Mildrezod. Zee hesitated, wondering if they'd heard what happened at the tavern, but strode over and greeted them.

"You're being assigned a different duty today, at the request of the academy," Mike said.

"Recruits and cadets are going through water survival training today," Mahfouz explained, "and our lead lifeguard is out sick."

Mildrezod said, "After your show of bravery and skill at the strafing exercise, we're hoping you'd fill in."

"I'd be honored," Zee replied, somewhat taken aback, but also relieved this wasn't about the tavern incident. He'd also get a first hand look at more recruit and cadet training, which he hadn't had much time for lately.

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Having changed into lifeguard's swim trunks, Zee stood on a low diving platform at the edge of the training pool. It was more like a lake than a pool, over a hundred yards wide and twice that in length. Situated at the edge of the island, one side was bounded by a fifty foot high break wall wide enough for two dragons to walk on abreast, two others by sandy beaches, and the far end a rocky slope to a natural ridgeline.

The exercises hadn't begun, but two groups of twenty five BCT Minnows were marching in while being berated by their cadet MTIs. A squadron of upper-class pairs was flying in as well.

Zee had been asked to do a safety check of the pool before the exercises. He'd almost laughed when a security officer had offered him a snorkel, and politely declined.

Without taking a deep breath, because he didn't need to, he dove from the platform. It took him little time to check the full length and width of the pool, which was uniformly about twenty feet deep, with a sandy bottom, and surprisingly clean. He inspected the channels that ran



through the wall with heavy grates at both ends to allow for circulation. They were only a foot across, the grate openings not even large enough for a ranha to fit through. Zee tugged at them anyway to make sure they were secure. All the while, he spotted only a few small schools of tiny colorful and harmless fish.

Zee climbed out at the end of the pool and gave the security officers a thumbs up. They stared at his gills and webbed hands and feet as he walked by, but he paid them no mind. By the time he'd taken three more steps the gills had disappeared and his hands and feet had returned to normal.

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Sand shifted in a wide circle at the bottom of the pool, opening to reveal an eye three feet across, with a pupil in the shape of an X. The eye roved around the pool, unblinking, then closed again, and waited.

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Recruits craned their necks to watch Zee walking behind them, only to be scolded harshly by their MTIs. He was still an oddity among them. He'd become just one of the gang amongst the workers at the docks, for which he was incredibly grateful, but with each passing day he felt more like he might never fit in at the academy, even if he did become a cadet. That was okay though. It would be nice to make friends with some of the cadets, but didn't really matter. He and Jessup just had to be the best among them.

Zee climbed the rungs to sit atop a twenty foot tall watchtower at the corner of the pool. More lifeguards took positions several fourth year magicker pairs lounged on benches on the beach. No one looked particularly concerned.

Dragon cadets took to the water, their riders clinging to their saddles. All of them held their wings in tight, their riders swimming alongside with one hand on the saddle. They swam better than Zee would have imagined, but The Ice Divers were easily the swiftest. The Rocks had the hardest time, floating lower in the water than the others, but even they didn't seem to be struggling.

The BCT recruits had the more difficult task. Wearing full training armor, they were made to climb to thirty foot diving platforms and jump in. It soon became clear to Zee they'd trained for this already, and this was more of a practice test. That didn't mean they were doing all that well.

They sunk as soon as they hit the water and stripped off as much armor as they could before surfacing. Zee watched for signs of panic or telltale bubbles, ready to leap if needed. The MTI cadets paid close attention. They might treat the recruits badly, but they didn't want any of them to die.

Once the recruits surfaced, they had to swim out to a line of bouys in the middle of the pool, tread water for five minutes, then strip their trousers and tie off the ends of the legs to make a makeshift flotation device. Once that was accomplished, they were to swim back. The recruits went ten at a time from ten platforms, and as soon as one set started swimming out to the bouys, the next ten jumped in.

It was Zee's task to watch the recruits, while the other lifeguards kept an eye on the cadets. One of the magicker pairs flew slowly back and forth over the water as well.

Even with that many people keeping watch, and a dragon, there were a lot of people and dragons in the water. Zee lifted the protective lenses over his eyes to sharpened his vision in the sun's glare and repeatedly scanned each one of them.

Even with all hundred recruits in the pool, everything was going fine, when Zee noticed a recruit out by the bouys he had just seen wasn't there anymore. Then a dragon screamed.

Zee leapt to his feet on the tower.

The dragon of one of the fifty cadet pairs that were swimming laps thrashed frantically and was tugged beneath the surface while the rider shrieked. Then the dragon was lifted out of the water, clutched in an enormous, hairy, crab's claw.

The pincer snapped shut, cutting the dragon in half. It's rider wailed.

The creature shoved up further out of the water. Its shell was covered in shaggy fur, as were its pincers and the slim front legs it used to gather one half of the dragon to the two trunk-like proboscises above its wide mouth packed with rows of jagged teeth. Sharp tusks protruded from its face on either side of its trunks. A single eye, three feet wide and with an X-shaped pupil, gazed from the center its shell, and a smaller eye was centered just above its trunks. Zee had seen illustrations of these creatures in Aenig's books on sea fauna. A Mammoth Crab.

Cadets, recruits, and dragons shrieked, splashing frantically for the nearest shore. MTI's screamed for them to get out.

Zee spoke briefly through his bond, and dove from the tower.

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*“Jessup, I need your help.”*

Jessup froze in the middle of lifting a crane mount onto a pier.

He set the mount down roughly, causing workers to jump back, climbed onto the wharf, and shuffled away as fast as he could.

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The surface above Zee churned with frantic swimmers, the water filled with their muffled shouts and the muted roars of dragons. He surfaced in an area clear of swimmers. The dragon of a Silver Class knight pair on the break wall roared into the sky.

Zee considered trying to save as many swimmers as he could, but the monster crab was laying waste to the cadet pairs. Only the Ice Divers were able to escape by diving deeper, then thrusting with their wings to clear the surface enough to fly. The rest had to swim for it. Most had sparked their cores for extra strength, but dragons weren't well built for swimming.

The cadet magicker pairs scooped recruits up and dropped them on shore as fast as they could, but it wasn't fast enough. The knight pair swooped down from the wall and blasted the monster crab with flame, but the beast ducked under the water and leapt back up, stabbed the dragon with the pike-like end of one of its legs right through their aura armor, and dragged them under.

The best thing Zee could think of to do was distract the crab and give everyone a chance to get out of the water. He spied the armor that had been shed by the recruits piled at the bottom of the pool, but there were no weapons. Not that a training sword would do much good against this monster. He submerged and shot toward the beast.

The Mammoth Crab was even bigger than he had thought. Its shell had to be twenty feet wide, and its legs thirty feet long. Zee put on speed and slammed into the eye on the top of its shell with his shoulder. The clear covering of the eye barely gave, but it got the creature's attention. It ducked under the water and spun to glare at Zee with the one eye on its face, pincers held wide. It loosed a shriek and lunged.

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Jessup clambered over a wall at the edge of the academy training fields. Zee had told him he would be at the training pool across the island. Jessup had never been there, but he felt Zee's presence and headed straight for it.

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Zee shot in and slapped the tip of one of the Mammoth Crab's trunks, then swam up, avoiding the creature's sharp tusks, front-flipped over its shell. The crab was surprisingly fast, but Zee was faster. Even without Jessup being close enough to lend him the strength of their bond, he was able to avoid the crab's pincers and stabbing feet.

