

Chapter 50

Zee and Jessup strode from the moon pool with Tem and Timandra, who had met them there after returning from the matches. None of them spoke, all considering the day.

The commandants had interrogated Zee and Jessup thoroughly after the match. They all wanted to know how they had managed their core in each match. Zee and Jessup had explained the best they could when exactly they directed power into Abilities, strength, speed, resilience, cognition, and sufferance, the ability to endure pain, and approximately how much. Zee had a high sufferance level naturally, developed over his years dealing with his rash and breathing problems and working on the ship, but it was nothing compared to Jessup's. Zee benefitted from Jessup's by virtue of their bond, but still he'd had to pump a lot of core energy into it to keep from shrieking and leaping crazed into the sea from the unbelievable heat of Inferno and the damage it had done to him during the match with the Gold Class knights.

From behind his ruined shield, he'd focused on the bond and directed core power to where he knew Jessup needed it most so Jessup could concentrate on the fight. Most of what Zee'd done had been subconscious or by instinct, initiated by a kind of natural feedback loop that passed between the two of them through their bond.

All had commented on how both fights went, step by step, and offered tips. Lastly, Dean Wanchoo had asked about the storm that had formed overhead during the last match, saying he and Rama and the commandants had seen the same phenomena during their confrontation with Cadet tar Tarzian's flight. Zee had seen it then, too, but with everything else happening, he'd thought it could have just been a fluke and put it back of mind. Jessup had shrugged and said it happened when he got angry, which made him fight harder. The group had thought about it, then left it at that.

The magickers had dismantled and removed the Simulation Artefact long before they'd finished, and the sun had been sinking below the horizon.

Zee collapsed on his back on the cot in his and Jessup's quarters, throwing an arm over his eyes. He was tired deep in his bones, but also invigorated at the same time. Part of it had to be that he and Jessup's core was down to less than ten percent, but his energy was bolstered by what they had accomplished against all reasonable odds. He still couldn't believe it, as if he'd dreamed the whole thing. He was also still haunted by how he had shrieked at the knight trapped in Jessup's arms, the rage he'd felt at how they'd hurt Jessup, and how it had felt to stab his stinger through the man's face.

"Are you feeling all right, Zee?" Timandra asked.

He forced himself to sit up, where he rubbed his face with his hands. "I'm okay." He affected a smile. "I mean, what a day, right? We beat a Silver Class pair and a Gold Class pair in our first matches ever.

"The Terrors of Whitecaps Isle, no less," Tem interjected.

Zee gazed at the floor. "It feels like a dream." But also a nightmare.

After a pause, Tem said, "You didn't really hurt him, Zee. They're both fine, and better for the match." After all the time they'd spent together, Tem knew him too well.

Zee said, "But there might come a time when I really have to do something like that, in a real battle."

"You've done it before." Tem's voice was serious but with a touch of empathy.

"I know, but my life, or anyone's I cared about, didn't really depend on it today."

Timandra said, "In a real battle you can't take the time to ask every enemy to yield, and even if they do, you can't just release them to go hurt someone else."

"I could leave them there if they were injured enough," Zee replied.

"That's true, and in your case, they'd probably already be in the sea, anyway."

Tem said, "Simulated combat is about more than exercise, practicing technique, and working your core. It's about developing a battle-ready mind."

Zee remained silent, but nodded.

Timandra tipped her head toward Jessup and her voice brightened. "This big fellow here already has it, and you two have a powerful bond. You'll get there."

Zee snorted and smiled. "He's just mean."

Jessup grinned. "Big mean kraken."

Tem said, "And that's why we love you."

Jessup blinked, taken off guard, and everybody started to laugh.

“Okay,” Tem interrupted, “enough morbid talk. Let’s get forging. You two have a lot of Emphyrean and Marisean to shove in that big mean core of yours.”

The day got even better when, after forging their core back to where it had been and then some, Zee and Jessup tensed as a sudden flood of power washed over them, through them, bringing the now familiar intoxicating sense of indestructibility and euphoria. It receded more quickly than the previous times it had happened to them, but like then, they were left feeling as if yet more weight had been shed from their bodies, another layer of gauze peeled back from their senses, and more fog had been cleared from their minds.

Not only that, Tem and Timandra leveled up as well. That was their second time in a month, which was practically unheard of at Silver Class. They left cheerful and energetic.

Zee couldn’t quiet his mind enough to sleep. Meditation and breathing exercises would probably do it, but some part of him didn’t want to sleep. Then he figured out why. They’d leveled up and he hadn’t checked the murfolk book.

He fetched a bucket of seawater, retrieved the book out of their Keep and dunked it, evoking the blue glow of its pages. When he put his hand on the cover this time, instead of brightening and dimming once, the light pulsed twice before fading. Zee flipped through pages while Jessup looked on over his shoulder.

When he got to the chapter on attack Abilities that had been revealed before, he had to look again to make sure he remembered it correctly. The diagram had changed. The kraken and murperson were still depicted gesturing forward, but instead of the repeated movement of generic arrows moving away from them, the attack was clearly lightning.

More astounding, the unknown letters below the diagram changed before his eyes to settle on a new configuration, and a glyph below them appeared. The glyph looked much like the triangular illustration of the kraken in the diagrams, but simpler, and a bumpy circle with a jagged line angling down through it had appeared centered on the kraken’s shell above its face.

“What’s that?” Jessup asked.

“I wish I knew,” Zee replied. He also wished now more than ever he knew how to read the language. He moved his fingers over the diagram. “But it’s like the book knows what our attack ability is now.”

Zee flipped to the next page and it was no longer blank. Neither were several of the one's that followed. Zee's heart beat faster as he studied the diagrams in glee and wonder.

"Oh, Zee," Jessup exclaimed, "we have work to do."

Chapter 51

Jessup and Zee climbed aboard the raft at sunrise, just as Tem and Timandra flew down to join the deans, commandants, and Dame Toomsil and Peloquin, who had already arrived.

“Sorry we’re late,” Tem apologized.

“He had breakfast with his father,” Timandra added with a roll of her eyes.

Zee asked tentatively, “How was it?”

“Wonderful. Mostly he asked about you and Jessup, but he wanted to know everything I’d been doing, and to talk politics and my future, of course.”

“That doesn’t sound terrible,” said Dame Toomsil.

“He even gave me a hug at the end.”

“Really?” Zee asked.

“No. Can you imagine?”

The group chuckled.

Tem’s face grew dour. “He did apologize for not paying closer attention to my career, though.”

“That’s nice,” said Jessup.

“It makes me nervous, is what it does.”

Commandant Aureosa said, “Lord Commander jal Briggs is a fine knight and governor. He’s served the Dragon Corps and his province well for many years.”

Tem shrugged, then caught himself. There’d been no admonishment in the commandant’s tone, but he was the commandant, and a Daimyo General. “Yes, Sir. Of course, Sir.”

Vandalia turned to Zee and Jessup. “You two have caused quite a stir.” Her expression was unreadable, but it felt like an accusation.

“Oh...” Zee uttered.

“Everyone wants to fight you now. They’re practically clambering over each other for a chance to prove themselves or level up, everyone from Silver Class Knights to White Titan Earl Generals. The Vice Admiral has had to organized a lottery. They’ll be pulling names from a hat, though we get to choose what classes you’re matched with.

“Bring them all,” Jessup said through a mischievous grin.

Dame Toomsil said, “Wagers are being made. Not so many on who will win, kraken and murman or knights, but which knight pairs will last the longest.”

Zee said, “I’m not sure how I should take that.”

“Well, I would say,” said Aureosa. “Though it does place more weight on your performance. We need to get you stronger and further refine your Abilities. Standing around chatting won’t do it.”

Zee’s brow furrowed. He glanced at Jessup, who nodded. Zee took a breath and nodded. “Speaking of that, Jessup and I think we leveled up last night, and we want to show you something.” He retrieved the murfolk book from their Keep and began to unwrap it. “Deans Wanchoo and Venkatarama have seen it, but they didn’t see what it can really do.”

Everyone watched closely as Zee handed the book to Jessup, who took it with a small sucker at the end of one of his arms then reached the twenty feet to the edge of the raft and put it in the water. After a few seconds, he brought it back, the pages emanating soft blue light. Zee placed his hand on the imprint on the cover. This time it only brightened once before fading. He handed the book to Commandant Aureosa, who looked to Wanchoo.

“It’s quite safe,” the Dean replied. Aureosa took the book. “Probably.”

Aureosa raised his eyebrows at Wanchoo, who grinned. Aureosa opened it to the first page.

Vandalia asked, “What is it?”

Jessup said, “A magick training manual for bonded murfolk and krakens.” Aureosa’s eyebrows raised again.

By the time Zee finished explaining the book, how it worked, and where he got it, they were all crowded close, riders in front, their beasts behind them. After Zee had shown them the new pages that had been revealed, Aureosa looked to Zee and nodded. “This changes everything. Let’s get to work.”

Aureosa and Vandalia lead them out into the fog away from prying eyes – which Aureosa said was in itself a strategy. The others, including Dame Toomsil, Tem and their dragons, rode on a rescue barge lowered from the ship, large enough to fit four pairs comfortably.

There they worked on the new Abilities that had been revealed in the book. They were: raising water out of the sea in a spout, which they called Water Spout; the shooting of multiple

bolts of lightning at once, which they had already tried with little luck and called Lightning Blast, and a defensive Ability where their Shield was formed mostly of spinning water drawn from the air or sea and mixed with their aura They called that, of course, Water Shield.

Each day they trained and engaged in more simulated combat until their core was nearly spent, forged, and did it all again the next day. At one point they felt like they'd leveled up again, but nothing new showed in the murfolk book.

Their opponents, all having witnessed the previous matches, did better against them as they learned how the murman and kraken fought and what they could do. Zee and Jessup had to work harder because of it, think faster, and come up with new strategies and techniques. Which was just the way they liked it.

On the ships, sailors would groan or cheer after each match, those groaning handing over coin to those cheering, having lost their bets.

The day after Zee and Jessup had beaten the Silver Class and the first Gold Class pair they were pitted a Gold Class Ice Diver pair. Their Water Shield proved even better for blocking attacks when it was frozen, but once frozen they couldn't see through it or change its size. It was also heavy and slow to move. It made a great ram, though.

At one point in the match they dropped their frozen Water Shield and made a new one, much larger and thicker. The Ice Diver froze it as well, then coated the raft with a slippery Ice Sheet. Zee scrambled up Jessup's shell to peer over their shield and spot where there foes were. Jessup reached out, gripping the ice with his claws and sucker spikes, then yanked himself forward with Burst. They engaged Push at the same time they struck their foes with their froze Water Shield and succeeded in knocking them out of the ring.

In their next training session, the commandants went into depth about feeling out for others, enemy and otherwise. Bonded pairs had a natural sense of those around them and learned to know where their flightmates were at all times, whether they could see them or not.

Going beyond that was a passive Ability called Tracking. Vandalia explained that by directing more core power into cognition, which heightened their perception, and feeling out for auras of other pairs like they would when revealing their core, they should be able to see

phantoms of gold light against a white background. She also told them it would help at first if they closed their eyes.

Tem and Dame Toomsil flew into the fog on their dragons to act as targets – Zee and Jessup just had to promise to use very weak lightning bolts if they were actually going to fire at them. The phantom images were flickering and weak at first, but after a few hours of practice, Jessup and Zee could see them more clearly and target them in the fog, even with their eyes open. Apparently it had taken Tem and Timandra weeks to develop their Tracking Ability and they still had difficulty with it. Aureosa said that as Zee and Jessup progressed, they'd be able to see greater numbers, and together with their uncanny sense of impending danger, even be able to discern between friend and foe. In the Titan Classes, it would become second nature. Even then, attempting to see too many caused the ability to become weak and unreliable. As with all Abilities, the important thing was to keep practicing.

Their next match came in the morning, with Zee and Jessup facing off against a Gold Class Rock dragon pair. Their foes attacked immediately. The spinning Water Shield worked even better than expected to block and cool the flying lava, causing it to drop to the raft, but the blows still sucked up core power and knocked them back. Then the Rock sprayed a Lava Flow that sped toward Zee and Jessup, over a foot deep and too wide for the murman and kraken to escape. Having nowhere to else to go and not wanting to wade through the molten dragon ambergris, Zee poured core power into Abilities and they used Burst to leap high toward their foes, Jessup doing a forward flip in the air with his arms tucked. It looked like they were going to fall short, right into the Lava Flow, but at the last second Jessup threw out all his arms at full extension. The Gold Class pairs tried to evade, but Jessup snatched and Shocked them. Zee and Jessup hadn't used too much of their core so far, so they kept Shocking. To their great relief, their opponents yielded just as Zee and Jessup's core power was becoming dangerously low.

That evening, after a long forging session, the commandants pitted them against three pairs at once, a Silver Royal Ebon pair, a Gold Rock pair, and a White Titan Ice Diver pair. Jessup whipped his arms and they fired Lightning Blast wildly in an attempt to make their opponents keep their Shields up so they wouldn't be able to attack until he and Zee could get close enough to grab them. They held them off for quite some time, but finally the White Titan

pair Streaked in, dropping their Shield at the last second. Zee and Jessup engaged their Shield too late. The rider skewered Jessup between the eyes with a lance and the Ice Diver speared Zee through his aura and shield with an Ice Spike that pinned him to Jessup's shell.

Jessup didn't like losing and angrily recommended they not do that again.

Their first sea bout was against four Silver class pairs, including Tem and Timandra, which began with some good nature taunts.

The Simulation Arena projected from the back edge of the raft out over the waves, larger than it had been on the raft, the walls of light rising high into the sky and down deep into the sea. The ship didn't slow, so they also had to swim and the dragon knights had to fly to stay within the ring.

Zee and Jessup managed to bring one particularly aggressive pair down with a Water Spout, then the other three with successive Lightning Blasts. The pairs struggled in the water, but weren't terribly injured. They were spread out as well, and two of the dragons were Ice Divers that attempted to get out of the water before Jessup could get to them. Zee shared an idea with Jessup, who flipped over, dove below the surface, and began spinning, head down, while Zee focused power into strength and speed. With their core sparked and quite a bit larger than it had been when Jessup had first done it, a prodigious vortex of water spun up, creating a whirlpool that sucked their foes spiraling down into its center. Zee channeled all the power they could muster into Abilities as Jessup snatched them all into his arms. The resulting Shock was blinding.

They surfaced and Jessup shouted, "Done!"