Zee kept close, swimming around its legs where it had a harder time keeping track of where he was, then shot out in front of it again. The monster glared at him, then turned and strode toward the splashing dragons. It no longer considered him a threat.

He shouted and tugged at its back legs, then swam over its shell to punch at its frightening eye, but the beast kept going. What Zee needed was his stinger. He could remove it from his Keep without he and Jessup sparking their core, but Jessup had to be much closer. He expanded his bond sense and could tell that Jessup was coming, but still too far away. Zee had to do something, and he had to do it now.

He shot around the crab as it reached for a swimming dragon and grabbed ahold of the lower half of one of its claws both hands. The beast shoved up out of the water, snapping and waving its claw in the air, trying to dislodge the pesky murman. The claw didn't close far enough to snip off his fingers, but several of them were crushed. Zee gritted his teeth though the pain and hung on.

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Jessup grunted with Zee's pain. He had to run faster. He could have swum out of the harbor and around the island, but he hadn't thought of that. There was no guarantee it would be faster, anyway. It was too late for that now.

Cadets and MTI's shouted at him as he shuffled straight through training fields, heedless of whatever activity the riders and dragons were engaged in. No one tried to stop him, and anyone in his way parted with haste.

Fennix had been helping Jessup practice walking like a spider, but the technique still evaded him. His failures had been comical, he knew it, but it wasn't funny now. He tightened his arms and pulled eight of them under him while holding the front two up in front of him. He went slowly, thinking about alternating opposite pairs at a time, then remembered how Fennix had chastised him for thinking too hard about it the last time they'd tried it. He forced himself to breathe slowly and put himself into a state closer to when he and Zee meditated for forging, letting his mind relax while keeping the movement of his legs at the back of his thought, pushing

himself up farther and stepping farther. Before he knew it he had closed his eyes. When he opened them he was running faster than he'd ever thought possible. He nearly tripped, but calmed himself further, and ran.

MTI's stopped shouting in mid-sentence. Dragon's nearly collided in the sky. Everyone stopped and stared at the kraken, raised up on eight legs, speeding across the fields, stepping over walls ten feet high, even leaping a low storage building, all without slowing or missing a step.

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One of Zee's hand's slipped from the Mammoth Crab's claw just as the beast lifted the other from the water and reached for him. He was about to swing out and drop into the pool when he felt the power of a Red Titan pair sparking their core and heard Dean Mihir han Wanchoo shout,

“Viraam!”

Zee hung at an odd angle, frozen still. He couldn't even turn his head. Water rippled out from the immobilized crab.

The Deans of Magicks flew within sight, Wanchoo riding bareback on Venkatarama's back. They hadn't even had time to saddle the dragon. Wanchoo had his wand pointing at the crab, projecting a cone of yellow light.

“Are you all right, Mr. Tarrow?” said Venkatarama.

Zee, of course, couldn't answer.

The commandants circled, Aureosa shouting, “Get everyone out! Get them out!” Gold Class pairs that had accompanied them began retrieving recruits and cadets from the pool. Staff magickers lowered Platforms to the surface of the pool for cadets and recruits to climb onto.

The crab's eyes glowed with crimson light, as did the water beneath it, and the monster began to move. Wanchoo and Rama groaned with effort. The crab's eyes flared. The cone of light failed. The crab lunged, and Zee dropped to the pool.

Zee surfaced to see the Dean's holding the monster back with their Shield, then the crab's claw smashed through it. Wanchoo and Rama Shifted to the side, avoiding the blow, and conjured a Testudo Globe around the monster. The Globe sizzled and blinked at the water line, then it, too, failed.

There were still too many swimmers in the water, and too close for Aureosa and Vandalia to use their most powerful attack Abilities, but they fired a Beam of fire at the creature that should have incinerated it. Shaggy fur caught fire, but the crab shrugged it off and moved toward a group of dragons and their riders still in the water.

Jessup's roar sounded from a distance. The familiar heat of the bond flared, hottest in the krakenbond on Zee's chest. Zee dove, his chest flashed blue and his stinger was in his hand. He shot upward and out of the water. He reversed his grip on the stinger and gripped it with both hands as he flew, then hit the crab at the center of its big eye, stabbing the stinger deep.

The crab lurched and bucked, shrieking, trying to reach Zee with its enormous claws. Zee's hands erupted in sizzling blue electricity. With a shout, his fists flashed, sending the power down the stingers shaft and into the beast. The crab jolted, shook, then collapsed into the pool where it floated, steaming.

Zee jerked the stinger free and sat back on the dead creature's back, breathing heavily. Finally he lifted his eyes to find everyone except those still floundering in the water staring at him, including the commandants and deans.

*"Jessup is here, Zee!"*

Zee spotted his friend come running over the rise that separated the training fields from the pool.

Jessup stopped when he saw Zee sitting on the dead crab-monster. *"Oh... Zee okay?"*

*"I'm okay,"* Zee said. Wait... *"Were you running? Like a spider?"*

Jessup grinned.

Everyone else continued to stare.

## Chapter 40

Jessup tipped the dead Mammoth Crab onto its back on the beach, shaking the ground and sending up a cloud of dust. Magickers approached it cautiously, wands aimed, just in case. All recruits and cadets had been cleared from the area, the seriously injured flown to the infirmary. Mahfouz and Mildrezod moved somberly along a line of bodies, cadets and dragon's alike, which Zee and Jessup had helped retrieve from the pool. Altogether, one knight pair, three cadet beasts, five cadet riders, and two recruits, a human and a dragon, had been killed. Over twenty had been injured.

Jessup shuffled over to where Zee sat on a stone bench facing Dean Wanchoo, who sat on a bench carved into a boulder. Venkatarama stepped to the side to give Jessup room to join them.

Zee leaned out to watch a group of faculty and staff up the beach in a heated discussion with Commandants Aureosa and Vandalia.

Wanchoo spoke, drawing his attention away from the conversation. "That's twice in as many weeks you two have saved cadet lives."

Jessup said, "Jessup didn't do anything."

"But you did, didn't you?" said Venkatarama.

Zee couldn't read the dragon's expression, but he feared it might be an accusation. They hadn't sparked their core, though.

Jessup didn't answer.

Zee looked back over his shoulder. The academy's chaplain, Antoon oh Connor, was saying prayers over the dead. The chaplain caught his eye and glared. Zee looked away. "I didn't save all of them."

Rama gazed at the beach as well. "It's a hard truth in the military, learned through painful experience. You can never save everyone."

They sat quietly, then Wanchoo said, "May I see this weapon you used, Zee?"

Zee hesitated, but unwrapped the stinger and handed it to Wanchoo. He hadn't wanted to put it in his Keep while people were watching but he couldn't just have it disappear after everyone saw him use it, so he'd wrapped it in the shirt he'd been wearing when he'd arrived at the pool.

Rama moved closer to inspect it as well, then he and Wanchoo exchanged glances. Zee was pretty sure they were talking through their bond. Wanchoo closed his eyes and waved a hand over it, whispering words Zee didn't understand.

Strange symbols began to glow along its length. Zee held his tongue, in spite of his surprise.

Rama said softly, "It's a wand..."

"I believe so," said Wanchoo, not taking his eyes off the stinger. "Though like none I've ever seen."

Zee peered at the symbols. They looked similar to the ones in the book Dr. Aenig had given him, but more like letters of a foreign language. "Can you read the writing, Sir?"

Wanchoo shook his head. "I wish I could. I've never seen anything like them." He looked up from the stinger. "Did Dr. Aenig give this to you?"

Zee hesitated, but nodded. "All it did was zap, and not very well for anyone else. The crew found it on a salvage dive. They thought it was junk since it isn't gold or silver, so they gave it to the doctor when he said he'd like to have it."

Wanchoo said, "If it was one of ours, or of an allied nation, we'd have to confiscate it. I can guarantee you, however, it is not." He waved his hand over it again and the symbols disappeared. He handed it back to Zee, who rolled it back up in his shirt, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief.

Wanchoo leaned back. "This electrical power you manifested... Neither you nor Jessup sparked your core – if you even have one, that is."

Rama said, "If you do, you are very good at masking its power if even we can't feel it." Zee swallowed, but stayed silent. He wasn't sure where this line of inquiry was going, but at least that was good news. "And you can do it without the stinger?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Jessup can produce electrical current naturally," said Wanchoo, "just as a Greatwing or Royal can produce fire. That you have become able to do the same is not entirely surprising. It's called a Sympathetic Ability. They develop in riders of pairs who have a particularly strong bond, but they do not require a sparked core like other Abilities do. They usually don't manifest in anyone below Copper class, and then not for everyone. There are White Titans who don't have one."



Zee wasn't sure how to respond to that, but Venkatarama spoke, saving him the trouble.

"There are names for Sympathetic Abilities, just as there are for common Abilities, but we've seen nothing like yours." He turned to Jessup, "What have you called it?"

"Um..."

"Go ahead, Jessup," Zee encourage him. "You came up with it."

Jessup shuffled a bit. "Lightning Fists."

"I like it," said Rama.

Wanchoo smiled. "Quite appropriate." He leaned closer. "I wouldn't go around showing off with it or lighting up the night just for fun, however."

Zee nodded quickly. "I understand, Sir."

Jessup beamed with pride. "Zee wanted to call it Sparky Paws."

"I did not." Zee chuckled, as much from being nervous as amused by Jessup's taunting. "Fennix said that."

Wanchoo said, "We'd heard Fennix was visiting you."

Zee winced. Of course they knew.

Wanchoo's smile was genuine, though, and Rama was smiling as well when he said, "Young Fennix is well within his accommodations to visit you, as are you to receive him."

The crunch of boots on loose stone alerted them that people were approaching.

Wanchoo's smile disappeared and Rama sighed with a deep-throated rumble.

Zee and Wanchoo stood as Aureosa and Vandalia lead the group around the boulder. Those that followed lined up in a semi-circle. Among them were Superintendent Hyooz and Dean of Academics Phillip sim Tooker.

"How are you holding up, Zee?" Vandalia asked.

"I'm fine, Ma'am, thank you for asking." He'd been in similar life threatening situations on the Krakenfish. Just like those times, and when he and Jessup had gone to help the fallen cadet pair, he'd just done what he felt had to be done. And just like those times, the true danger to himself hadn't occurred to him until afterward.

Chaplain oh Connor marched up to join the group, steering well clear of Jessup, but glowering at him, then Zee, with unveiled disdain. Mahfouz and Mildrezod weren't far behind him.

Dean Tooker cleared his throat. "How did this happen, Mr. Tarrow?"

“I don’t understand, sir.”

“You checked the pool prior to the beginning of the exercise, did you not?”

“I did, Sir.” At their silent stares, he added, “So did the other lifeguards.”

“They aren’t murfolk, though, are they?”

“No, Sir.”

“How is it that a creature of this size escaped your attention?”

“It must have been buried in the sand, Sir.” Truth was, Zee had been wondering about that himself. He’d always been able to sense danger when it was near, especially in the water, and that aptitude had only gotten stronger since his bond with Jessup had grown. How had he not sensed a twenty-foot-wide Mammoth Crab?

Hyooz looked around at the group. “The more pertinent questions are how did it gain access to the pool, and when?”

“Indeed,” said Tooker, though his accusing gaze at Zee didn’t abate.

Zee felt Jessup’s ire rising, but calmed him the best he could.

“A crab that size could have climbed the wall,” said Mahfouz.

Superintendent Hyooz replied, “There are always guards on the walls, as well as making rounds in the air.”

“As much as I hate to admit it,” said Aureosa, “it could be possible. There can be brief periods of time when the sentries are past, or looking the other way.”

Tooker said, “For it to have snuck in like that suggests a malicious intelligence the creatures are not known to have.”

“Perhaps it tunneled in,” said Mahfouz.

“The island is solid rock,” said Mildrezod.

Superintendent Hyooz pushed her spectacles up on her nose. “Nonetheless, the base of the island should be checked by divers.”

Zee said, “I can do it, Ma’am.” She glanced at him, but didn’t answer.

Tooker said, “Mammoth Crabs are deep sea dwellers. Scavengers. They rarely come to the surface, and never to hunt. What brought it here in the first place?” The dean of academic’s eyes fell on Zee once more, and the chaplain continued to glare.

Zee didn’t know where this was going, but he didn’t like it. Hadn’t he just killed the monster and saved lives?

Aureosa said, "This is ultimately my responsibility."

"And mine," said Vandalia.

"As commandants of this academy we are charged with not only the training and discipline of cadets, but their safety and the security of the citadel as well. There will be a thorough investigation into the matter and I will deliver a full report. Meanwhile security details will be doubled."

"Your loyalty to the Dragon Corps and the academy are not in question, Commandants," said Superintendent Hyooz. She turned to gaze at Tooker over her spectacles.

"Of course not," said Tooker. "I have never doubted that you always have the best interest of the Corps, the academy, and the kingdom at heart, Peleus." His eyes went to Jessup, then Zee. "As much as I may disagree with some of your courses of action."

"There is also the question of how the beast was able to shrug off the Beam of a Red Titan Class pair," said Vandalia. "Even if it could do such a thing naturally, it also resisted Wanchoo and Venkatarama's Viraam holding Ability and broke free of their Testudo Globe."

Wanchoo said, "The Abilities of even the most powerful magickers do not hold well in water. The beast was mostly submerged, and Mammoth Crab are naturally extremely powerful. This one is not, however, an entirely natural beast."

"What are you saying?" Hyooz asked.

Wanchoo, and Venkatarama shared a look, then lead the group to the crab, where Wanchoo climbed up between its sprawled-up legs to its expansive underbelly. Aureosa followed without question. The others hesitated, but did the same. Zee half-expected to be told to wait on the beach, but no one said anything, so he climbed up as well.

Wanchoo stared down at the broad plates of the crab's belly, which were devoid of the fur that covered its carapace, legs, and pincers. "It's as I suspected." The dragons came closer, rose on their haunches and craned their necks to see.

Dozens of glyphs had been carved into the plates. Zee shuddered at the sight of them. They struck him as hideous and profane, though he had no idea why.

From the looks on faces of the rest of the group, they felt the same way. Chaplain oh Connor made the sign of Zepiter over his heart, whispering a prayer.

Aureosa crouched and reached to touch one of the glyphs, but stopped with his fingers suspended above it. He pulled his hand back and stood. "What are they, Mihir?"

“I don’t recognize the symbols or their configuration, but I assume they are wards, perhaps a spell or enchantment. There could be several of each. Stealth magick, wards against entrapment Abilities, possibly strength enhancement. We must consider that this beast could have been under the control of a powerful magicker. Someone who could have sent it here.”

“Who?” Hyooz asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I didn’t think anyone practiced this kind of magick anymore,” said Tooker.”

“Neither did I. Not for hundreds of years, perhaps longer.”