In further matches, they found that three quick strikes of Lightning Bolt could take out a Gold Class pair, but it took up a lot of their core. The first or second strike would destroy their Shield or weaken it enough that the next one or two dropped them from the sky. Their foes also couldn't escape the strikes once they were targeted, even with Shift or Streak. They wouldn't be killed, but once in the water with a kraken they were done for.

White Titans, especially more than one, proved much more of a challenge. They were incredibly fast, and their Shields and auras too strong even for high-powered Lightning Bolts.

In their first match against three White Titans, spears pierced Zee and Jessup's Water Shield and aura and stuck into Jessup's shell, face and arms. Zee took arrow wounds and a spear thrust. Jessup surprised a pair that got too close and caught them with the hook of a stretched arm. He drug them into the water and Shocked them, but they used Blast, a much more advanced version of Push, and escaped. No one came that close to Zee and Jessup again. Their advancing Water Spout technique came in handy, but only as a distraction. The Titans pounded attacks into their Shield again and again, draining their core. One of the Titans had mastered Slice as well, a devastating attack where a blinding swing of the rider's sword sent out an arc of cutting power that sheered through their Water Shield and cut a deep furrow into Jessup's shell.

Zee and Jessup had found they could target their Lightning Bolts while their Water Shield was up using the Tracking technique Aureosa had shown them. They still had to drop their Shield to strike, but it exposed them to attack for only a fraction of a second. They'd also discovered they could Track and target from underwater. They weren't able to fire their Lightning from under the water to the sky, though, and had to surface to strike.

From beneath the waves, they targeted the strongest of their opponents, then shot to the surface, dropped their shield, fired, and dove immediately, taking only a spear to Jessup's shell.

A shadow flickered over the surface twenty yards away, then a Greatwing splashed into the waves. Zee and Jessup's core was dangerously low, so they just watched as it swam toward the edge of the arena, not wanting to take the risk of trying to drag it below the surface. If the pair still had enough of their core left to use Blast or any number of other close combat Abilities, Zee and Jessup might not be able to hang on to them, let alone survive. Zee and Jessup considered their predicament, and decided to just stayed under.

After a few minutes, everyone on the raft glanced at each other, wondering what the murman and kraken were up to. Out in the arena, a Royal Crimson pair flew close to an Ice Diver pair and pointed down. The rider looked, then the Ice Diver shook its head.

Shortly thereafter, one of Jessup's arms waved above the surface, then pointed downward and submerged.

Vandalia said, "Are they yielding?"

Aureosa replied, “I... don’t know.” He stepped to the edge of the raft where the SHEELS sat on their krisdolphins watching the match. “Chief Walster, go see what those two are up to, if you would.”

A few minutes later, Walster surfaced next to the raft and removed his breathing mask. “They’re forging, Sir. They say they’re not coming up.”

Vandalia said, “It looks as if our mad murman and kraken are learning. If you can’t win, at least don’t lose.” She called the match a stalemate.

After that, all of the White Titan sea battles ended the same way. Zee and Jessup could hide underwater when their core got low, and if the Titans were injured or also weakening they could fly high enough it was difficult for Zee and Jessup to target them even if they did have enough core left to power a strong Lightning Bolt.

Then the commandants and deans decided it was time to show the formidable young murman and kraken what real defeat felt like.

The bout took place on the raft and Aureosa, Vandalia, Wanchoo and Venkatarama had given themselves permission to start the match in the air. It wasn’t fair, but that was the point. Not all combat was fair. Zee and Jessup knew they didn’t have a chance, but were excited by the challenge. They planned to jump straight up with Burst and use Lightning Bolt as fast as they could, then throw up their strongest Water Shield. They hadn’t planned ahead any more than that, which was fine because they didn’t even make it that far.

“Begin!”

As soon as they leapt, their Lightning Bolt charged and their target acquired, they bounced off a Shield conjured by Wanchoo and Ventarama and dropped like a very large rock. They recovered quickly, though, throwing up their Water Shield while Jessup shoved himself upright – just as the commandants flared golden a hundred feet in the air. Aureosa slammed his hands together and Vandalia clapped her wings.

Zee heard a muffled whump, it felt like he ignited from the inside, and they were slammed to the deck by what had to be the white hot hand of a god. Ten yards away, two Jessup’s staggered in Zee’s double-vision, steaming, his shell crushed in on one side and flaming. Most of his spines were broken and several arms had been smashed. Zee’s fuzzy gaze

fell along his own mangled and charred body. He pumped what little core power they had left into resilience and sufferance.

Dame Toomsil said, "Their still alive...?"

"How is that even possible?" said Tem.

Timandra said. "What are they made of? Steel?"

Peloquin just gawped.

Jessup spun and tipped in what looked slow motion, dropping heavily to the deck. It reminded Zee of when baby Jessup would fall over and Zee would have to tip him back up. He grinned through what was left of his lips, and Jessup started to laugh, a loud croaking cough. Zee joined him, both of them choking and in pain, but they couldn't stop.

Aureosa eyes whipped to Wanchoo's while their dragons just stared.

Vandalia said, "I think we've created a monster."

Aureosa shook his head. "Two monsters."

Rama said, "At least their our monsters, thank Zepiter."

Wanchoo lowered his want to his lap. "Or perhaps we should say, 'thank Postune.'"

Still laughing, the young murman and kraken shouted simultaneously, "Again!"

Jessup's tendency toward frustration and anger became more tempered as the matches went on. He didn't exactly fight with more restraint, but a more practiced mindset. Gone was the kraken who fought only with fury and reckless abandon, a more shrewd beast of battle taking its place.

Chapter 52

For the last two days of their journey the task force purposely sailed into a storm and traveled under its cover. The prevailing trade winds blew straight toward their destination, a rugged atoll forty miles from the position where the Wraith's would be waiting. Magickers kept them Shielded from the strongest wind and maintained a steady fill of the sails, but the effect was strange and unsettling.

All simulated combat was suspended and the raft was disassembled and stowed. Zee and Jessup continued to train and forge just as hard as before, going so far as to run and exercise in the driving rain on deck for bells a day.

The mood on the ship grew more somber, but the knight pairs were an inspiration, remaining resolute in their mission to save the prince, and they maintained their military bearing at all times. Zee and Jessup saw less of the commandants, deans of magicks, and Dame Toomsil and Peloquin. Even Tem and Timandra could only join them for a single daily forging session, explaining that plans were being refined, gone over again, and flights and squadrons were being configured.

Zee and Jessup spent more time with the SHEELS. Mostly running drills under the sea where the weather didn't affect them, but they also went over their infiltration and hostage rescue plan and the possible variables.

A four person fire team of commandos would leave the ship on their krisdolphins the night before the king was expected to deliver the ransom for his son. As had been established earlier, Zee and Jessup's task was to protect them from sea beasts. Beneath the surface, they would swim the forty miles to where the Wraith ships awaited. Once there, Zee and Jessup would stay beneath the ship while the SHEELS snuck aboard and rescued the prince. They even had breach-blasters to blow through the hull in case they became trapped. As soon as they had the prince safely off the ship, they would fire a flare into the sky to alert the task force and head toward them.

While that was happening, the task force would creep out from behind the atoll under the most complete Cloak that Wanchoo, Rama, and the other magickers could muster, and sail toward the enemy ships. It would take the ships some time to reach them, but as soon as they saw the flare the magickers would drop the Cloak and divert all their efforts to speed. The squadrons

of knight and combat magicker pairs would cross the distance much faster and engage the enemy within minutes. Zee and Jessup and the commandos would intercept the admiral's ship and enter the moon pool with the ship moving at full speed, which they had already practiced a dozen times.

If all went well, the Dragon Corps and Navy task force together would wipe out the enemy completely.

In theory the plan was simple, but the variables were many. Zee was amazed at the professionalism and detail with which the SHEELS ran through the possibilities. It was obvious they'd done this kind of thing before, or at least something similar, and more than a few times. If anyone could pull this off, it was them. Zee felt the same about the Dragon Corps and Navy commands.

Zee had to admit he was nervous. Oddly enough, not about the danger, but that he might fail in some way. He was honored to have them believe he and Jessup could be of help on such an important mission. A small, bitter part of him also embraced this as a chance to prove to the academy board they were wrong for not accepting him and Jessup, but everyone on the mission had been sworn to secrecy. Other than Aureosa, Wanchoo, Vice Vizier Ashura, and Lord Commander Governor jal Briggs, the rest of the board would never know.

One day he and Jessup would show them. Zee took comfort in that, as petty as it might be. Jessup's fierce confidence was a godsend. When the kraken sensed Zee's anxiety, it flowed from him through their bond like the soothing, radiant heat of a hearth.

First thing in the morning on the day of the mission, Zee went up for physical training on deck. Some time in the night the task force had reached its destination and settled into a foggy bay, snug against the sharp misty atoll. Other than the shuffle of feet of other knights running and sailors moving about on deck, it was eerily quiet. No orders were shouted. Anyone who spoke did so in hushed tones, and even the bell that sounded the time of day remained silent.

Dean Wanchoo sat upon Venkatarama with eyes closed and wand raised, concealing the entire task force with Cloak, an Ability that functioned much like Camouflage but was used to mask others, and in this case, an entire task force of Navy ships. A dozen White Titan magicker pairs circled Wanchoo and Rama, facing outward. Zee could feel the power of their cores burning steadily. As it had been explained to Zee, only Wanchoo and Rama could conjure Cloak

on that level, and the other magickers were boosting its power to both enhance the concealment and keep the deans from collapsing under the strain on their own.

The rest of the morning passed quickly, with more run-throughs with the SHEELS, and a long forging session.

They took lunch in their quarters with Tem and Dame Toomsil and their dragons. Little was said but small talk, words of encouragement, and light-hearted jokes. Tem and Toomsil with Timandra and Peloquin would take part in the assault on the enemy ships, but as was Dragon Corps protocol, the highest class pairs would take the lead – five squadrons of White Titan knight pairs accompanied by combat magickers, with Tosh's Red Titan Knight pairs, King mon lin Phan and Norrogaul and Commandants Aureosa and Vandalia, with Red Titan Deans of Magicks Wanchoo and Venkatarama to protect them, at the vanguard.

In the afternoon, Zee and Jessup trained lightly again up top. They were supposed to be resting for the mission, but neither of them could sit still. Wanchoo and Rama and the magickers were still there, in the exact same position they'd been in the morning. Zee could endure a lot, be he was sure standing still for that long would drive him mad.

The sun had finally set when nearly twenty people flooded their quarters with tools, ladders, and some rather bizarre looking apparatuses.

"Time to saddle up," said Tackmaster Sadir sem Samir, keeping his voice down even this deep in the ship.

Armorer Nanners tan Runoffski beckoned Zee over. "Mr. Tarrow, to me."

Assistants and craftspersons descended upon him and Jessup with precision and fervor that felt like an all out assault.

Two bells later, Dame Toomsil waited in the lower deck with Peloquin, Tem, and Timandra when the doors to Zee and Jessup's quarters finally slid open. The Tackmasters and Armorers and their teams filed out with their gear. When Zee stepped out behind them, she barely recognized him.

He wore a high-necked body suit of black, subtly striped in gray, similar to the ones the SHEEL commandos wore, but with silver-black scales that glistened like fish scales sewn to it on his torso and upper arms, streamlined pauldrons on his shoulders, scale sewn in like tassets on

his thighs, and metallic bracers on his forearms. Gloves of the same material as the suit covered his hands, though his feet were bare except for pieces of scale mail that covered the tops, strapped around the soles. On his head was a smooth black helmet. The helmet had no visor, but there was a short nose guard and the sides curved in to protect his cheek bones. Altogether it was far more sleek and form-fitting than a rider's armor.

Though Dame Toomsil could only see Zee's eyes and mouth, she would recognize his wide grin anywhere.

Zee moved aside to make room for Jessup. The kraken had no armor, but a strange contraption was attached to his shell above his brow. It had to be a saddle, but unlike any she had seen before.

"What do you think?" Zee asked.

"Terrifying," said Timandra.

Jessup said, "Terrifying is good."

"Not you. Zee. What is that thing stuck to your shell?"

"It's a kraken battle-saddle," Zee said cheerily.

Though their teams had left, the Tackmasters and Armorers had stayed behind. Sadir sem Samir said, "He called it that. We came up with no such name."

There was a seat between two vertical rails bolted to Jessup's shell. Above and below it were half-ovals of domed gray steel, the open ends facing each other, with oblong windows of clear crystal that appeared to be at least three inches thick between ridges of saw-like teeth.

Zee strode over and put a hand on it. "You have to see how it works."

The SHEELs had taken notice and approached as well. Zee climbed onto one of Jessup's arms and pulled himself up. Jessup watched cross-eyed as he went. Zee sat on the seat and strapped in at the waist, then reached down, pulled a lever, and slid the bottom half of the capsule up on the track and over his legs. Next he reclined the seat back and reached up to the top half of the capsule.

"Watch this." Another pull of a lever and the top part released to slide down over Zee, then lock into place against the lower. Zee waved at them through the window in the top half of the capsule.

Peloquin said, "It looks like he's inside a beetlebug."

There was a clunk from inside the chamber and the top slid back up to lock into place, then Zee slid the bottom back down as well. “This is even better.” He pulled a handle beneath the seat, swiveled it one hundred eighty degrees, then repeated the process of closing the capsule, now upside down.

Jessup said, “That’s for when I smash through ships so Zee doesn’t have to jump off.” That raised some eyebrows.

Zee opened the capsule and swiveled back to an upright position, grinning wide.

“It’s brilliant,” said Dame Toomsil, coming closer. She ran a hand over the metal of the capsule, inspecting the lag bolts that held it all to Jessup’s shell.

Dragon Tackmaster Timy, said, “The parts are made of alchemical steel, the surfaces fused with anti-corrosion and heat resistant ceramic, like your own armor, Knight Commander Toomsil.”

Samir said, “It was a team effort between Timy and I and the armorers. The design was a challenge, but we did the best we could with limited time and resources.”

“It’s amazing work,” Tem replied.

“There’s a seat on the back, too,” said Zee. “No capsule, but perfect for riding when Jessup’s swimming point first and I should be on top, above the surface or below.”

Zee spoke as he unbuckled from the seat and clambered out of the saddle. “I have a sword, dagger, rondel dagger, and shield too, but you really have to see this armor.” He hopped down and pointed at various pieces of his armor as he explained. “The suit is sheelskin, which is super tough anyway, but it’s also alchemically infused with ceramic particles. The pauldrons, helmet, braces and scales of the mail are high tensile alchemical ceramic instead of steel, so they’re much lighter weight and just as strong.”