“We’ll study these thoroughly,” said Rama, “and call in our best scholars.”

“Do that,” Hyooz replied, “but I suggest we keep this on a need to know basis. That a wild beast was able to sneak onto Triumph’s island and harm students is bad enough. A planned attack could start a panic.”

“Meanwhile,” said Vandalia, “we should maintain business as usual, but with heightened security. I will see to it immediately.”

Aureosa said, “We must inform the king as well. I’ll dispatch a confidential letter as soon as I’m back at the citadel.”

Zee’s head spun as they all stood silent. Jessup just stared down at the crab’s shell, risen slightly on his tentacles. No words were spoken between them, but emotions flowed through their bond. Confusion and worry, but also the warmth of support.

Tooker looked to Superintendent Hyooz. “There is also the matter of a kraken running loose across our training fields.”

“No one was harmed, I take it?”

Aureosa shook his head. “Not that I have heard, and I would have heard by now.”

Vandalia said, “His bondmate was in danger. I’m sure he can be forgiven this once.”

Hyooz considered it, then nodded.

“The kraken and murman should be taken into custody immediately,” said Chaplain oh Connor, “for the safety of all on the island, in Zepiter’s Holy Name.”

“Why is that, Chaplain?” Aureosa asked.

The chaplain jabbed a finger toward the crab’s belly. “Can you not feel it? This is demon script. Murfolk, krakens, they are kin to this monster. The spawn of Postune, demons all.”

Zee gawped in disbelief, but Tooker and several others stared at him. “I had nothing to do with this,” Zee sputtered. “You must believe me.”

Jessup growled, glaring at the chaplain, who turned his accusing finger on the kraken. “You see! These two could have led the demon here, perhaps signaled when it was safe to climb the wall in the night. The murman could have known it was in the pool all along.”

“And why would they do such a thing?” Vandalia asked.

“They are trying to elevate themselves within the academy, then destroy us from within.”

Mahfouz’s fists were clenched, but his voice held steady. “Zee was only informed of his appointment to the water survival exercises this morning.”

“It could be a coincidence, but does anyone know what’s actually wrong with the lifeguard he has replaced? The murman could have made him ill with more foul magick.”

No one was backing up the chaplain’s theory, but Tooker and the superintendent both looked pensive. Zee couldn’t believe this was happening, and he had to reassure Jessup that everything would be all right. Jessup wasn’t sure about that, but he understood that resorting to violence or intimidation would only make things worse.

“Twice now, Zee and Jessup have saved lives on this island,” said Mildrezod. “Lives that we ourselves, with all the might of the citadel, could not protect, and would be lost if it were not for them. Are you saying they also arranged for cadets to collide and fall into a burning ship?”

The chaplain’s brow knitted as he searched for an answer.

It was Tooker who responded. “Highly unlikely. It did provide an opportunity for them to prove themselves, however, and they did not hesitate.”

“I would call that heroism,” said Vandalia.

“Perhaps.” Tooker had none of the chaplain’s fervor in his voice, but it was cool and calculated.

“This is ridiculous,” Mahfouz spat.

Hyooz said, “Let’s keep our heads, gentlemen, and our voices down.” They glanced around. The attention of several magickers and knights quickly turned away, but they were all at the other end of the beach or high in the air, too far away to have heard the conversation. “We will reconvene in the board room at oh eight hundred this evening. I’ll request the presence of anyone else who should be involved in a meeting to discuss an official inquiry.”

She took a deep breath. “Meanwhile, there is no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of Mr. Tarrow or Mr. Jessup. They will remain free to go about their business unless further evidence suggests otherwise. What say you, Commandants? Security is ultimately your purview without an official vote of the board to supersede it.”

Aureosa and Vandalia answered together. “Agreed.”

She looked around the group, but didn’t ask for their thoughts on the matter. None posed an argument, though the chaplain fumed. “We need to address the full student body, faculty and staff as well. And we must send letters to the families of the deceased. I and my staff will take care of it. For now, I recommend you all attend to the injured and traumatized.”

As one, they saluted. She saluted back, climbed to her dragon, and the two of them flew off toward the citadel.

Aureosa said, “Mr. Tarrow, Mr. Jessup, walk with me.”

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After speaking to Zee and Jessup, Aureosa and Vandalia flew straight to the citadel. They landed on a wide balcony on the third floor. Wanchoo and Venkatarama were already there.

“The boy and the kraken?” Venkatarama asked.

Vandalia said, “We don’t believe they’re going to swim off into the sea, if that’s what you mean.”

They stood quietly for a time, then Aureosa voiced what he knew to be on all their minds. “There was red light in the eyes of the crab.”

Wanchoo nodded. “No one else has spoken of it. In the madness of the attack, I doubt they noticed.”

“If they did, they couldn’t know what it might mean,” said Vandalia. “They would assume it was something the crab did naturally.”

Rama said, “I would assume the same, if it wasn’t for the terrible surge of power that came with it.”

“But, in a non-sentient beast?” Aureosa asked, then paused, brow furrowed. “Was it brought back?”

“There was no sign of that,” said Wanchoo.

“And the glyphs?”

Wanchoo stared at the balcony floor. “I spoke the truth. Those are new to me – but the dread Rama and I felt from them was not.” He looked up. “They radiate the same sense of foreboding horror that has haunted our dreams for many months.”

## Chapter 41

The setting sun painted the horizon red and gold when Fennix winged his way around the mountain, deeply concerned for his newfound friends. If he was to admit it to himself, they were the only friends he had in the world, but he couldn't have asked for better.

He spotted Zee sitting on the ridge of rock that separated the ocean from their lake in the cavern, chin in his hands. Next to him, Jessup floated in the sea, anchoring himself with several arms on the ridge.

Fennix spoke before he even landed. "Are you all right, Zee?!"

He lit on the ridge and strode closer, hopping on his one good front leg.

"I'm okay, Fennix," Zee replied. "Thank you for asking."

Jessup said, "Zee is sad."

"I'm not sad. Just frustrated."

"I would have come sooner," said Fennix, "but my BCT group was engaged in formation drills over the sea when it happened. We didn't hear about it until we'd returned, but the MTIs kept us training."

Zee said, "That's all right, and thank you for coming."

"Wild stories are circulating. One is that a Mammoth Crab fifty feet wide attacked in the training pool, killing everyone, including Gold and White Titan Class Knight and Magicker pairs. Jessup ran across the entire island, raised high on his legs like a spider, crushing dragons and shaking the ground with his passing. The two of you engaged in a mighty battle with the beast, nearly bringing down the breakwall, then you slew it with an enchanted sword of blue light."

Zee snorted and a weak smile spread on his lips. "That's not true." He blew air out between his lips and slumped. "It was bad, though."

"I figured as much, and I'm sorry this happened. Everyone is being gathered to be briefed on the incident, but I wanted to hear it from the two of you." He paused. "If you don't mind telling me, that is."

Zee shook his head. "We don't mind."



Fennix listened with fixed attention as the young murman told him everything that had happened. When Zee finished, Fennix turned to Jessup. “Is it true? Did you actually run like we’ve been working on?”

Jessup grinned. “I did, finally. I was fast. Thanks to you.”

“The hard work was all yours, my friend. I just offered encouragement.”

“I didn’t step on any dragons, though.”

“I didn’t imagine so.”

Zee said, “I could hardly believe it when I saw him come over the hill. It was amazing, and kind of terrifying.”

“Even better,” Jessup replied.

“How long have you two been working on that?”

Fennix looked to Jessup, who shrugged his okay, then said, “Several weeks. It’s been... well, it’s been a process, let’s leave it at that.”

Jessup chuckled. “I tripped and fell down a lot.”

“If it had been my paid vocation to train him, I would have asked for hazard pay.” They laughed together.

“How didn’t I know?” Zee asked.

“Jessup wanted it to be a surprise.”

Zee looked to Jessup, who said, “Surprise!”

When their laughter subsided, Zee took a deep breath. “We might be in some trouble, though.”

He and Jessup explained what had happened after he’d killed the crab. Talking to Deans Wanchoo and Venkatarama, then the conversation with Superintendent Hyooz and the others, the accusations, and the possibility of an inquiry.

“That’s preposterous,” Fennix exclaimed. Then he sighed. “Though, and I hate to say it, I’m not completely surprised. Families of the cadets and the Board will want an explanation, and, perhaps, someone to blame. Dean Tooker is a spiteful man, from what I’ve heard, and the chaplain, well...”

Zee said, “After everyone left, Vandalia and Aureosa told us the superintendent didn’t have a choice. She had to bring the request for an inquiry to the academic board. They’re meeting tonight. We’ll just have to wait and see how it goes.”

After a period of silence, Jessup said. "Commandant Aureosa said if it was up to him and Vandalia, Zee would be getting a medal."

"It sounds to me like you deserve one, Mr. Tarrow."

"I don't know about that."

"I also think both of you have much to be thankful for, even in this situation. It appears that the Commandants Deans of Magicks are firmly on your side. Those are some very powerful allies."

"I just hope it's enough," Zee replied.

"Also, it doesn't sound like Dean Tooker or Chaplain Connor suspect that you've been forging."

"Nobody said anything about it, though Wanchoo and Venkatarama hinted around it. I'm pretty sure they know, but don't want to know, if that makes sense."

Jessup appeared to be taking it all pretty well, but Zee was still somber. Fennix tried to think of a way to cheer him up. Then a dragon roared out over the sea. The three of them watched as a knight pair swooped low then soared up and disappeared behind the mountain, headed toward the interior.

Fennix heaved a dramatic sigh. "I wish I knew what it was like to carry a rider." He glance at Jessup out of the side of his eyes.

Jessup caught on quickly. "Zee has always wanted to ride a dragon."

"So you've said."

Zee said, "You've never carried a rider, Fennix? Not once?"

Fennix sighed again. "Sadly, no."

Zee looked back and forth between the two of them. "You two do realize I know what your doing, right?"

Fennix clutched his club-foot to his chest. "I haven't the foggiest idea what you mean."

"Sure," Zee said with a chuckle. "But, are you serious?"

Fennix smiled. "I am. It's a very selfish offer on my part, though. I would be thrilled and honored to take you for a flight, Mr. Tarrow."

Zee turned to Jessup. "Are you sure you wouldn't mind?"

Jessup looked confused by the question. "Why would I mind?"

"I'd be riding someone other than you."

“That little thing? He probably won’t be able to carry you very far, anyway.”

“Ho ho!” said Fennix. “That, sir, sounds very much like a challenge.”

“It is. I challenge you to take Zee flying.”

Fennix looked to Zee. “I’m sorry, but now we have to. My honor would be tarnished until the end of my days if did not accept a formal challenge of this nature.”

Zee shook his head but couldn’t hide the grin that bloomed on his lips. Back to Jessup, he said, “Are you sure you’re sure?”

Jessup crossed his two front arms and looked down at Zee. “I am sure.”

Zee snorted. “Okay, you win. And I win. We have to be careful, though.”

“There’s nothing in the Dragon Corps code of conduct or laws of Tosh that forbid an unbonded dragon to carry a rider, nor for a non-cadet to ride one. It’s just rarely done.”

“You’ve looked into this, have you?” Zee asked wryly.

Fennix’s eyes darted about for a moment. “Perhaps...”

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“I’m riding a dragon!” The thrill Zee’d felt since Fennix first leapt to the air had only grown stronger, and all his worries of the day had faded away.

“I’m carrying a rider!” Fennix shouted beneath him.

They’d waited for darkness, then Zee had climbed upon Fennix’s back. Zee had been nervous, but settled in much more easily than he’d expected. Memories of riding Midge came back to him, at once happy and sad. Happy for all the time he’d had with her; sad because he hadn’t seen her in a decade, and maybe never would. Domestic hogs lived for decades, though, so there was still a chance. Riding a pig wasn’t easy, and Zee recalled how he would have to grip with his legs and lean with her when she turned. Of course, a fall from a pig would be nothing compared to a fall from a dragon, but Fennix had assured him he would be very careful.

So far Fennix had indeed been careful, not only to make Zee feel safe from falling, but also to avoid the two of them being seen. He’d flown around the mountains, low and close to the water, beneath the view of any guard stations and far below the cadets’ quarters, until the mountains blocked even the dim light of the newly risen moons, then straight out over the sea in the shadows.

The waves sped by beneath them. For Zee’s sake, Fennix made no tight turns or other sudden moves, but he wasn’t holding back on the speed. They weren’t much higher from the

water than Zee would sit when he rode Jessup, but the feeling was much different. There was no spray of the waves, no bouncing or splash, just the wind and gentle movement with the beating of wings. Zee began to think the grin that split his face might be stuck there permanently.

Once they were several miles away from the island, Fennix angled upward toward a low layer of clouds. Zee felt his stomach drop and a strange queasiness as the ocean fell away beneath them. The nausea abated, replaced by a touch of vertigo, but soon that faded as well.

Even in the dark, he could see for miles in every direction. Then they entered the clouds, and he couldn't see a thing. It was very much like sailing through fog, but this fog got brighter as they ascended, until all of the sudden, they broke through into the clear night sky.

If Zee had thought he could see for miles before, here he could see forever. The stars were brighter than he had ever seen, casting light on the surface of the clouds below like moonlight on a rolling gray meadow that spread to the horizon in every direction.

“Oh...” Zee uttered.

Fennix circled, peering into the distance all around, searching for any other pairs in sight.

Fennix slowed to be heard better over the wind. “What do you think so far?!” he shouted.

“Are you kidding? This is spectacular! How is carrying a rider?”

“It's every bit as wonderful as I'd imagined. Much easier than I would have thought as well. Entirely natural, if you get my meaning.”

“Well, I'm not very heavy.”

Fennix laughed. “That is true. Do you want to have some fun?”

“This isn't fun?”

“Of course, but *more* fun. Are you feeling secure back there?”

“I am, surprisingly so. It's actually easier than riding a pig.”

“Pardon me?”

“Never mind,” Zee said with a laugh. “I'll explain later.”

Fennix shook his head, puffing icy mist as he laughed. “Lean forward further and hold on tight. If I feel you coming unbalanced or slipping in the slightest, I will adjust immediately.”

Zee did as he'd been told, reaching further forward to grip the spines higher on Fennix's neck and squeezing tighter with his legs.

Fennix flapped harder, increasing their speed, then swerved gently back and forth. When Zee had no problem hanging on and leaning into the turns, Fennix went faster and made the turns tighter.

They practiced like this for a time, climbing and diving as well, until it was clear they each had a good feel for the other. Then the real fun began.

Fennix shot up into the air and dove, spiraled and even did a few loop de loops, both of them loosing whoops of excitement. Fennix didn't do the crazy aerobatics Zee had seen him do by himself, for which Zee was glad, but he did perform a long twirling dive that made Zee's head spin.