“Stronger,” said Armorer Runoffski. At the expressions of curiosity on members of the group, she added, “We’ve been working on it for a while. This will be the first time it’s tested in the field.”

Zee said, “It’s designed for as much freedom of movement and as little drag in the water as possible. I can take the gloves off and store them in my Keep for swimming, and there are flaps in the sides of the suit and in the neck for my gills.”

“Does it work?” Dame Toomsil asked.

“I’m going to find out right now,” he said, gesturing toward the krisdolphins tank. “But if there’s a problem, I can unsnap panels along my ribs and remove the sheelskin gorget on my neck.”

He headed toward the tank, but Walster stepped in his way, scowling down at him, muscular arms crossed. “I don’t like it.” Zee’s face fell. “We can’t have you looking better than we do.”

Jessup said, “I think he looks like a bug.”

Zee glared at him in mock disapproval. “Hey!”

Walster’s grinned and thumbed over his shoulder toward the tank. “Hop in.”

Dame Toomsil strode beside Armorer Runoffski. “This all had to be very expensive.”

“Zee said the same thing. I think he was worried we were going to make him pay for it. It’s being covered under our research and development budget. King Phan signed off on it himself.”

The test went fine. Zee swam, twisting and turning in the tank, with the armor causing no impediment to his movement or breathing. The krisdolphins enjoyed it as well, squeaking and swimming with him the whole time. When he climbed out, Zee was happy to see the armor drained quickly, too.

Walster said, “You might as well leave it on. We’re going to suit up now.”

Zee took a steadying breath and pulled off his helmet. “Okay.”

Dame Toomsil said, “We have to go. Be safe out there.”

“You too, Ma’am.”

Timandra looked up at Jessup. “Take care of your kraken-self and our murman. You’re the only ones we’ve got.”

“I will, Ma’am. We’ll see you when the prince is saved and victory is ours.”

She smiled and nodded. Tem put a hand on Zee’s shoulder, gave him an encouraging nod, and strode away.

Zee watched them go. He knew he and Jessup were as ready for the mission as they could be, but he still had to quell the thought that this could be the last time he’d see them.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught movement and a white robe with a red sash. Dean Wanchoo stood in the tall doorway to the room behind the table, waving him over.

Zee had never seen Dean Wanchoo look tired, but he did so then. There were circles under his eyes, and his movements were slow, as if his limbs carried too much weight. Venkatarama lay on a carpet nearby, his head hung low. Keeping up the Cloak for an entire task force for a whole day must have really been taking it out of them, even with the help of the other magickers.

“We can be spared for a few bells,” said Wanchoo. “Fresh magickers have been rotated in. They can keep the concealment up by themselves for that long.”

They sat at a low table in comfortable chairs, the only people in the room, with the door closed. Wanchoo poured tea for both of them. He downed nearly all of his, in spite of its heat, then set the cup on a stand next to his chair and folded his hands in his lap, gazing at a beautifully engraved and inlaid box on the table.

Zee sipped his tea and waited silently. He and Jessup didn't know why the deans wanted to speak to them, but Wanchoo looked so exhausted, he didn't want to push it.

Finally, Wanchoo spoke. “You two will be leaving with the SHEELs on a very dangerous mission shortly, this we know, but there are some things we want you to be aware of before you go.”

Wanchoo still hadn't look up at him, so Zee stayed quiet.

When his eyes met Zee's, he said, “You are aware of the two types of bonded pairs, Knights and Magickers.”

“Yes, Sir,” Zee replied. “Knight pairs are naturally suited to fighting and attack, magickers to defense and healing and, well, magick. They have a greater magick affinity by virtue of how their unique auras mix with Empyrean during the refining phase of forging.”

“Exactly right. There is also, however, a third type.”

Zee brow creased. “A third type of pair?”

“Cadets learn of it in second year courses at the academy, but only in passing and when the exploits of Slan hai Drogo and Mogon are covered in history courses. Drogo and Mogon were the first to be assessed as this type in a hundred years, and there have been none since. It's called a Sorcerer.”

“Sorcerer...” Zee rolled the word on his tongue. “I'd never heard that about Drogo and Mogon.”

“It isn't spoken of often.”

Then Zee remembered when Dame Toomsil had shown him and Jessup the assessments taking place at the Orb of Assessment. “I’ve seen the type badge on Drogo’s statue in the citadel courtyard. It had both a wand and a sword.”

“That is the emblem of the sorcerer type. You have a good eye. Very few ever notice it.”

After a pause, Rama said, “Sorcerers have the affinities of both knights and magickers. All the attack Abilities of knight pairs, but also the defensive Abilities of magickers, including their greater magic affinity, healing Abilities, and talents to infuse enchantments, potions, wards, and spells. Like other magickers, they tend to specialize, but they can use one affinity to affect and strengthen the other. Sorcerors also tend to have significantly larger crucibles than others of their class and level.”

“As you can imagine,” said Wanchoo, “it gives them great advantages in battle.”

“I can imagine. Do you think there may be some among the Wraiths?”

“We have no way to know, we just don’t want you to be surprised if you run into one.”

Jessup said, “Thank you for the warning, Sirs.”

Wanchoo seemed to shrink further into his chair. “The is another thing.” He pondered a moment, then said, “All magick leaves a trace, some more than others, and Rama and I feel a lingering dread in the air. It has come to us for some time, like a foul smoke on the wind, there and then gone again. We’ve sensed it more often in the last few years, but it has grown ever stronger as we’ve approached our destination. This close to the enemy, it is constant, and cloying. It wears upon us.” He took another deep breath with a hint of a shudder. “Please keep this to yourselves, gentlemen, but there is darker Aethereal ore from which to forge than is found in the Empyreal and Mariseal Plains. I shall not speak its name, but I, we, fear the Wraiths, some of them at least, have somehow gained access to it.”

Zee didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing.

“Peleus and the king aware of this, and they will be on their guard, but we want you to be as well. The feeling of dread I mentioned when we stood upon the belly of the Mammoth Crab is the same that we have now, only here it is a hundredfold stronger. We sensed it on the hand of the prince and foot of his dragon as well.”

He looked up at Zee once more.

“If the aura, Shields or Abilities of any of the enemy manifest red instead of the yellow of Empyrean, we want you and Jessup to dive as deep and swim as far as you can. Leave the fighting to the Titans.”

Zee couldn't believe it, but Dean Wanchoo and Venkatarama, the Deans of Magicks and mid level Red Titans, were afraid. He looked to Jessup and sensed his friend felt it too.

“We are not telling you these things to frighten you,” said Rama. “Just be on your guard for more than your usual foe.”

Zee still didn't know what to say, but uttered, “We will, Sirs.”

Wanchoo sat up in his chair. “There is one more thing.” Off Zee's reaction, he added, “It's nothing so dreadful as what we've just told you. I promise.”

“That's good. I mean, thank you, Sir.”

Wanchoo leaned forward, spun the finely carved box toward Zee, then lifted the hinged lid. The bottom of the box had square dividers which held small corked bottles. In the box's top, more bottles sat on hinged shelves that swung vertical as the lid was lifted, except these bottles were of different sizes, shapes, and colors. Some in the lid were beautifully designed and shimmered with metallic tints like colored oils on dark water.

Zee had seen similar boxes in the apothecaries back home and on Triumph's island, but they weren't as fancy as this box, and the bottles had always just been clear or dark amber – and none of those had exuded the intoxicating power Zee and Jessup felt from these. The effect was almost heady, and it took a few seconds for Zee's mind to clear.

Wanchoo said, “These are pills for boosting core power and increasing bond strength, produced by pharmaceutical magickers at the academy and in the capitol by the king's own. Some have been dispensed to other pairs for the battle to come, but by regulation, only to those who can afford them.”

“We're not fans of that regulation,” said Rama, “but it is extremely time consuming and expensive to produce them, so I suppose there is some logic in it.”

“The effects are temporary,” Wanchoo continued, “but they can mean the difference between life and death in battle. Even the least potent among them could be dangerous to any pair under Silver Class. More than one could harm even a Red Titan's core. What they would do to a bonded murman and kraken, we do not know.”

After another pause, Rama said. “There are knight pairs who refuse to take them at all, out of pride or fear, it’s difficult to tell, but their choice is always respected. Nonetheless, we would like to offer one to you.”

Zee stared at the bottles, then lifted his eyes to Wanchoo. “How much do they cost, Sir?”

It was Rama who answered. “My apologies. When I said offer, we mean at no cost to you.”

“That is... very kind.”

“It should be swallowed by the rider since they are the natural conduit during forging.”

Wanchoo spoke more sternly. “Even if you take one, do not swallow it unless as a last resort, at the moment of most extreme need, understood?”

“We understand, Sir,” said Jessup.

Zee inspected the bottles, conversing with Jessup. There was no question they wanted one. They’d take any advantage they could, even with the risk, and the opportunity to be stronger if they needed it was too hard to resist. The only question was, “Which should we take?”

“None of them would be harmed if submerged in water, so there is no worry there. Otherwise, they increase in potency from bottom to top.”

Zee scanned the bottles, feeling the intense gazes of Wanchoo and Rama upon him. His eyes, his whole being, rising from his and Jessup’s core, were drawn to a squat bottle of unremarkable color or design on a shelf in the top of the box. Zee glanced at Jessup, who tipped a curt nod.

Zee pointed at the bottle. “What’s this one?”

Wanchoo exhaled in an almost undetectable sigh, then pulled the bottle from the shelf and uncorked the bottle. The power Zee had sensed earlier wafted over and through him again, only stronger, then was gone. Wanchoo tipped the bottle and an oblong golden pill an inch long dropped to his palm.

Rama said, “You have powerful instincts, Mr. Tarrow. That is the single most potent pill in the box.”

“Which also makes it the most risky for you to take,” said Wanchoo. “But it’s yours if you and Mr. Jessup are certain you want it.”

“We’re certain, Sir.”

“So be it.” He replaced the pill in the bottle and held it out to Zee.

Zee's palms were sweating for some reason. He rubbed them on the thighs of his sheelskin armor and tentatively took the bottle. It was warm and soothing in his hand, but he would swear it throbbed with tremendous potential energy.

"Place it in your Keep," said Rama. "It will be perfectly safe."

Zee did so, and the sense of vitality was gone.

"Remember, only use it if you absolutely must."

"Yes, Sir. Thank you both. We'll bring it back to you if we don't need it."

Wanchoo nodded. "Now," he placed his hand on his knees and pushed himself up from his chair, "Rama and I need to engage in a quick forging session and get back to work." Zee stood as well. Wanchoo placed a hand on Zee's shoulder and his mouth curved in a weary smile. "We'll see you back here on the ship, safe and sound with the crown prince, yes?"

Zee smiled back and saluted. He knew he didn't have to salute, but it felt like the right thing to do. "Yes, Sir." Jessup saluted as well, bringing a broader smile to Wanchoo's lips.

Wanchoo saluted casually back. "Be safe."

Zee nodded and he and Jessup made their way out of the room.

Watching the young murman and kraken move out into the main area of the deck, Rama spoke through his and Wanchoo's bond. "*They made their choice. It was obviously drawn to them, and they to it.*"

"I just hope we've done the right thing."

"It wasn't our idea."

"That doesn't absolve us."

"No, it doesn't." Rama considered a moment. "*Perhaps we should have told them if it were to be sold, it would fetch a price equal to that of an entire battleship.*"

Wanchoo snorted, then shook his head and closed the door.

Jessup said, "That was... something."

Zee's face was drawn in contemplation. "Yes, it was."

A low whistle caught their attention. Walster, who stood across the deck next to the moon pool with Coolbaughm and Chan, tipped his head for them to come over.

The last of the krisdolphins was being lowered into the moon pool as they crossed the deck, fabric bands holding small kit bags and a quiver of short harpoons wrapping its body three-quarters of the way back.

Other than a half dozen sailors to operate the winches and watch the moonpool, the deck was empty, making it feel even larger and more intimidating.

Walster was completely geared up, Chan adjusting his harpoon crossbow and air tank on his back. "It's go time."

"We're ready, Sir."

Coolbaughm and Chan were staying behind as back-ups, but would be waiting in the moon pool with their krisdolphins in case they were needed. Walster climbed up and was straddling the lip of the pool when a half dozen dragon and rider pairs flew into one of the dragonports and alighted on the deck. The pairs stepped to them, the riders in full armor, the dragons kitted out for battle. King mon lin Phan lead the group in gleaming blood-red armor. The others were all White Titans. The banner of Tosh hung on a pole attached to the back of the saddle of one of the dragons. Another held the banner of the Dragon Corps.

Zee snapped to attention, as did Jessup. They hadn't seen the king much at all on the trip. The expression on his face was inscrutable as ever.

Walster didn't climb down to kneel, but sat straight and saluted along with Coolbaughm and Chan.

The king saluted back, then inspected Zee and Jessup. When he seemed satisfied, he said, "Be strong. Be Brave." His stern expression softened a touch and he addressed them and Walster. "Bring my son back to me."

The SHEEL commandos put hands to hearts. "For King and Kingdoms call."

Phan's gaze went back to Zee and Jessup. "Zepiterspeed to you all."

Chapter 53

Fifty feet down in the dark waters, Petrikleo's krisdolphins dispatched yet another overly large and aggressive sheel, driving its wavy nose blade through the killer fish's gills, then returned to formation. Borrelli shot a harpoon bolt to spear yet another overly long and vicious cooda.

Zee sat belted into the seat on Jessup's back as they sped through the sea at the center of the group, the four commandos at equidistant points, above, below, and on each side. All watched the water and listened with supreme vigilance. Zee's eyesight had continued to improve as he and Jessup forged, especially his night vision. He could see as far now in the dark sea as he ever could with the sun shining bright above. His hearing had also been boosted, especially beneath the waves. It didn't come close to Jessup's though. His and Jessup's sense of impending danger had become even more uncanny as well.

The krisdolphins, however, were in a whole other class. They'd dart off before he or Jessup felt anything, sometimes two at a time, clicking signals to the others, take out crabsharks, sharks, and tigerfish with brutal swiftness, then return just as quickly. The four of them had already slaughtered a pack of hammerhead orcapods with far more efficiency than Zee had Jessup had when they'd been attacked on their way to Triumph's Island. Between their surprising swiftness, calculated maneuvers learned from years of training, their swordlike nose-blades, and the dead-eye aim of the commandos, the SHEELS were a truly deadly force.

Zee and Jessup had only risen to action once, when a diresquid nearly half Jessup's size shot up from the depths with the speed of a harpoon cannon's projectile and caught hold of one of the krisdolphins. Jessup had snatched the creature, freed the krisdolphin, and shoved the diresquid into his mouth, sucking its legs in like noodles. That got looks from the commandos, but the krisdolphins squeaked and clicked in glee.