Fennix pulled out of the dive just above the surface of the clouds and flew over it. "How was that?" Fennix asked.

"Amazing. I think I'm a little dizzy, though."

"It used to happen to me all the time. You get used to it." They flew awhile longer, enjoying the view, and Fennix said, "I hate to say it, but we should probably be heading back. Jessup will be waiting, and we'll have to tell him all about it."

"He's going to be jealous. You'll have to give him a ride next."

"Oh, dear!"

They were both still laughing, skimming the starlit surface of the clouds, when Zee felt the sudden tingle of present danger.

He just had time to shout Fennix's name when five dragons and riders shot up through the clouds in front of them. Fennix braked wildly with his wings to keep from colliding with them.

Zee recognized them immediately. Lukas tar Tarzian and his cadet flight. The last times Zee had seen them hadn't gone well. From the looks on the faces of both riders and dragons, he had a feeling this was going to be worse.

Tarzian shouted through a predatory sneer. "We thought that was you! The cripple, and the freak!" Waves of energy swept over Zee as each of them sparked their cores.

Fire roiled in the maw of Tarzian's Royal Crimson dragon. "Burn!" it hissed, then blasted a column of searing flame. Fennix plunged into the clouds.

Zee hung on for dear life as Fennix dove, far faster than they had flown before. The fire hadn't touched them, but the heat had been incredible. Fennix leveled out in the thick cloud cover, but continued flying fast.

Leaning forward as far as he could, Zee shouted, "Are they trying to kill us?!"

"They wouldn't dare!"

"Are you sure?!"

Fennix thought for a moment. "No. This far out, they could incinerate us and sink us with lava if they really wanted to."

The back of Zeke's neck tingled. "Turn left!"

Fennix didn't hesitate, rolling to the left just as more fire streaked down, vaporizing a swathe of mist where they'd just been.

"Right!" Zee cried, and they avoided a geyser of ambergis lava from one of the other pairs. A blast of ice made the clouds flurry with snow, and more fire melted it. Zee shouted each time and they barely avoided the attacks.

Instead of continuing to dive, Fennix swooped swiftly upward and climbed. He stayed below the upper surface of the clouds and sped through them. No more attacks came.

"They will find us," said Fennix. "We need to get back to the citadel. They truly wouldn't dare continue an attack within site of the island!"

"If we make it!"

"There is that!"

"Then let's see how fast you can really fly!"

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Fennix knew he had flown faster, but not often. Carrying a rider slowed him less than he would have thought, and Zee was a natural rider. A pang of remorse clutched his heart as he wished he could bond with Zee, but he knew that was impossible. Zee was a murman. There was no feeling of connection between them, and Zee was already bonded. He felt guilty for even thinking such a thing. Jessup was his friend. So was Zee. He forced himself to have faith that he would pass BCT once again, that this time he would find a rider, be bonded, and be a knight. He clung to that, let it fuel his heart, and pushed himself even harder, pumping his wings with everything he had.

Though he could barely see in the fog of the clouds, he didn't question that he was going the right way. Dragon's have an innate sense of direction, and he was no exception.

Suddenly the clouds became more illuminated, and they shot through the edge into clear sky, lit by the moons to the east and the stars above. Fennix could see the island, but it was still miles away.

Zee had remained silent, most likely to keep them from being heard by their pursuers. Then he spoke. "Don't look back, Fennix, just fly!

"Are they pursuing?!"

"Yes." The murlad's voice was surprisingly matter-of-fact.

Fennix's mother had often told him he was more intuitive than other dragons. She said it was a gift from Zepiter to compensate for his physical disability. He had been skeptical when younger, but had later realized she was right. He could sense the emotions of others. Right now there was no fear in Zee. No anger, either. Just a steely resolve.

Fennix kept himself in exceptional shape, but the muscles of his chest and neck ached from the sustained exertion of flying at top speed. He clenched his long jaw, breathed deep, and flew.

Fast as he was, however, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't keep ahead of bonded pairs for long. Especially bonded pairs with the furnaces of their cores aflame.

Two of the pairs dove to fly ahead in front of Fennix and Zee. At the same time a pair came up on their left, and another on their right.

Tarzian's voice roared from above. "Gotcha!"

Fennix dove. Flames, ice, and magma, enhance by the power of their attackers' cores, rained down around them. Zee shouted no warnings or directions. Tarzian and his flightmates weren't trying to hit them, Fennix presumed, but drive them into the sea. Perhaps they weren't trying to harm them at all, but just wanted to teach them a lesson, whatever that lesson might be in their cruel and twisted minds. The ocean, however, was also the perfect place to dispose of their bodies.

Zee yelled, "Watch out!"

Fennix launched into a succession of the swiftest evasive maneuvers he knew – and he'd practiced them often. It became clear they were trying to hit them now, and though Fennix tried every trick he knew, the flight kept driving them closer to the sea.

“Keep it up as long as you like, freaks!” Tarzian shouted. “You can only go so low!”

A streak of fire singed Fennix’s tail, and a spatter of sprayed magma struck his back. His scales kept either strike from burning deep, but there was pain, nonetheless. He gritted through it, and kept flying. He hadn’t worked this hard, for this long, to die this way. And he couldn’t let Zee die either.

In the sky ahead, dark clouds approached swiftly, heat lightning flickering through them.

Zee leaned as far forward as he could and spoke only as loud as he had to. “Get down as close to the surface as you can.”

A moment of panic seized Fennix. “Are you going to jump?”

“No. Even without carrying my weight, you can’t out-fly them. I’m not leaving you.”

Fennix felt Zee’s resolve growing even stronger. Fennix dove as instructed, evading more attacks. They gained a little distance on their pursuers, but not for long. Soon projectiles flew all around them.

Zee shouted louder than he had since the attack had begun. “Dive, Fennix, dive!”

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“Well, we survived.” Commandant Aureosa strolled to a table at his favorite café on the wharf and pulled back a chair. It would be good to relax after the somber address at the academy earlier, where at least Superintendent Hyooz had done most of the talking, then the meeting of the academic board to discuss whether there would be a formal inquiry into Zee’s role in the crab attack, where he and Wanchoo had to speak the most. The motion for an inquiry had passed, but the vote to proceed would have to wait until the Board of Visitors could convene. Meanwhile Aureosa had already launched a formal investigation into how the crab might have gotten in.

Across from him, Dean Wanchoo pulled back a chair, lit by the soft amber glow of the tiny Emyrean lamps strung between posts along the edges of the café’s deck. “Survived is the right word, I’m afraid. And barely.” He and a group of trusted magickers had removed the plates from the crab’s belly, inspected it’s tissues and taken samples, then taken the plates to one of their academy laboratories to study the strange runes. He nearly shuddered at the feeling of dread they’d conjured within him.

They had just sat when a cadet pair landed in haste on the wharf. The young woman leapt from her dragon and ran to two Gold Class knight pairs on academy security duty who had been discussing something good-naturedly, side-by-side.



“Sirs! Ma’ams!” she shouted, addressing the dragons as well as the riders. She caught herself, stood to attention, and saluted. Once they’d saluted back, she blurted, “There’s something happening.”

“What is it, cadet?” Aureosa heard one of the dragons ask.

“I was on dorm guard duty when Raddifax spotted them. My squadron and group leaders aren’t available. I didn’t know who else to come to.”

“Just tell us what it is.”

“I used our spotting scope, but they’re quite a ways out—”

The cadet’s dragon interrupted her, “Sirs, Ma’ams, it looks like a flight of cadets are attacking another pair out over the sea.”