The attacks had been practically non-stop since they'd rounded the atoll, but the largest predator so far had been the diresquid. Much larger sea-beasts piqued Zee and Jessup's senses outside of their view, and the krisdolphins would go quiet, but the monsters either weren't hungry or were smart enough to know the dangers of approaching a kraken.

Tablert checked her Empyrean lighted compass once more to keep them on course, and Zee realized they hadn't been attacked for a while. In fact, they'd come across no sea animals of any kind.

Tablert tapped her compass and pointed ahead. Walster held up a fist for them to halt. Berolli pulled a telescoping periscope from where it was stowed on his krisdolphins, and the two of them swam toward the surface.

Zee and the others waited in silence. Zee closed his eyes and listened. Other than the soft rush of the commandos breathing with their air tanks, the sea itself was eerily silent. Too silent. Jessup was thinking the same thing.

Berolli and his mount returned, stowing his periscope as they came. He pointed ahead, then used his fingers to indicate the distance of the enemy ships. Three hundred yards. They were almost there.

They moved more slowly going forward, commandos circling above and below Jessup as they went, and still no fish in sight. Zee heard the faint slapping of waves on the ships hulls before he saw them. The twin moons of Zhera cast them as wavering silhouettes on the surface, arranged in a circle with eighty feet between them.

The ship closest to them was a third the size of the HMS Dragon's Rage, but still a sizeable vessel and the largest of the Wraith ships. Noticeably absent were chains dropping into the depth for anchorages, which could only mean they had magickers keeping them in place. Below, a vast field of odd ropey kelp waved lazily in the current.

Berolli crept to the surface with his periscope again. He returned shortly, having identified the larger ship as the one bearing the mottled white flag with a four red blotches, the ship the Wraiths had instructed the king to meet and make the exchange for the prince. Following signals from Walster, they maintained their depth and crept to directly below the ship.

The back of Zee's neck tingled and he looked down at the waving kelp just as Jessup spoke through the bond, his voice urgent. "*Zee, that's not kelp.*"

Zee shouted, "*Retreat!*" His voice sounded lower in the water but was easily understood by the SHEELS.

Their reaction was instantaneous, but not fast enough. Dozens of tentacles exploded upward, snatching the krisdolphins and riders and wrapping Jessup, and yanked them into the deep.

Two of the krisdolphins escaped, their skin raised in red welts where the tentacles had held them, their commando riders drawing short sword and combat hatchet. They dove, cutting at tentacles to free their team members, but were caught again themselves and drug downward.

Jessup extended the spines on his shell, spun and ripped the tentacles that held him with the spikes and claws of his arms, and bit at them with his teeth. Zee slashed with his sword and stabbed with his stinger. With a quick pulse of electricity from Jessup and a blast from his siphon they almost fought free, but the tentacles were countless and unrelenting.

They continued to fight, but were drawn inexorably downward, the krisdolphins and commandos bound helpless around them.

Below, the gaping shell of a monstrous clam-like creature came into view, it's open shell with teeth-like edges plenty large to fit all of them, including Jessup, with room to spare. Inside, a great lump of muscle rippled and clenched, a mouth with concentric rows of teeth gnashing at its center. The tentacles sprouted from all around it. On its surface, dozens of eyes glared malevolence personified, and they glowed red.

Jessup thrashed with fury, pulsed with electricity once more, but couldn't escape before the clam-monsters shell slammed close upon him. As strong as the monster was, it couldn't break Jessup's shell. Luckily for Zee, Jessup had been turned when the clam shell closed, or he would have been crushed.

Jessup pressed his arms against both sides of the shell and pushed. The shell barely budged. It was a risk, but they had to spark their core.

Power rushed through them as their core ignited. Zee channeled all the power he could into strength, and Jessup pushed again. They focused on the mouth of the beast and blasted it with Lightning Bolt. Much of the electricity ran off down the tentacles that held them, but the strike caused the muscle to convulse. It didn't, however, die, or even let go. The mouthed and eyed muscle writhed with the strain, and the shell nearly closed on them again. With a mighty groan, Jessup shoved, extending his arms. The mouth gibbered, something snapped in the hinge of the monstrous shell, then all the creature's resistance failed as the muscle tore in half. The tentacles went limp, and the glow of the red eyes of the beast faded to black.

Zee and Jessup wasted no time thinking about what they'd accomplished, but tore the tentacles stuck to them away and spun, casting about for the commandos. There were none to be

seen. Zee did see something, though, and it gave him pause. Hideous glyphs, carved into the smooth inside of the monster's shell.

They doused their core, backed out of the creature's maw, and turned to find Walster and Tablert upon their krisdolphins. Tablert was leaned forward, clutching her ribs. Walster's right arm hung unnaturally from the shoulder socket. The kit belts of Tablert's krisdolphin had been torn away. Only one of Walster's remained. Riders and mounts had red welts from the stinging tentacles. But they were alive.

Zee spoke with urgency. "Petrikleo and Berolli?"

Walster shook his head, then thrust the hand of his good arm upward.

Thirty feet below the main Wraith ship, Walster retrieved the SHEEL communication device from his kit. He attached the cup to his mask, then handed the other to Zee, who held it to his ear.

When Walster spoke, the sound traveled through a wire between them. His voice was thin and far away. "Dreadclam. I've only heard of them, but they weren't describe as being that big. How was it you and Jessup didn't sense it?" There was a touch of anger in his tone.

Zee didn't have to use the cup to speak, but he kept his voice down this close to the ship. "Did you see the glyphs carved inside it's shell? We've seen them before, on a Mammoth Crab. We couldn't sense the crab either."

Walster gazed at him through the crystal of his mask, then sighed.

"What do we do now?" Zee asked.

"Tablert and I go aboard and retrieve the prince." Tablert forced herself to sit up straight, her face set in a determined grimace.

Zee and Jessup conversed swiftly through their bond.

"No," said Jessup, his voice rumbling in water. "You are injured."

"We're not giving up on the mission."

Zee said, "I'll go."

"I can't allow that."

"I have some experience sneaking around on ships without being seen, and I don't see that you have a choice."

Walster looked to Tablert, who met his gaze, then looked down and petted her krisdolphin, which had been stung badly by the Dreadclam's tentacles.

Walster considered, his expression conflicted, then nodded. “We still have the flare and a spare air tank, but we’ve lost the breach blasters. You’ll have to get the prince out through a cannon port or from the top deck.”

“If it comes to having to escape through the hull, I won’t need breach blasters.” He patted Jessup’s shell.

Zee rose from the sea in the shadow of the hull, lifted by one of Jessup’s arms. Away from the Dragon Force magickers’ fog cover, the sky was clear, with stars and Zhera’s twin moons shining bright. The ship was painted a ghostly white with shades of gray, just as Captain Mauricio had described. Other than that, it bore no markings, name or designation. He almost reconsidered his task when he looked up. Dangling from the rail all along the ship were dead bodies, strung on rope like laundry hung to dry. Sailors and knights, their uniforms tattered, armor torn open or ripped away. Zee steeled his nerve, signaled Jessup through their bond, and was lifted higher.

The stench of the rotting dead was nearly overpowering. Zee tried not to look, but he couldn’t help it. What kind of people would do this?

He held his breath, almost to the height of the rail, peering between eyeless sailors. The bodies blocked much of the view, but he adjusted to see between them. There were only three Wraith sailors on deck, dressed all in mottled white. No others on watch, nor anyone in the crow’s nest. And no dragons or magickers. Zee thought that was odd, but then again, the decks below could be filled with them.

This close to the ship, he and Jessup hadn’t wanted to spark their core to seek out the auras of any riders and dragon’s present, even if they tried to Camouflage it. If a particularly sensitive Wraith magicker somehow sensed them, they would raise the alarm. He and Jessup had used Camouflage when they’d sparked their core while fighting the Dreadclam. They hadn’t yet mastered the ability completely, but by the lack of activity on the Wraith ships, it must have been enough. They’d also been pretty deep at the time.

Zee asked Jessup to move him further toward the bow where the moons cast inky shadows onto the deck along the the forecastle. His arm brushed the dead sailor in front of him, and the corpse came alive.

It clawed at him with manic fury, red fire burning in the empty sockets of its eyes, gasping gurgles escaping from its gaping mouth. Its jostling awakened the bodies next to it, which hissed and grabbed at him as well.

Zee was yanked down into the sea, the string of the dead with him.

At the sound of the splash, the Wraith sailors drew swords and ran to peer over the rail. Behind them, the arm of a kraken lifted a murman in dark skin-tight armor over the opposite rail and deposited him in the shadows.

One the Wraiths shouted, his voice gruff and deep. “Check the captive!”

“Should we sound the alarm?” one of the others asked.

“Not yet, it could have been a sheel or a loose knot. Check the captive and report!”

Two of the sailors ran only feet from where Zee crouched in the shadows, whipped open the door to stairs, further concealing Zee, and trampled down.

The man with the gruff voice stalked over, glared down the stairs and slammed the door with a grunt.

Zee gave the man no time to see him or shout an alarm. Instead, Zee threw an arm around his neck and ran him through with his sword. Zee drug the body into the shadows and laid it down softly, where he eyed the dead man. The Wraiths were not demonic phantoms. They were people, like everyone else. And they could die like them.

Heart pumping with adrenaline, Zee took deep, practiced breaths, putting the fact he’d just killed a man out of his thoughts. There might be plenty more killing to be done. He couldn’t hesitate. Guilt and remorse could be processed later. He strengthened his resolve with a thought – what would Jessup do? And more, with the knowledge of what the Wraiths had done to the prince and his dragon, and to those people strung up on the ship’s rails. People who were dead, but not dead. The images of the Dreadclam’s red glowing eyes and the crimson flames in the dead sailors’ flashed through his mind. This is what Deans Wanchoo and Venkatarama had warned them about – only worse. This was necromancy. Zee shuddered at the thought, reported to Jessup, then rolled his neck and descended the stairs.

Other than the drip of seawater from his armor, there was little sound below, making it easy for Zee to follow the sounds of the sailors’ clomping boots and curses. His old habits of

sneaking out of the berth on the HMT Krakenfish at night, through the ship to the hold to train, returned to him in an instant. Dim oil lamps provided only weak pools of light. He moved swiftly, his bare feet making nary a sound, from shadow to shadow, down stairs and ladders, and saw no one.

A door clattered open on the bottom deck and shouts of surprise came from the far end of a hall. How many voices there were, Zee didn't know, but it sounded like at least half a dozen.

Their voices would cover any sound he might make. He and Jessup agreed, the time for stealth was over. He bolted down the hall, their core sparking as he went, and drew his shield from their Keep.

There weren't six Wraiths in the room, but nine. They may have been battle hardened ex-marines or pirates for all Zee knew, and all had swords or axes in hand, but they weren't bonded knights, and none had armor quite like Zee's. They never knew what hit them.

In moments, all lay dead at his feet. None had even struck his shield, so quickly and efficiently had he moved. Zee stood there, chest heaving, shocked at what he'd been able to do. It had been so easy, like they'd all been moving in slow motion. And that as without he and Jessup sparking their core.

Only then did he see a young man gaping at him, as stunned as Zee, sitting on the floor with one hand tied to a beam and legs bound. The stump at the end of his other arm was wrapped in filthy bandages. He looked starved and his clothes were covered in grime. He must have been only five or six years older than Zee.

Zee dropped to one knee. "Prince Talog mon lin Phan, Your Highness, my name is Zee Tarrow. Your father sent me. I'm here get you out."

The prince swallowed, his mouth dry. "Okay." Zee cut his bindings and helped him up. The prince was barely able to stand. "Are you a SHEEL?" the prince asked.

"No, Your Highness. I'm a hullscrubber." The prince had no reply.

Zee pulled an arm over his shoulder and they made their way out of the room.

The prince suddenly pulled up. "Wait! We have to save Addrian."

"Who?"

"My dragon."

"We were told he was killed when you were taken."

"No, he's here, at the other end of the ship."

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! The distance is too great between us to forge or spark our core, but I can speak to him. I’ll tell him we’re coming.”

Zee balked. Getting one man off the ship was one thing, but a dragon as well? He spoke briefly to Jessup, then said to the prince, “Let’s get your dragon.” By the time they were halfway down the hall, he and Jessup had come up with a plan. Not a great plan, but it was something.

Banging doors, shouts, and the pounding of dozens of boots reached them from the decks above. Where had they come from? Unless they’d been hidden in the stock rooms he’d passed, concealed by more foul magic... Heavy footfalls descended the stairs at both ends of the ship. And there were a lot of them.

It was no use hiding now. He and Jessup sparked their core, then Zee lifted the prince into his arms, and ran.

Several feral-looking Wraiths burst into the hall ahead of them. Zee threw up his Shield without slowing, shaping it to fit the hall while tipping it forward, and plowed right over them, leaping so as not to trip on their crumpling bodies. He didn’t look back as shouting and stomping boots filled the hall behind him, but felt the sparking of an Emyrean core. He flung his Shield behind him just in time to block a blast of ice. It shoved him forward, but he did not fall. Still, he felt the cold of the attack. So their were bonded pairs on the ship, or at least one rider with an Ice Diver.

Zee sprinted toward a set of doors at the end of the hall. Almost there. The doors flew open and a large Wraith with a spear roared. Zee kept going, threw himself onto his back at the last moment, and slid beneath the point of the spear, the prince still in his arms. He kicked the man in the knee and took his legs out from under him as they slid, then dug a heel in and spun, pushing the prince to roll away from him, and leapt to his feet. A quick survey of the room revealed no other guards.

The pirate was up on one knee, trying to rise. Zee front kicked him out into the hall, where at least thirty wraiths were barreling toward them. At the lead was a knight in mottled white armor, her frightening helmet in the shape of a dragon’s mouth shining gold. She pressed her hands together in front of her and a spiked ball of ice formed. She shoved her hands forward, sending the ice-ball straight at Zee.

Zee grunted as it struck, nearly penetrating his Shield, then grabbed the doors and slammed them shut. So, there were knights on the ship. At least the dragon wasn't there. That was something to be thankful for. He was also thankful for the heavy cross bar that he slammed down into place on the doors. With that many enemies in the hall, and what Zee assumed was a Gold Class knight with a sympathetic ice Ability among them, it wouldn't hold for long.

Standing back, he grimaced at the sight of dreadful glyphs in strange patterns painted on the door and walls in red paint – or something red. Zee didn't want to think about what, but he had an idea.

When he spun back to the room, the prince was holding the head of a Greatwing, weeping. The dragon lay on the deck, wrapped in chain, its mouth bound closed with heavy rope. By its appearance, it had not been treated well, and the clawed foot of one front leg was gone, with only a cord tourniquet cinched around the ragged stump.

The Wraiths pounded on the door. Zee hurried to the dragon, pulled his dagger from its sheathe on his leg, and cut the rope that bound its mouth.

“Addrian,” the prince said tenderly, “This is Zee Tarrow. Father sent him to help us.”

Addrian snorted and barely glanced at Zee. Zee recognized his expression not as anger or fear, but shame. “Thank you, Zee Tarrow.”

“We're not out yet,” Zee replied.

The pounding continued, the chop of axes striking as well, and the door began to split.

Zee rushed to check the chains that wrapped the dragon's body and legs. A large lock held them together, too strong for Zee to break, and there were no keys in sight. The guard with the spear may have had them, but Zee had kicked him into the hall. Zee shook his head, chastising himself. That was some good thinking right there. The door bowed and cracked.

“Where is your dragon?” Prince Talog asked.

Zee answered curtly while speaking with Jessup through their bond.

“I don't have a dragon.”

“But you're bonded.”

“I have a kraken.”

The prince took a swift intake of breath. “You're the murman!”

“That's me.”

Ice grew in the cracks of the door. Wood snapped and the hinges groaned.

“Prince Talog, Addrian, can you spark you core?”

“There isn’t much left of it,” Talog replied. “But...” They closed their eyes, straining, and their core lit.

“Shield the door, and get down. Whatever happens, don’t be afraid.”

The prince began to speak, “What—”

The door burst open, the prince and his dragon throwing up their Shield just in time to protect them from flying ice and splintered wood.

Zee crouched next to them and conjured his Shield between them and the far back corner of the room. Wraiths came pouring in with a roar.

“*Now, Jessup!*” he cried through the bond, then out loud, “Hang on!”

With a mighty crunch, the ship lurched and the hull exploded inward, the point of Jessup’s shell having bashed a gaping hole in the ship. Wraiths cried out and lost their footing, tumbling against one another. The shell was pulled out like a plug. The sea gushed in, along with the arms of a kraken. Wraiths screamed, crawling over each other in an attempt to escape.

“Addrian!” Zee shouted. “Fire!”

The dragon didn’t need any more encouragement than that. He and the prince dropped their Shield, Addrian’s eyes gleamed with golden wrath, and he drenched his torturers with flame. The enemy knight tried using her Shield from where she was trying to get up from the tangle of bodies, but too late.

Jessup’s arms wrapped the dragon. Zee threw one arm around the prince, grabbed Addrian’s chains with the other, and the kraken drug them all into the sea.

Chapter 54

The ocean's surface blazed with fire above. The roar of flames, snap of burning timber, groans and cracks of the collapsing hull came muted through the water. Tablert outfitted Prince Talog with a breathing mask and tank, and they sped away, the ship sinking behind them.

Jessup rolled the dragon in his arms as they went, found the lock, bit through it, and removed the chains.

As fast as they were moving, they only made it a hundred yards before they had to surface for the dragon to breathe. The eerie silence of before was gone. Only the bow of the main ship remained above the water, spouting flames. Bells rang on the other Wraith ships, orders were shouted, canons were run out, and sails were set. All of the ships were painted like the main ship, a ghostly mottled white. Pairs were taking to the air by the dozens, and not just dragons and riders, but petrelriders and condorriders as well, the birds screeching and croaking as they soared. Zee had heard they were used in far countries, but even on all his travels aboard the HMT Krakenfish, he'd never seen one. The birds weren't as large as dragons, and like the krisdolphins, couldn't be bonded with, but they were big, swift, vicious, and the petrels could dive deeper and swim faster than Ice Divers. Beacon lamps scoured the surface of the sea. It would only be moments before they were spotted.

Zee pushed water from his lungs and asked Addrian, who was cradled in Jessup's arms, "How long can you hold your breath?"

It was all Addrian could do to answer, as weak as he was, as well as shocked to be held in the arms of the kraken. "I... long enough."

The prince, seated below the seat of the saddle with his legs jammed into the lower half of the capsule, shouted into his mask. "I'll let you know when we need to surface!"

They dropped to just below the waves. Walster had the flare cannister out and raised it toward the surface. Before he could pull the string to ignite it, a petrel shot down into the water, rider hunkered down against its back, and snatched the commando away from his krisdolphins. A swift flap of its long pointed wings and they were gone through the waves above.

They all sat stunned, Wanky squeaking in anguish. Zee spotted the flare sinking and leapt to retrieve it. Once he had it in hand, he shot to the surface, aimed high, and pulled the string. The flare flew high and bright, leaving a colorful trail of sparks behind it.

His Majesty's Dragon Corps and Navy would be coming soon. Unfortunately, lamp beacons pinpointed Zee's location, the ships began to move, and the Wraith forces in the air spotted him. He flipped and dove.

Jessup swam on his back, Addrian held below his chin. With his swiveling eyes and uniform shape, it made little difference to his range of view and none to his speed. He wasn't as fast as he would be without holding the dragon, but with their core sparked, eight arms still available, and the jet of his siphon, he shot through the water with tremendous speed.

More petrelriders dove in after them, driving them deeper, but just when they reached a safe depth, Addrian convulsed. Prince Talog reached up and slapped Zee's leg, then jabbed a finger to the surface.

They had no choice. The dragon would drown otherwise. For a fleeting moment, Zee considered his mission. Save the prince. The dragon had been thought dead and was not part of the plan. But, what if that was Jessup? He wouldn't, couldn't, do that to the prince's bondmate, or the prince.

Jessup lunged out of the water. The dragon gasped in his arms, coughed, then lay still.

The prince jerked forward to look down at Addrian, tearing the breathing mask from his head, then his shoulders relaxed. "He's alive, but our bond is growing weak. We must get him back to the healers!"

If they submerged, the dragon would drown. Jessup paddled as fast as he could on the surface, the krisdolphins and Tablert having caught up with them and sticking close. The enemy fleet was coming fast, their fell magickers giving them speed, leaving the main ship sinking and burning in the distance behind them.

Condorriders, petrelriders and enemy dragonriders swarmed the air, and dove. Zee and Jessup threw up their Water Shield, protecting them from above, but petrelriders plunged into the water beyond its perimeter to get below. Jessup crushed them in his arms and slashed them with his claws, and the krisdolphins and Tablert fought them off with nose blades and sword.

A dragon blasted searing flame, but no heat reached them through the incredible density of their Water Shield.

The roar of hundreds of dragons sounded in the opposite direction of the enemy ships. The flames ceased blasting their Shield and the beasts of the air soared back into the sky. Jessup spun around for them to look.

The Dragon Corps pairs were coming shockingly fast. The three Red Titan's streaked by overhead, leaving a comet trail of gold light at their backs, flights of White Titans right behind them.

Zee watched in fascination as the kings and commandants fired Beams and concussive blasts of fire that seared and scattered aerial attackers, then pummeled the leading ships with long range Fireball bombs.

Though they weren't knights, Wanchoo and Venkatarama proved to be nearly as deadly. They conjured a massive shield at full speed, knocking any flying beast and rider in their path from the air. They dove, and with a wave of Wanchoo's wand and a flap of Rama's wings, two ships crashed against a wall of golden light, stopped dead in the water.

The remaining flights of the Dragon Force arrived. Golds first, then Silvers, and more battles ensued in the air. Auras and shields flashed yellow, flames soaked the sky, lighting the crystals of Ice Divers' attacks all colors of the rainbow. Geysers and bombs of molten dragon ambergris flew from the mouths of Rocks, searing orange and gold. The enemy ships' cannons and harpoon guns boomed, sending their projectiles into the sky. It occurred to Zee that Dame Toomsil and Peloquin and Tem and Timandra were up there. He prayed to both Zepiter and Postune they would be safe.

In the noise and bright mayhem, neither Zee nor Jessup felt the swift diving attack of a condor until the beast and rider were already upon them.

The rider leapt from the monster-bird, swinging his axe at Zee. The condor went for the prince's dragon, clawing at Jessup's face and arms, croaking fiercely.

Zee ducked the axe and the blade thunked into Jessup's shell, where it stuck. The man landed on Zee and they grappled violently. Even with Zee and Jessup's core sparked, the Wraith condorrider was terrifyingly strong. He cursed in a language Zee didn't know, and spit in his face. He wore a squat helmet with a spike at the top and leather armor with feathers on his shoulders, all painted the same white with faint gray mottling like all the Wraiths.

Zee tried for his dagger, but couldn't break the man's grip on his wrist. He poured more core power into strength, but the man seemed to only get stronger. How was this possible from

someone without a bond? Then Zee saw that red light burned behind the man's eyes. Not dead and brought back to life, but enhanced by whatever had powered the Mammoth Crab and Dreadclam. A frigid terror almost overtook him as he thought about what Wanchoo and Venkatarama had told him and Jessup.

“If the aura, Shields or Abilities of any of the enemy manifest red instead of the yellow of Emyrean, we want you and Jessup to dive as deep and swim as far as you can. Leave the fighting to the Titans.”

They'd said nothing about eyes, but this was somehow worse.

Jessup must have felt his fear. The kraken poured his courage and will to fight into Zee through the bond, even as he swatted at the condor, which was swift and agile for such an ungainly creature, flying out, dodging Jessup's strikes, and shooting back in with wicked curved beak and claws. Wanky shot out of the water in an attempt to spear the condor in the belly, but the beast banked and raked claws along his side.

In a brief glimpse, Zee saw that the creature's eyes glowed red as well, and on its wicked beak were carved more of the hideous glyphs, which dimly shined crimson as well.

Zee and Jessup's aura flared with each strike, but up close, it did little to help Zee unless the man punched him – which he did, multiple times. Zee's armor and aura absorbed most of the damage, but he began to feel the blows.

Prince Talog tried to help, but jammed as he was into the lower half of the capsule, he could only grasp at the Wraith's leg with his one good hand. The man kicked him hard in the side of the head, and the prince fell limp.

The Wraith pulled a seax from his belt and swung. Zee ducked his head, caught the blow on his helmet, then caught the man's wrist. Zee's fear had vanished with Jessup's support through the bond, and he did the only thing he could think of. If the man broke free, it would take but one strike to kill the prince. Zee let go of the man's arm that didn't hold the seax, unbuckled his belt, and threw them both into the sea.

Jessup called his name through their bond.

“It's all right,” Zee replied. *“Protect the prince and Addrian. Tell the krisdolphins to stay there and help.”*

Down they went, Zee's gills opening, web forming between his fingers, the toes of his feet spreading wide and webbed as well. Zee kicked, holding tight to his foe, and drove them

deeper. The man's red eyes went wide as he realized what Zee was. The Wraith was out of his element now, in the domain of a murman.

He struggled frantically, struck Zee with his knees, and even tried to bite. Zee lost hold of the man's arm, snatched hold of his leather breastplate and pulled. The breastplate tore free, revealing a chest branded in more glyphs which also shown with dim red light. Zee dropped the leathers and threw his arm around the man, hugging him close, all the while swimming deeper into the darkness.

The man dropped his seax, twisted his hand out of Zee's grip, and grabbed Zee by the neck. He pushed, attempting to break Zee's grip on him, tried to dig his fingers through the flaps in Zee's gorget and into his gills, bearing yellowed and ragged teeth. Zee held on, refusing to feel the pain, glaring into the man's red eyes.

Panic took the Wraith, bubbles burst from his mouth, and he sucked in salty water. Twice more the man tried to breath. His eyes bugged, then the crimson glow within them dimmed and went out. His struggles ceased, but his dead eyes still stared at Zee.

Zee shoved him away, watched him sink slowly, then clenched his fists and roared down at him.

"Zee, are you all right?" came Jessup's voice.

Zee regained his senses. *"All good. I'm on my way."* He sped toward the surface.

Zee broke the surface in time to see a Greatwing slam into the condor, spearing it with its talons, then crush the bird's neck with its powerful jaws. It flung the monster bird to be torched by a Royal Crimson.

Dame Toomsil shouted, "Mr. Tarrow!" She sat upon Peloquin, her golden armor scorched but whole, while the dragon hovered. Her eyes went to the limp prince, then the dragon.

Before she could ask, Jessup said, "They're alive."

Tem flew closer upon Timandra. "You did it!"

Zee climbed onto Jessup. "They're not on the ship yet. Where are they?"

Dame Toomsil nodded away from the battle. "There."

Zee turned and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the task force cutting through the waves at top speed, the admiral's ship in the lead.

Four magicker pairs flew ahead of the ships, swooped down and conjured a Platform. The riders hopped off their dragons and Zee helped them lift the prince onto it. Jessup lifted Addrian and laid him gently next to him.

A Gold Class healing magicker said, "We'll take good care of them. Well done."

Jessup said, "Take SHEEL Tablert and the krisdolphins as well. They've been injured."

The lady magicker hesitated, then saw the state of the commando and krisdolphins. "All right."

Jessup lifted them to the Platform. Tablert nodded to Zee. The krisdolphins squeaked their thanks as the Platform rose, then floated away toward the admiral's ship.

The pride in Dame Toomsil's eyes was unmistakable, though there was a touch of sadness at what Zee and Jessup had been through. "Well done, Mr. Tarrow, Mr. Jessup."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Zee replied.

A Red Titan pair Streaked from the battle to the magicker's Platform, circled twice, then sped to where Zee, Jessup, and the knight pairs waited. Norrogaul hovered, the king perched on his back, gazing at Jessup and Zee. "Stay put, you two, your job here is done." To the knights he said, "Toomsil, Briggs, with me." He drew his sword. "We have Wraiths to kill."

Zee shouted, "Your Highness!" The king paused and turned his attention back to him. By Zepiter, it was impossible to read the man's mood. "The red, Sire. We saw it."

"I have seen it. So far it's nothing we can't handle."

"And dead sailors and knights, Sire, brought back to life."

Toomsil, Tem, and their dragons looked as if they'd been knocked back. Even Norrogaul's head turned. Finally the king's face held a readable expression. Shock, and horror.

Norrogaul said, "Necromancy. Are you absolutely certain?"

Jessup said, "Yes, Sir. They were strung from the main ship's rails."

"Where is this ship?" said King Phan.

Zee replied, "Addrian set it afire, and we sunk it."

The king pondered deeply, probably speaking with Norrogaul. When he looked up, his eyes gleamed with even greater determination. "Then we must burn them all, now more than ever." He raised his sword. "To battle!"