Aureosa got up from his chair and went to the deck railing. “Where is this happening?”

Both the cadet and her dragon’s mouths dropped open at the surprise query from their commandant. The dragon recovered first. “Due west from the mountains, Sir!”

Aureosa sighed and turned to Wanchoo, who had joined him at the rail. “I was so looking for a nice, quiet meal.”

By the time he’d finished speaking, Vandalia and Venkatarama had rocketed down to land on the wharf, a great gust of wind sending the café canopies flapping.

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Fennix felt Zee lay flat on his neck and reach his arms around it as he tucked his wings and plunged straight into the waves. Twenty feet down, Fennix swam, using his narrow wings like fins, then they stopped and looked up.

Flames roiled over the waves, shot through with globs of molten dragon ambergris. The fire didn’t penetrate the surface, but the water boiled and steamed above. The lava quickly cooled and sank harmlessly.

Then the surface began to freeze. Zee couldn’t imagine how cold the breath of the Ice Diver above had to be to freeze saltwater that quickly. Within seconds a thick layer of ice spread out at a shocking rate above them.

Fennix didn’t need any prompting to begin swimming to reach the outer perimeter of the ice. He was running out of air when they got to the edge and was forced to surface, blowing out the air in his lungs as he went. He barely had time to gasp in another breath and glimpse that the storm was closer and darker before flames descended upon them and he had to dive again.

He looked back at the sound of something plunging into the water above them. The Ice Diver had dove in after them, its rider no longer on its back. It plunged straight toward them. Fennix's maneuverability was severely limited in the water, and the other Ice Diver clamped its jaws down on the bone of his wing. Then Zee was sitting up, his stinger crackling with blue light in his hand. He stabbed at the dragon's neck. The beast's aura protected it from being skewered, but the stinger penetrated enough to zap it hard. The dragon recoiled, then glared at them with sheer hate, preparing to strike again.

Fennix realized something. He'd trained with Zee and Jessup enough to know, if Zee was able to retrieve his stinger, that meant...

His thought wasn't completed when Zee pulsed with the power of his and Jessup's core being sparked, immediately followed by a kraken arm whipping around the other Ice Diver and jerking it into the depths.

Fennix broke the surface of the waves, gasping and sputtering. He tested the wing the other Ice Diver had bitten. It would be sore, but there was no serious injury. Zee surfaced next to him, no longer on his back. Blue light burned behind the murlad's eyes, which Fennix had seen before, but he also wore a feral smile. Fennix turned in the water follow Zee's gaze.

The cadets circled, searching the water around the wide patch of thick ice, upon which stood the rider of the Ice Diver that had dove in after them.

Tarzian's dragon spotted them. "There they are. Sneaky little freaks!"

One of the other cadets shouted. "Lukas! Don't you think they've had enough?"

Tarzian shot the cadet a glare, then sneered. "No one will miss a gilly and a cripple. We're doing Triumf's Island and the Dragon Corps a favor." His dragon's mouth lit with fire.

Black clouds darkened the sky, thunder rumbled overhead, and a deep voice reverberated from beneath the sea. "I AM HERE."

A powerful wind slammed into the dragons and riders, and the ice exploded beneath them.

The cadet who'd been standing on the ice went flying, screaming as he flipped head-over-heels out over the sea. The cadets in the air were battered by broken ice and knocked away by the blast. The dragons shrieked, flapping to right themselves, and finally got their wings under control when the kraken lifted the Ice Diver out of the water and chucked it to flop through the air and splash into the sea. Blue electricity arced across Jessup's spines.

Fennix looked to Zee, who's smile had transformed to an expression of fierce concentration. Later, Fennix would be glad he hadn't been watching Jessup at that moment, because everything went blinding blue and white.

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The Commandants and Deans of Magicks sped through the night sky, eyes on a cluster of black storm clouds that hung in air above the sea about a mile away. Lightning flashed in spidery bolts, striking four objects in the sky. Except the lightning had not come from the storm. It had come from the sea. Aureosa and Wanchoo exchanged glances, then fed more power into their Streak ability. They and their dragons shot forward, becoming virtual streaks of golden light.

They disengaged Streak to find a flight of cadet riders floating on the waves amongst shards of ice, and Jessup clutching Zee and Fennix close. Four of the cadet riders were groaning, clinging to dragons who flopped groggily in the water. The fifth rider was swimming weakly to his Ice Diver dragon, who reached out toward him with a wing.

Wanchoo and Venkatarama both eyed the sky above, where the last signs of the storm clouds were dissipating into the air. Rama curved his neck back and they exchanged a look of wonder.

More pairs arrived from the citadel, including two magicker pairs and the Gold Class MPs.

Aureosa sighed with relief that no one appeared seriously injured, or worse. Then his features become stern. "What is the meaning of this?!"

The cadets gulped and said nothing.

Aureosa turned upon Zee, who gulped as well. "Mr. Tarrow, perhaps you can explain?"

"I..." Zee looked to the cadets, then took a breath. "We were just training, Sir. Perhaps we went a little to far."

"Mr. Fennix?"

"That's right, Sir. We're very sorry about the trouble."

Aureosa scowled, then waved a hand at the academy pairs. "Get them out of the water. Bring them to the courthouse for questioning. We'll get to the truth of this, one way or another."

## Chapter 42

Zee sat in his chair across the desk from Commandant Aureosa, trying not to fidget under the man's unblinking gaze. It didn't help that the collar of the prisoner's overalls he'd been given to wear itched at his neck.

Finally the commandant spoke. "I know very well what kind of person Lukas tar Tarzian is, and his dragon is as vicious as he is. When it comes to bonding, like is attracted to like more often than not. His flightmates don't have quite the same personalities, but they are loyal to their flight leader. I can't entirely blame them. It's how they're trained."

Zee waited, but Aureosa stayed silent. Zee wasn't sure what reply the man wanted, so he just said, "Yes, Sir."

"I am also aware there was an incident at a tavern in town. I'm not privy know all the details, but I do know that you and Tarzian were involved."

Zee swallowed, but stayed silent.

"I believe the cadets were in the wrong, and they will be punished accordingly, though what form that will take is not up to me but an academy tribunal. It's not strictly illegal for you to have ridden Fennix, but the fact remains that your kraken attacked cadets of the citadel."

Zee's anger flared – not at Aureosa, but at Tarzian and his lackeys. "In defense of me and Fen..." Zee cut himself off.

"As I suspected." Aureosa leaned back in his chair. "Regardless of the reason, there are already members of the faculty and the Academic Board crying for your heads – not literally, thank Zepiter. At least not yet. But with the rumors that are spreading about the Mammoth Crab attack, the possibility of an inquiry, and very strong evidence that you and Jessup have been forging, we find ourselves in a very difficult situation."

Aureosa's expression had changed from stern to worried, even sympathetic. Zee flushed with shame and regret. He felt terrible about putting Aureosa in this position after all the man had done for him and Jessup. He never should have flown out on Fennix. Not today, at least. "I'm very sorry, Sir. If it helps, Jessup held back. He could have killed them, but he didn't."

Aureosa nodded lightly. "I'll do what I can, but since you're a civilian, the township also has jurisdiction in this case. A combined village court and military tribunal are convening now."

He pushed up from his chair, then looked as if he was about to say more, but decided against it. Instead he called out, "Next!"

Zee stood as the door opened. A knight security officer entered, took him by the arm, and lead him out.