He and Norrogaul Streaked away, leaving a palpable trace of their Red Titan aura hanging in the air.

The knight pairs sparked their cores and sped away.

The HMS Dragon's Rage passed, not a hundred feet away, speeding to the thick of the battle. Along the rails high above, sailors waved and shouted. It took a moment for Zee to realize they were cheering for him and Jessup.

The murman and kraken floated their, bobbing in the waves, and watched them pass.

Zee's adrenaline drained away and he was suddenly exhausted. Jessup sighed. When they'd doused their core, there had been less than half of it left.

The admirals speared straight toward the enemy task force while the other Navy ships split to either side. Cannons blared in a thunderous rolling boom and kept firing, wave after wave. Masts and bridges splintered on the first of the Wraith ships, and great holes blew open in their topsides. The enemy ships returned fire, but more sporadically, their cannons sounding like popping fireworks compared to the big guns of the Dragon's Rage. Combat still raged in the sky, but not as intense as it had been.

The forces of Tosh were winning.

Jessup said, "We should join the fight."

"You heard the king, Zee replied. "Our job is done." He patted Jessup on the shell. "We saved the prince, and his dragon."

Jessup grunted. "SHEELs died."

"I know," Zee responded softly. He'd been thinking about that too.

A foul and terrible chill descended upon them. The hair stood up on Zee's neck. Jessup's spikes shot out on his shell, and he spun back.

A half mile away a massive wall of fog roiled, dark, foreboding, tinged with purple and green like a horrid bruise, and coming fast. Then it just stopped.

The fog swirled from waterline to high in the sky, opening an expansive spinning vortex to blackness. Out of it poured a great fleet of the ghostly painted Wraith ships, three times the size of the Navy task force. The air above the fleet teemed with riders and beasts, at least five complete wings of riders upon dragons, and hundreds more condor and petrelriders. The knights' armor was a motley mix of designs, with few matching – even the riders' helmets weren't the same – but all were painted the identical mottled white, except for the riders' helmets, which gleamed in the metallic sheen of their class.

The king's Navy was caught between two enemy forces. The whole thing had been a trap. And the only thing between the Navy and the oncoming force were Zee and Jessup. Jessup spun and roared a warning to the king's forces, they turned back.

Approaching through the vortex came a red glow, low above the ships. Flying Wraith forces scattered from its path. An umbral shape with massive wings. It cleared the vortex and fog, dropping to fly low over the waves. A dragon – or something like a dragon.

Its head was a dragon's skull with red flames wreathed in black shadow gushing from the empty sockets of its eyes. Six legs of various sizes were tucked up under its length, and three long tails whipped behind, one tipped with a sharp bony point like the blade of a spear, another like the spiked head of a mace, the third slim and lashing. Its scales may once have been gray, but now they were dull and peeling. It was also far larger than the largest beast in the Dragon Corps, its body alone at least sixty feet long.

At the base of its neck rode a man who appeared to be wrapped in filthy white strips of cloth but for his breastplate, which gleamed white, the Wraith's insignia of four red blotches on his chest. He wore no helmet, his face gaunt, long white hair trailing behind his head, his eyes circled in black. They seemed to be in no hurry, their forces passing them above.

"That pair must be their generals," Zee said to himself as much as Jessup. *"Who are these people?"*

Three more Wraith bonded pairs swooped down to join the their generals, the dragons regular size, the riders in helmets of gold.

"Bad people. That's all we need to know."

Zee gathered his resolve, trying to remind himself they were just humans and beasts. But these Wraiths, especially the general and the monster he rode upon, emanated with menacing power.

Enemy bonded pairs and other beastriders zoomed by overhead. Blasts of fire and ice, flashing Shields, and the roars of dragons marked the clash of the two forces.

Three flights of the Dragon Corps rear guard descended on the Wraith general rider and beast pair and their escort of Golds. The three Gold Wraiths spread out from their leader and sparked their cores. Zee recoiled at the fell power that struck him. When he looked back, the eyes of the dragons and riders burned red.

The Dragon Corps knights fired as they dove, spears, javelins, arrows, ice, magma, and flames. Dame Toomsil and Tem were among them. Dread filled Zee's heart.

Jessup uttered, "No..."

The Wraith generals sparked their core. Crimson light gleamed from the rider's eyes, far brighter than the other Wraith knights, and the red flames in the sockets of the dragon's skull became bonfires.

Zee nearly fell out of his saddle. The power of their sparking core hit him like the spray of a skunkcat and being hit in the gut with a heavy plank at the same time. Nausea clutched his stomach, and his mind reeled in horror. Jessup groaned.

The Wraith general rider thrust out the fingers of one bony hand and red Shields formed in front of all three of his Gold knights. Then he waved his hand, sending multiple tendrils of red light whipping out, shrieking in the air, and striking the Dragon Corps knights, scattering them like chaff.

Toomsil, Peloquin, Tem and Timandra tumbled through the air. To Zee's relief, they got their wings under them. For a moment, they fluttered there in shock. Others splashed to the waves, some swam helplessly. Others lay still.

Zee gaped. The Wraith general had Shielded the knights of his guard, then struck with an attack like Zee had never seen.

At the same time, he and Jessup said, "A sorcerer..."

"Make way!" came the roaring voice of Norrogaul. The rear guard sped out of the way as the three Red Titans came Streaking in.

Wanchoo stabbed forward with his wand. It flashed yellow and a Testudo Globe with walls much thicker than Zee had seen him use before surrounded the Wraith general and undead dragon. The dragon shrugged, pulsed with red light, and the globe shattered. Venkatarama reeled back, flapping his wings, his long mouth agape.

The commandants' aura flared, Vandalia reeled back, drew her wings back, and flapped. The air exploded like thunder. Hurricane winds rocked the general's dragon up and back.

Norrogaul opened his great mouth wide and roared a golden Beam that split the air like lightning, striking the dragon's exposed underbelly. The Wraith's red aura flared, but the commandants and kings did not relent.

The Wraith generals' aura expanded, pushing the Beam away and blocking the Hurricane wins. The dragon roared, deep, juddering, unearthly, then clapped its wings, the sound like cannon fire.

Shields appeared before the kings and commandants, then another in front of those, conjured by the Deans of Magicks. The blast broke right through the Shields and slammed into the Red Titans, knocking them back. They managed to catch themselves, then hovered in the sky, steam rising from armor and dragon scales .

The Wraith general rider laughed, the sound of it chilling Zee to the bone.

"We have to help them," came Jessup's voice.

Together, Zee and Jessup breathed deeply, slowing Zee's racing heart. Jessup's will to battle and determination poured into him, turning his resolve into absolute certainty.

Zee set his jaw. *"Yes, we do."* They sparked their core.

The general rider retrieved a wicked curved sword from his Keep. Glyphs burned red along its blade, and he swung it. A Scirocco of red flame slammed into the Red Titans. Their Shields did not help them. If Zee had blinked he would have missed it.

King Phan and Norrogaul shot backward, flaming, to crash through the bridge of a Navy ship. Aureosa and Vandalia streaked like a burning meteor into the sea, sending up a geyser of water and steam. Wanchoo and Venkatarama were hurled high, a fiery pinwheel, out over the battling ships behind them, and dropped out of sight. Dragon Corps knight pairs and magickers shot from the sky to their aid.

Zee's determination did not break, shored as it was by the kraken's will. *"Everything we've got, Jessup."*

"Everything."

The air screamed as a Lightning Bolt struck the demon dragon with more power than Zee and Jessup had ever used before. Red aura flashed. Thunder cracked. The dragon rolled through the air, blasted sideways, shrieking, wings beating helplessly.

Zee nearly collapsed from the effort. Jessup breathed out beneath him like a punctured floatbladder. When Zee looked up, the dragon flashed red and it stopped toppling. It beat its expansive wings, hovering thirty feet above the water, then slowly turned. The fire in the eyes of dragon and rider alike burned brighter, the inky shadows that accompanied the flames swirling like black smoke.

The sorcerer rider's voice came slithering into Zee's mind. The sound of it brought a deathly chill. "*There you are...*"

He'd spoken to them just like Zee and Jessup spoke through their bond.

Zee's mind recoiled. "*How...?*"

The voice came again. "*How, indeed.*" Zee's jaw bobbed wordlessly. The sorcerers could hear them, too.

The demon dragon flapped toward them.

"Don't speak!" Jessup shouted out loud, then dove.

Zee's panic washed away as he and Jessup's bond heated to full force. He focused on their bond, and the bond alone. His and Jessup's will, their very souls and minds, became one.

They'd expended nearly half of their remaining core on the most powerful Lightning Bolt they'd ever summoned. And the enemy was still flying.

They had to make the remaining twenty five percent of their core count. The thought of retreat never entered their minds. Zee went to pull his sword from their Keep, but retrieved his stinger instead, then drew out his shield. They sped toward the oncoming enemy.

A slithering shadow on the waves above, and a red glow. Jessup fired his siphon and shot out of the water, straight at the monster dragon's head, Zee channeling core power into strength, resilience, and their Shock ability.

The peak of the kraken's shell struck the beast's jaw with the force of a speeding ship, Zee and Jessup loosing a blinding pulse of blue electricity at the same time. The dragon's aura flashed red, but that didn't prevent its head from being snapped upward, the breaking of massive teeth as its mouth jammed shut, the cracking of bone, and the dislocation of its enormous jaw.

It screamed and reeled, the hooked tip of a wing carving the water as it fought to stay the air. Red fire gouted from its broken mouth, spraying the sea and sky. But it didn't go down, and the rider stayed seated on its back.

Zee and Jessup plunged back into the sea, circled up and back around. Zee released the bottom of his saddle capsule and pulled it up to lock into place over his legs while keeping his eye on the enemy dragon above the surface, which began to climb into the air.

Jessup rocketed out of the water, shooting out the spines of his shell. Instead of colliding with the beast, he landed on its back just above the tails. Red aura flashed, but Jessup's arms

wrapped the dragon, claws and sucker-spikes hooking onto its great rough scales. The dragon dropped with a roar, but beat its wings with greater force and climbed once more.

The sorcerer rider turned in his saddle and blasted a red Fireball. Zee raised his shield while conjuring Deflect. The strike slammed him back in his saddle, cracking his helmeted head against Jessup's shell, and his arm went numb, but the ball of flame ricocheted away.

The sorcerer rider appeared shocked, then his eye's narrowed. Zee's whole body clenched as what felt like a phantom hand of ice reached right into him.

The sorcerer's mouth widened in a cadaverous grin. *"I see..."*

The statement seemed to portend much more than the meaning of the words themselves. A frigid dread sent a shiver down Zee's spine and pain shooting through his brain.

Jessup tried to reach the sorcerer with a whipping tentacle, but with the massive length of the dragon, it was too far.

The spikes of a great chitinous mace pierced Zee and Jessup's flashing blue aura and thunked into the kraken's shell to Zee's left, then was torn free. A spear point three feet long struck to his right. The undead dragon was attacking with its tails.

A scaled whip wound around the point of Jessup's shell, and pulled. Jessup groaned, digging his claws in deeper. Blue lightning arced across his spines and he pulsed with electricity. The dragon shrieked and its whip-tail withdrew.

Gold and silver knight's of the Dragon Corps soared in, flinging javelins and firing bows at the dragon's head and neck. They bounced off the bony skull and heavy ridged scales or were incinerated by the red flames of its eyes. Its aura flashed, stopping many others, but one knight broke through and drove a lance into its chest. One snap of its enormous jaws and dragon and knight were crushed.

A squadron of White Titan's descended, twenty five knight pairs strong. The sorcerer rider waved a hand. Tendrils of crimson lashed them away, their Shields blinking out, and several plummeted to crash into the sea.

Jessup roared and detonated another mighty Shock into the dragon, then tore at the dragon's scaled hide while also reaching to foul the beast's wings, and Shocked it again. The beast lurched with each pulse of electricity, aura flaring, but continued to fly inexorably upward. Zee hurled a ball of electricity at the sorcerer rider's back with all his might. It merely glanced off the man's aura.

Bitter, freezing cold enveloped them as a foot of ice coated Jessup's shell and froze his arms into place on one side. Jessup tugged to free himself, to no avail. Electricity swarmed over his shell. With a roar, he released another pulse. The ice exploded from his shell and the dragon spasmed, shrieking.

Zee caught a flash of gold and swung his stinger. Sparks flew as its tip scraped on scales. A claw tore through his sheelskin armor and gashed his upper arm, then a sword struck a mighty blow to his helmet.

Zee's head rung. He didn't want to waste their core on sufferance, but he barely felt the pain of the strike or the cut on his arm anyway. Adrenaline pumped through veins and Jessup's tolerance for pain was frighteningly high, which Zee had inherited through the bond, at least temporarily.

A gout of fire poured over Zee. He covered his upper body with his shield, his legs protected by the bottom half of the capsule. His shield glowed with the searing heat, his numb arm blistering beneath his armor, even with his blue aura flaring. Steam rose from his soaking armor. He gasped for breath, feeling as if he was being boiled in a pot. His aura winked out and he and Jessup called upon their Shield. It would not come. With a thought, Zee saw their core was down to ten percent.

A Gold Class Knight pair of the sorcerer's guard shot in through the flames, the dragon with its wings tucked. The rider grabbed the edge of Zee's red hot shield and snatched it away, dislocating Zee's shoulder in the process. He stabbed out with his stinger and heard the dragon squeal. Zee covered his face from the flames with his good arm. The sheelskin of his armor curled and smoked in the heat, yet Zee's skin only blistered.

Jessup roared and struck out with one of his arms at full length. A dragon shrieked and the flames stopped. Jessup struck again, missed, and another of the sorcerer's guard swooped passed Zee. This time the rider stabbed him through the shoulder of the dislocated arm with a thrust of her spear, right through Zee's weakened aura. Zee screamed, and Jessup roared. Jessup thrashed at the dragon with fury, ripping off scales and tearing out hunks of living dead flesh. The dragon screamed, high and keening.

In the sky above, a dark storm roiled to life, lightning shrieking through the clouds. The sorcerer rider looked up in wonder, then laughed his hideous laugh.

Zee groaned and sat up, one arm dangling and useless, one hand clutched over the wound in his shoulder. Steam rose from his body and from Jessup's shell. The pain was terrible, but it should have been excruciating. He forced himself to breathe, drawing on he and Jessup's bond but not their core, forcing the agony down even further. Still, he felt light headed, his thoughts muddled. Then knew why. Their core was dangerously low, now less than ten percent.

He had no time to consider their predicament, however. Dame Toomsil and Tem were soaring down, only two other Golds and a Silver with them.

The sorcerer lifted his wicked sword and ignited it.

Zee roared in the voice that was his, but not his. "No!" He threw out his hand just as the sorcerer attacked with the same Scirocco Ability that had knocked the Red Titans from the sky. A massive Water Shield appeared between the sorcerer and the oncoming force. The Dragon Corps dragons pulled up frantically to avoid a collision. The arc of red Scirocco flame struck the Water Shield. Both Shield and flame blew apart, but Toomsil and Peloquin, Tem, Timandra and the others, were unharmed.

Jessup sucked in a deep, exhausted breath, and roared. "Fly away!"

They hesitated, eyes wide and mouths agape, then took off into the sky.

The Wraith sorcerers had no interest in them, however. The rider twisted in his saddle to gaze back at Zee and Jessup. Zee had to shake his head to clear his blurred vision, which nearly caused him to swoon.

Flames raged in the Wraith general's eyes, but on his face was an expression of malicious glee. He pointed at them with a crooked finger. "Sorcerers!"

Zee barely had time to register what he and Jessup had done – they had conjured a Shield to protect others – or the word that the rider general had roared – before the Wraith general rider drew his arm back, gathered smoking red flame in his palm and hurled it at them.

Zee and Jessup were hit with an impossible force. The claws and spikes of Jessup's arms tore free; they flew back, toppling, and dropped.

Chapter 55

A dragon's claw caught hold of Commandant Aureosa's arm and hauled him out of the sea. He flopped onto the Platform and rolled to his back, staring up into the eyes of Vandalia, whose great chest rose and fell with the effort of lifting one man. The Ability the Wraith sorcerer had hit them with looked like Scirocco, but it had hit like a hammer of the sun and somehow drained a vast percentage of their prodigious Red Titans' core. It felt like their life force itself had been sucked out of them. His bond with Vandalia was still strong, but that was about all he could say for the sum of their strength.

The Platform rose, four magickers powering a Testudo Globe around them, while Dragon Force knight pairs fought off dragons, condors, and petrels.

"Are you all right, Daimyo General Commandants?" said a concerned healing magicker dragon.

Vandalia shoved him away in a surge of frustration. "We're fine."

Aureosa felt it too. Frustration, awe, and he must admit, fear. He wanted to scream out orders, rally his forces, but all around cannons blared, ship sides splintered, and his knights were already doing all they could against the enemy swarm. Even against an overwhelming force, they fought on with all they had. He was proud of them. Deep remorse clenched his heart. Perhaps they should have just paid the ransom and been done with it. But, no. That wouldn't have been the end of it. This trap had been planned from the very beginning.

He wondered if he should call a retreat, but only the king could do that. If Phan and Norrogaul had truly fallen, it would be the choice of the admiral or vice vizier. But where would they retreat to? An enemy force of this size and strength could pursue them to their deaths and the destruction of even the admiral's ship. And they had a sorcerer pair with red light in his eyes.

He and Wanchoo had only seen it once before, in a single battle long ago. It had been awesome and terrifying then, but at least that pair had been on their side. This was worse. And the sorcerer dragon had been risen from the dead. He shook his head, gathered his strength and pushed to his feet, where he leaned with a hand on Vandalia.

"I cannot fight, Peleus" Vandalia said in weary defeat. One of her wings hung crooked and broken.

Aureosa patted her neck. "I know."

“Look!”

Jessup shot out of the sea and landed hard on the back of the undead dragon’s back. They watched, helpless and amazed, as the fight ensued. From this distance it was difficult to tell exactly what was happening. Flames, blasts of electricity, flailing kraken arms and dragon’s tails, swooping wraith dragons, and mighty roars. The king’s forces attacked as they could to help, but the sorcerers swept them away with ease. Somehow, the young murman and kraken continued to fight.

“They could be our only hope, now,” said Aureosa. “We’re nearly undone, and no pill or elixir can help us.”

Vandalia said, “We’re not done yet. Those two have surprised us before.”

“That’s a sorcerer pair gorged on the power of death itself.”

“And yet, Zee and Jessup still stand against them. They are a true force of nature.” Is if in answer, cool wind gusted over them and the moons and stars were blocked from the sky. A storm blacker than night roiled above, seething with lightning.

The unmistakable roar of Norrogaul sounded from behind them and they turned. King Phan and the mighty dragon staggered to the broken rail of the ship they had crashed into, Norrogaul dragging a limp wing, hopping on one front leg to favor the other, which was twisted at a terrible angle.

Both commandants breathed a sigh of relief. Vandalia said, “They’re no better off than we are, but they live, thank Zepiter.”

“I fear for the deans.”

“Venkatarama is tougher than I am. If we live, so do they.”

The undead dragon’s roar drew their gaze back to fight. Barely more than a flight of Gold and Silver Dragon Corps pairs sped to Zee and Jessup’s aid. The sorcerer raised his flaming sword.

Vandalia uttered, “No...”

Then a Shield of Water nearly a fifty feet wide appeared. It exploded as the aberrant Scirocco struck it – but so did the Scirocco.

Even as far away as they were, they were staggered by the force of the concussion.

Aureosa’s mouth opened and closed without words.

The Wraith general rider's amplified voice carried the word he'd been trying to say over the waves.

"Sorcerer!"

Then Zee and Jessup were blasted off the back of the dragon and fell to the sea.

Red light grew inside the undead dragon. The lance that stuck in its chest was forced out to splash in the waves below. The light flared, occluding the pair entirely. When it faded, the dragon was healed of all wounds. It beat its wings, circling, eyeing the water, then dove with tremendous speed, tucked its wings at the last moment, and plunged into the sea.

Beneath the waves, Zee's head swam and ached, his stomach convulsed with nausea, and his whole body throbbed with pain. Jessup flopped, rotating them in circles, directionless. Worst of all, their core was nearly spent. Zee consciously doused it, then grit his teeth and groaned as the pain increased tenfold.

Jessup's voice was weak, distant, tinged with anger and alarm. "*Zee...*"

"*Jessup...*"

Their bond was fraying. If their core went out, they'd lose their bond forever. Zee didn't think they even had the strength to forge.

Still, the fire of kraken's will remained. Lightning blinked from the raging storm high above, flickering across the waves, the bizarre manifestation of his own wrath.

"*Last resort, Zee.*"

It took Zee's befuddled mind a second to grasp what he'd said. The pill that Wanchoo and Venkatarama had given them. It was dangerous, but what choice did they have? And the sorcerers were still up there. But he and Jessup were sorcerers, too. He nearly lost his train of thought, bewildered as he was by the sudden realization. Both knight and magicker. Who knew what wonders they could perform? If they survived.

Zee couldn't move his left arm, and his right felt as if it weighed a hundred pounds as he reached for their Keep and retrieved the pill. He uncorked the bottle and tipped the pill into his palm. The waves of power it gave off were intoxicating, hypnotic, resonating. The trumpets of salvation, or the siren song of death?

The water darkened around them, then the surface exploded. Zee flinched and the pill dropped from his hand. He swatted at it feebly as it sunk, only managing to move it further out of reach with the eddies created by his webbed hand. "*Jessup!*"

Then suddenly, they couldn't move.

The evil-dead dragon floated down into sight, head tucked back on its long neck. It suspended itself with its wings, facing them. Bubbles rose from its skull and scales, and somehow the crimson flames still burned in the empty sockets of its eyes, wreathed in black shadow. Over its horned skull, the Wraith general rider gazed at them with his gleaming red eyes.

The sorcerer rider spoke. "*Murman...*" Zee couldn't even wince at the pain that lanced through his brain.

"*Kraken...*" It was the dragon speaking. The pain stabbed fresh with every word.

"*Thunder Kraken,*" the sorcerer uttered. If Zee wasn't mistaken, there was wonder in his tone.

"*We will have a piece for the master.*" Slowly, deliberately, the dragon reached with its longer front legs and clutched one of Jessup's arms in its talons, then opened its cavernous maw.

Zee couldn't speak. He couldn't even scream. Jessup raged in silence and stillness. Lightning flashed over the sea with his fury.

The dragon bit, then chomped again, wrenching its head back and forth until half of Jessup's arm tore free.

Zee wailed in his mind at Jessup's searing agony. In moments it subsided, but the heat of Jessup's wrath had become an inferno.

Dragon and rider watched, their very gaze an attack on Zee and Jessup's bodies and minds. With a great beat of the dragon-monster's wings, they shot upward, out of the sea to the sky, Jessup's severed arm flopping in the clutch of the dragon's claw. Even there, under the sea, Zee would swear he heard the sorcerer rider laughing.

And they still couldn't move. They sank slowly, inevitably. Jessup couldn't even fill the cavity in his shell with gases to float them to the surface. Their bond was frighteningly weak. Was this to be their end?

The answer was a resounding "no" that resonated through their bodies and minds. The parting words of Dr. Aenig came back to Zee. "Reach deeper than you could possibly imagine.

Farther than you ever have before. Only at the bell of most dire need will more power come to you. The greatest potential lies with those closest to defeat.” It was as if the surgeon knew this day would come.

A mad rage rose between them and their core sparked to life. Nearly spent as it was, it banished all exhaustion and pain, but their rage and determination burned bright as ever. They didn’t have to speak, their minds connecting as one through the bond. Their friends were up there. Dame Toomsil and Pelloquin, Tem and Timandra. The commandants, the deans of magicks, and the king. The prince as well, and they had been given a task to save him. That demonic pair of Wraith sorcerers would kill them all. They couldn’t let that happen.

Zee sensed Jessup straining harder than he’d ever felt before, then blinked as the curled tip of a kraken’s arm raised itself toward Zee, inch by inch. Their core was guttering, nearly spent when it came within reach and opened slowly. Zee would have gaped if he could at the sight of the pill he’d dropped lying in the center of a small sucker.

Jessup’s voice sounded in his mind, forced, as if every bit of his effort was poured into it, and far, far away. “*Last resort.*”

Zee mentally clenched his jaw, roared in his mind, and reached with everything he had. Veins stood out on his forehead, his mind in agony, but his hand and the kraken’s arm grew closer together. Their core was an ember, their bond fraying. Agony shot through their minds and bodies.

With more effort than Zee had ever given anything in his life, Zee clutched the pill, pulled it pill to him, and forced his mouth to open. The ember of their core dimmed faint blue and gold, disappearing in the dark void of their core.

Zee swallowed. A sun exploded, reality broke, and agony reigned.

Aureosa reeled back, throwing an arm up to shield his eyes. Vandalia jerked her head back on her long neck and turned away. If their core was sparked, they may have been able to gaze directly at the ball of white light that blazed beneath the sea. But now, it was absolutely blinding.

The screams of the kraken and murman shook the sea and trembled the sky. It sounded as if they were being tortured beyond all thresholds of pain, yet could not faint or die. Their wails of

agony cut through cannon fire and dragons' roars. All on both sides, in the air and on the ships, recoiled at the sheer intensity of it. Even the cannons quieted.

Black thunderclouds, denser, darker, churning with rage, roiled out to cover the entire battle, lightning shrieking through them, echoing the kraken and murman's cries.

The Wraith sorcerer pair halted and hovered while they gazed at the bright light below.

"What did they do to them?" Vandalia asked, to herself as much to Aureosa.

Wind gusted behind them. "Not them." Venkatarama stepped up beside Aureosa, Wanchoo upon his back. "Us."

Both were soaking wet and charred. Wanchoo's robe was torn. A few of Rama's scales had been ripped away by the sorcerers' blast. Otherwise, they didn't appear seriously injured.

Aureosa and Vandalia stared at them. Vandalia said, "You gave them the Pearl..." It wasn't a question, but a statement of disbelief.

The deans of magicks stared at the light beneath the sea, expressions softened with remorse.

Wanchoo spoke softly. "They were drawn to it. But more so, it to them."

"They chose each other," Rama added.

A Platform of golden light descended behind them. Boots and dragon claws scraped the deck. King Phan and Norrogaul limped to the rail.

"What is happening?" The king demanded, though there was wonder in his voice.

Aureosa did not take his eyes from the light. "We shall see..."

The white light shrunk gradually to a brilliant swirling sphere of blues and golds. The screams faded and died.

No one spoke. No clash of battle sounded. The sphere rose, then broke the surface. Within were Zee and Jessup, ethereal, barely seen, and completely still. Blue electricity crackled over Jessup shell, arcing between the wicked spines, many of which were broken.

The yellow and blue of the sphere emanated from their very center. When they opened their eyes, cerulean light blazed brighter than the sphere itself.

Their minds melded completely, Zee and Jessup had no need to speak. None of their own could be hurt, but hold nothing back.

Their awareness was heightened far beyond normal senses. In their mind's eye was every rider, every crew member on the ships, and every beast. It was like the commandants had taught them, but each image was brighter, clearer, sharp silhouettes of gold, red, and grayish light of unbonded pairs. And they could see them all. Intuitively, their perception absolute, there was no question as to which were friend and which were foe. They focused on the enemy sorcerer pair most of all, the brightest scarlet in their three hundred sixty degree view.

Power cycled between them, through them, of them, their sparked core now bloated beyond recognition and spinning wildly. They turned their eyes to the sorcerers high above, and roared.

The Wraith sorcerers reared back, flashing red to Streak away.

They weren't fast enough. Nothing could outrun lightning.

A pillar of electricity blasted straight up from Jessup's shell to the undead dragon beast. Their sorcerers' red shield flared. The storm clouds answered, sending another pillar to strike them from above. Night became brighter than day. The red shield failed and they were engulfed in a sphere of crackling, sparking power. They screamed.

Bolts of lightning shot from the sphere to strike the generals' escorts. Shield Abilities shattered, shields melted, and they fried.

Zee and Jessup roared louder. Power pulsed from them up through the pillar of lightning, through the sorcerers, to the clouds. A barrage of lightning bolts erupted from the storm by the hundreds, seeking out and striking the enemy.

How long their attack went on, Zee and Jessup didn't know. Finally it blinked out. Thunder pounded through the atmosphere.

Zee slumped back against Jessup's shell. The pain of his injuries returned, but more remote and distant. Jessup's arms squirmed sluggishly beneath him, barely able to keep them above the surface. Steam rose from them and the sea boiled around them.

Zee squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them his vision had ceased to swim. Wraith beasts and riders fell from the sky by the hundreds, spinning, smoking, burning. Enemy ships blazed, splintered, sinking.

The great fell dragon and rider spiraled afire down toward the sea. Scarlet embers of light gathered to them out of the air around them as they fell. They flared with red light. The dragon thrust out its wings, halting their freefall. It swooped upward, where it hovered, nearly unable to

stay in the air. The sorcerer rider surveyed the ruined Wraith forces from where he sat slumped forward in his ruined saddle, holding his chest, then he turned his gaze upon Zee and Jessup. The crimson fire had dimmed in his eyes, but his glare of hatred was unmistakable.