As he passed through the door he found himself face to face with Lukas tar Tarzian with another security officer gripping his arm. Tarzian didn't look Zee in the eyes, just scowled at the floor, face flushed and sweating. Zee was pulled away and Tarzian was lead inside.

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The handcuffs rattled as Zee tried to twist his wrists into a more comfortable position behind his back. Security officers hung on to him at either side.

Zee had been questioned by the town and military judges together and now he'd been waiting on the wharf across from the town courthouse for more than two bells.

At the edge of the wharf, Jessup waited as well. A half-dozen knight pairs and several magicker pairs had been posted around him, and more circled in the air above. All of them were White Titan Class.

Jessup had been questioned as well, but had stuck to Zee's story. After all these years, Zee still felt bad about lying, even if he felt it was the right thing to do. Considering how he and Jessup were already looked down upon, even despised, and may be subject to an inquiry soon, saying that Tarzian and the others had attacked him and Fennix, even intent on killing them, could just make people hate Zee and Jessup more. Zee had no idea what Fennix may have said when he was questioned, but he trusted his and Jessup's new friend, and Fennix was smart. He wasn't in a much better position than Zee and Jessup were. He didn't need more enemies either. Regardless, a deep worry passed between Zee and Jessup through their bond.

*Zee said, "However this turns out, Jessup, thank you for coming to help us."*

*"I'm sorry for doing it the way I did."*

*"Don't be sorry. I'm sorry for putting you in that position."*

*"We can both be sorry, then leave it at that."*

*"You are a wise big kraken." Zee snorted inwardly. "On the bright side, we finally succeeded in controlling the Lightning Blast."*

*"I don't know. I just thought about wanting to hurt them, but couldn't reach them. It just happened."*

*“We’ll work on it when all this is over.”*

Empyrean lamplight spread across the worn wooden planks of the wharf as the courthouse doors opened behind him.

“But the beast attacked cadets of the citadel!” Dean Phillip sem Tooker blustered through the door, his face red with anger. His dragon, who had been waiting outside, blew black smoke from his nostrils.

Tooker spun on Commandant Aureosa, who replied calmly. “Though we cannot prove it based on the testimonies of those involved, it is my belief that Mr. Tarrow and Mr. Fennix were being assaulted with deadly force, and unprovoked other than for the fact they are different.”

Vandalia, who had also been waiting outside, said, “What Mr. Jessup did was exactly what any dragon would do for its rider.”

Tooker huffed, but had no reply.

Chaplain oh Connor shook with rage, veins popping out on his forehead. “There is no doubt in my mind that they have been forging. That demon exhibited a deadly Ability, and you know it.”

“We have no proof of that,” said Vandalia. “For all we know, small bursts of lightning are something krakens can project as naturally as a Greatwing such as myself breathes fire.”

“The beast conjured an unholy storm!”

“Are you saying that krakens and murfolk can control the weather?”

“Who knows what fell power lies in the dark hearts of Postune’s demon breeds.”

“Be that as it may,” said Aureosa, “both judges agree, whether they are forging or not has no bearing on this case. The laws against forging outside of the academy specifically name humans and dragons. They say nothing about murman and krakens.”

Tooker said, “Perhaps the laws need to be changed.”

“For that, you will need to draft a petition, obtain the requisite number of signatures from the proper officials, and present it to the kingdom’s legislative body. It would then have to be debated and passed, then presented to the king, who would have final say in the matter. It is a long and arduous process, to say the least.”

“One that is well worth undertaking, in my opinion,” Tooker replied.

“I will begin the process myself,” spat the chaplain. “With the full weight of the Holy Church of Zepiter behind me.”

“All I will say is, good luck with that, chaplain.”

The chaplain glared, then stomped away.

Zee had heard the entire exchange. This wasn't good. The bright side was it sounded like none of the cadets had said anything about feeling Zee and Jessup spark their core, which meant their ability to Camouflage it had worked, they'd kept it to themselves, hadn't noticed, or, Zee wondered, maybe they couldn't feel a core being sparked under the water. He'd have to ask Tem and Timandra if they'd help him and Jessup test that out. That depended, of course, on what happened now.

More faculty and staff came through the door, including Dame Toomsil, followed by Tem, and to Zee's surprise, Meik Tabacci and Androo Cobbling as well. They must have been called in to testify as to Zee and Jessup's character.

Fennix was lead from the side of the courthouse, flanked on both sides by much larger knight dragons. He met Zee's gaze, then nodded slightly. Zee could only assume Fennix had continued to back up Zee's story, as well as said nothing about their forging.

The town judge strode out last, followed by the military judge. The town judge called out, “Mr. Zee Tarrow.”

Zee stood straight, trying to hold his nerves in check and keep the anxiety out of his voice. “Yes, Your Honor.”

“For your part in the assault on academy cadets by your bonded beast, you are sentenced to thirty days.” The judge frowned, then continued. “Your sentence shall be served in the citadel brig instead of the town jail, at the commandants' request.” The judge didn't look happy about it.

The military judge stepped forward. “As for Mr. Jessup, since no one was seriously injured, you will be put on probation and continue to work. Since the two of you are bonded and Mr. Tarrow will be incarcerated, it is expected that you'll be on your best behavior. This arrangement has always worked well for bonded riders and dragons. If there is the slightest infraction on your part, ninety days will be added to Mr. Tarrow's sentence. Is that understood?”

Jessup stared at the group, his feelings difficult for even Zee to read. After a tense few seconds, he said. “No.”

The group blinked and looked to each other in confusion.

The military judge said, “No, what, Mr. Jessup? What part do you not understand?”

“I understand all of it, Sir. No, I will not work. Put me in chains. Large chains. I will serve the same sentence as Zee.”

Zee’s initial reaction was disbelief – but this was Jessup. He shouldn’t have been surprised. Still, he pleaded with his friend. “Please don’t do this, Jessup. I’ll only feel worse.”

“I would feel worse knowing that you were in jail while I was free. I am also aware that I have a short temper. If I was to do anything to keep you imprisoned longer, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself. It will be better this way, for both of us.”

Zee’s throat clenched and tears formed in his eyes. His friend was sacrificing his freedom, just for him. With his hands cuffed behind his back, Zee couldn’t even wipe his eyes.

He felt a warmth of comfort from Jessup, and the kraken spoke, his voice almost cheery. *“Don’t worry about me. I can sleep for thirty days. It will be nice to have the rest.”*

Zee sniffed, turned back to the judges. Most of those watching appeared to be in shock. Zee wasn’t sure if it was at what Jessup had said, or because he spoke so well and was obviously not just a dumb beast.

The judges waved Superintendent Hyooz, Commandant Aureosa and the other lead faculty close. After a quick exchange, the military judge cleared his throat and announced that, per Jessup’s request, he would be incarcerated as well.

From the smug looks on the faces of some of the faculty and staff, Zee was more convinced there were plenty of people who weren’t happy with a murman and a kraken being on the island, in the academy or not. From the expressions of some, the sentence wasn’t nearly harsh enough.

“Recruit beast Fennix,” the military judge continued, “We find that you have not broken any specific laws or academy regulations. You will return to Basic Combat Training. However, your special accommodations to train outside of the regular BCT regimen are hereby revoked, and any infraction will be grounds for immediate dismissal. Is that clear?”

Fennix bowed. “Yes, your honors. A wise and fair judgment.”

The town judge turned back to the group. “Thank you, everyone, for your service today. This joint court and tribunal is adjourned.”