The rider drove his heels into the dragon. It flapped away at a limping pace. In its claws, it still gripped the arm it had severed from Jessup. Dragon Corps pairs shook themselves out of their astonishment and pursued.

The dark wall of fog in the distance swirled to a black pit, the vortex the Wraiths had entered through opening once more. In its depths were burning red eyes, gazing through. Two smaller eyes above, two below, enormous, far larger than the those of the Wraith sorcerer dragon. To Zee, it felt like they were looking right at him and Jessup. His soul quaked. A great toothy maw opened below the eyes, large enough to swallow a ship, a gigantic furnace of crimson fire burning within.

The sorcerer general and undead dragon flew faster until they became a red smear, leaving any pursuers far behind. They shot straight into the hole in the fog and disappeared past the floating embodiments of horror. The gigantic beast's mouth closed, the vortex shut, and the mountainous range of fog evaporated.

Above, the storm dissolved, leaving a clear night sky.

As far as Zee could tell, none of the king's forces or ships had been effected by their attack. He peered into their core. It was at less than five percent of what it had been when they left fully forged for the mission, but brighter and denser, perfectly round, its surface so smooth it gleamed. It also spun faster. It looked... perfect. And their bond felt stronger than ever.

Their crucible, however, was another story. It had taken everything they had to contain the power that had poured into their core from the pill. What kind of power it had been, they had no idea. White, hot, and blinding. The pain had been excruciating. Somehow they'd kept their crucible from rupturing, but its wall was stretched far beyond where it had been, wavy, thin, and weak. It even hurt.

Jessup's faint voice came to him. "*Did we do it?*"

Barely able to hang onto consciousness, Zee replied, "*We did it.*"

Jessup's consciousness faded and they began to sink. Zee could barely keep his eyes open and his vision was blurring once more, but he made out Wanchoo approaching upon Venkatarama; the commandants, King Phan and Norrogaul on a Platform beside them. All with

scorched and dented armor and visible injuries, but alive. All three were shouting orders, rallying dragon knights and magickers to them, sounding muted and far away.

As they sunk below the waves, Zee heard the clicks and squeaks of krisdolphins. He repeated, "*We did it,*" and succumbed to oblivion.

Chapter 56

Zee grit his teeth as he strode along a lower hall of the ship, following Dame Toomsil and Tem. He kept his head up and back straight, but the pain of his injuries still lingered. Zee felt bad thinking it, but he was glad of the slower pace set by Tem due to the splint on his leg. Dame Toomsil had her arm in a sling. Both had suffered from broken bones in the battle, now two days past. Magickers had sped their healing tremendously. In another few days they would lose the splint and sling altogether.

Zee had been injured worse than he'd thought, suffering from burns, a broken clavicle, stab wounds, and internal bruising. Wanchoo had aided the healing process himself, but told Zee the pill he'd taken had begun mending him and Jessup as soon as he took it. Zee hadn't been out of the cabin where they put him after Wanky had retrieved him from the sea and he'd been brought to the ship, and he'd just woken this morning. Apparently Tablert and her krisdolphins had descended into the depths to attach ropes to Jessup. It had taken five dragons to pull him up and to the ship, then a heavy winch and chain to raise him through the moon pool.

Speaking with Zee through their bond, Jessup had said he felt fine, if a little sore, and the missing part of his arm had already started growing back. He told Zee it had happened to him before. It itched, but the arm would renew itself, slightly shorter than before, but this time far more quickly because of the pill, help from the healing magickers, and their bond. Zee was headed down to see Jessup for the first time since the battle now.

They had indeed spared the forces of Tosh from the power of the Ability they'd unleashed – whatever that was – but some had been injured. Zee had been struggling with that since he'd heard. He hated the idea they'd harmed any of their own. They would be fine, but one of them had been Lord Governor Jal Briggs, the others a few of his men. Zee wasn't particularly fond of the man, but he *was* Tem's father.

Aureosa and Vandalia had mused that the ability Zee and Jessup had used was at least a high level Red Titan Class Ability due to the amount of widespread damage it could do, most likely Black Titan Class. They wouldn't be able to do it again until they advanced greatly, if then. Not without the pill, anyway, and Wanchoo had said that was the only one. It was, in fact, an artefact called the Pearl, brought from the citadel vault. None had ever been able to take it, its aura causing them such discomfort they hadn't the strength. Not even Slan hai Drogo and

Mogon. Yet, it had been drawn to Zee and Jessup, and they to it. What that meant, Wanchoo didn't know, but he and Rama had expressed their amazement at his and Jessup's reaction to the pill, and what he and Jessup had accomplished.

Wanchoo had said, "Most surprising is that you lived through it, and didn't kill us all." He'd warned Zee there was a chance their crucible could be permanently damaged, but if it had ruptured their bond would be broken, which it wasn't. He wouldn't know the true extent of the damage until Zee and Jessup were together and revealed their core to him.

They descended the final flight of steps to the expansive bottom deck. Tem and Dame Toomsil stepped to either side of the door at the bottom and waited for Zee to enter, which confused him. His sight line cleared the top of the doorway and he slowed.

There must have been much nicer rooms on the ship for the king to work, but he sat at the long table facing the door, writing with a quill. Mingling before him were the highest ranking officers of the Navy fleet and the Dragon Corps, including their dragons. Beyond that, it looked like every pair that had come on the mission were crowded onto the deck.

Among them were the commandants and deans of magicks. Aureosa's shoulder was bandaged, and he wore a sling, but he looked hail and hearty otherwise. Off to the side, in a discussion with Tablert and several Navy officers, sat Jessup.

Jessup sensed Zee's approach and grinned his big rubbery grin. Zee grinned as well and was about to go to his friend when Vandalia shouted, "Attention!"

Wherever they stood, those gathered turn toward to where Zee had entered, straightened to attention, and as one, saluted. Zee looked behind him, thinking someone important must have followed them down the stairs. To his surprise, no one was there, and Tem and Dame Toomsil were saluting as well.

Saluting him.

Dame Toomsil gave him a tiny nod. Dumbstruck, he turned back to the group.

The king stood, clasping his hands behind his back. "This is for you, Mr. Tarrow, and your faithful beast, Mr. Jessup."

Jessup looked as stunned as Zee was.

"Come," said the king, waving a hand. In the moment it took for Zee to find his legs, the king added, "And Mr. Jessup."

Vandalia shouted, "As you were!"

All moved out of their way as Zee approached the table and Jessup shuffled up on his arms, towering over everyone. Zee passed Lord Governor Brigg's, who didn't look quite as pleased with him as the others.

The king sat as Zee arrived and continued writing. Just as Zee was about to go to one knee, the king raised a finger without looking up. "Don't kneel."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Zee replied, his voice cracking. Silence followed, a very awkward one for Zee, as the king continued writing.

Prince Talog came around from behind the table in a wheelchair, pushed by an attendant. He still looked gaunt, but the color of his skin was better and the dark circles under his eyes had lightened. He reached out and shook Zee's hand – with his left, since his right had been removed by his kidnappers, the stump held in his lap, wrapped with clean bandages. "I owe you my life, Mr. Tarrow," a regal nod to the kraken, "Mr. Jessup. I shall not forget it."

"Nor shall I," the prince's dragon said from behind the table. "Thank you, from the bottom of my dragon's heart."

Zee's head felt like it was filled with alioishus goo, but he finally put the words together to speak. "My pleasure, Your Highness, Sir. Just doing my duty."

The prince smiled. "For such a young man, a civilian, a hullscrubber, even, from a remote village at the far end of the island, it was far more than that."

"My sentiments exactly," said the king, setting down his quill. Vice Vizier Davis had Ashura affixed the royal seal to the document and powdered it. Only then did the King mon lin Phan look up at Zee. "You will long be held as a hero in the hearts and minds of all here, but no one else must know of what has transpired on this mission, not even of the mission itself. Not the kidnapping of the prince, the mysterious enemy who nearly defeated us, nor the role you and Mr. Jessup played in overcoming them. Do you understand?"

Together, Zee and Jessup said, "We understand, Your Majesty."

He took the scroll from Ashura, who had rolled it and tied it with a ribbon. "At the academy, you will simply be cadets like any other."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Zee replied. "I... Pardon me?"

"By royal decree, you and Mr. Jessup are hereby admitted to Triumph's Citadel Academy." He slapped the scroll into the waiting hand of Commandant Aureosa. "Effective immediately."

EPILOGUES

Zee sat upon one of Jessup's arms at the rail of the HMS Dragon's Rage, gazing out over the passing sea. The sun warmed their faces and aching bodies, the breeze refreshingly cool. It was the first time they'd seen the sun in weeks, it having been blocked by the Shroud of fog conjured by the magickers for the trip to rendezvous with the Wraiths. Zee shuddered at the thought of them.

Of the twenty ships of the Navy task force, only twelve remained sailable. Three were being towed. Five had been sunk by the enemy. Zee and Jessup hadn't been told how many Dragon Corps rider and dragon pairs had been lost. Zee didn't think he wanted to know. Having known the SHEELS and lost three of them had been bad enough.

"We did it, Zee," said Jessup. "We're going to the academy." He always knew Zee's mood and just the right thing to say.

Zee still couldn't believe it. Part of him almost wouldn't allow him too. It had always been a crazy dream. Still, it was one he'd never given up on.

He grinned, the warmth of Jessup's good cheer and the sunshine making it impossible not to. "We still have to pass Basic Combat Training."

Jessup made a flatulent noise with his big rubbery lips, which made Zee chuckle. "Piece of fishcake. We are Zee and Jessup. We are *sorcerers*."

"A sorcerer type pair..." Zee shook his head. "Can you believe it?"

Zee was jostled by Jessup's shrug. "Why not?"

"There haven't been any sorcerer types since Drogo and Mogon, not in all the allied kingdoms and beyond, as far as anyone knows. And they'd been the first in a century before that."

"So?"

Zee shook with laughter, but it faded. "The Wraith's have a sorcerer pair. They're necromancers too. Using whatever that horrid red power is." He shuddered again, remembering the dreadful feel of it, the pain inflicted upon them, the utter violation of the sorcerers speaking in their minds.

"We beat them once. We will beat them again."

"We almost died."

“Almost dead is not dead.”

Zee chuckled again, shaking his head. “You are the most confident beast or person I have ever met.”

“I am a kraken.”

“Yes, you are, my friend.”

“Best friend Jessup.”

“Best friend Zee.” Jessup held him closer, the warmth of their bond heartening them both.

Zee sat up with a thought. “Sorcerers!”

“We said that.”

“I know, but...” He retrieved the murfolk book from their Keep.

“Oh...” Jessup uttered, realizing what Zee meant.

Zee also pulled out a bucket of seawater he’d taken to storing there as well. It had no cover, but no matter what they did, it never spilled a drop while in their Keep. He set it on Jessup’s arm, retrieved the book, and dunked it. This time when he placed his palm on the cover it throbbed with blue light three times, then glowed brightly for several seconds before fading.

Jessup said, “That’s different.”

Zee flipped pages eagerly. The chapters they’d gone through already were unchanged until he came to the page where the bumpy circle with the jagged line angling down through it had appeared centered on the kraken’s shell above its face.

Zee pointed at it, brow knitted. “Remember what the Wraith general called you?”

“Um... a Thunder Kraken.”

“I think that’s what this symbol means.”

“Because of the storms and lightning Abilities?”

“I guess. I wonder what other kinds of krakens there are.”

“Or were.” A slight sadness drifted to Zee through the bond.

“I told you, if there are any, we’ll find them. If there’s one, there have to be more.”

“I believe you.”

“You’d better,” Zee jested. Jessup’s sadness retreated.

There had been another symbol below the kraken and murman, but now it had changed as well. It was the same as the one he’d seen on the type badge on the statue of Drogo and Mogon.

“Jessup, this means sorcerer type. The book knows! And, this is crazy, but it’s the same as what the Dragon Corps uses.”

“Murfolk and krakens use the same symbol as humans and dragons? How?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to show this to Deans Wanchoo and Venkatarama.” He flipped pages to find more chapters had been revealed, with diagrams of more Abilities.

Together, both of them emitted an “Oooh…” of excitement and wonder.

Zee said, “We won’t be able to do anything about any of this until we heal our crucible, and Dean Wanchoo ordered us to rest for a few days. No training. No forging. No sparking our core.

“That never stopped us before.”

A sly smile crept over Zee’s lips. “No, it didn’t.” He put the book and bucket away, then closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

Jessup joined him. “Time to forge.”

Jondon dil Rolio threw one log of a leg over the bench and sat with his dinner tray piled high next to Chirt sim Nabbit and across from Mehmet can Yasso. As Sallison anh Batcu approached the table, a Courier Knight came striding through the outdoor basic training chow area, calling her name.

Conflicted emotions flickered over her features before she answered. “Here, Sir!”

She set down her tray as the knight marched over and handed her a letter. “Personal and confidential. Eyes only.” He spun and marched away.

Jondon raised his eyebrows. “Hand delivered?”

Chirt said, “Aren’t we special.”

Sallison stared at the letter, her expression unreadable. “It’s from my father.” She strode toward the barracks tent and disappeared around its corner.

The three recruits shared a look of concern, then waited as long as they could.

Chirt peeked around the tent, then Mehmet above her, then Jondon, well above them both.

Standing alone, facing away from them, Sallison gazed down at the later.

“Sorry to pry,” Mehmet said timidly, “but are you all right, Sallison? You’ve been very quiet lately.”

“Sullen,” said Chirt, not so timidly. “Brooding, even.”

Jondon said, “We’re worried about you.” Sallison gave no answer, then they saw that her hands were trembling and her shoulders were shaking. They stepped closer.

Jondon asked softly. “Is it bad news?”

“No, it’s good news.” She turned and looked up, beaming through happy tears. “Very good news.” She gazed back at the letter. “Strange, but...”

She grinned back up and threw her arms around Jondon’s prodigious girth. He gaped in surprise. Sallison didn’t hug. Ever.

She released him, then grabbed Mehmet and squeezed, making him grunt. Chirt backed away, eyes wide, but there was no escape. Sallison snatched her off her feet. Chirt squeaked.

Sallison set Chirt down, then wiped the tears from her eyes as she grinned at them all. “Everything’s great. Don’t you worry about me.”

They stared at her as she strode away, lighter in the step than she’d been in weeks.

THE END of Book 1