

Kraken Rider Z 1

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## Chapter 13

Zee sat on the edge of a table in the cramped infirmary, absent-mindedly feeling the rash-free skin of his forearm and gazing at his fingers where the webbing had been. The surgeon applied salve to his scratches, bandages to his deeper wounds, but Zee hardly noticed. It was like it was happening to someone else. He barely felt the prods and pokes as the surgeon inspected his skin, hands, and feet.

He'd lost his home, his family, and his best friend. The sense of it all was sinking in fast. The emptiness at the thought of never seeing his ma and da again. Or Jessup. The warmth in his chest and heat of the gray patch at Jessup's proximity was cooling. To add to his misery, his dragon-tooth necklace was gone. And he could breathe underwater. Or had he dreamed that?

The fear for the future hadn't yet begun.

"What's this then?" The first mate, Ms. Tammet, held Zee's pants in one hand, the lung-spritzer in the other.

"It's for my breathing." It sounded to Zee like someone else was answering. "I have a condition."

The surgeon took the old perfume decanter. "Do you know what's in it?"

"No, Sir. My ma makes it."

The surgeon sprayed it in front of his face and wafted the mist to his nose. "Hmm..." He unscrewed the top, dabbed some of the liquid onto his finger, tasted it. After a moment of deliberation, he tipped a few drops on his tongue and slished it around. "Sea water, if I'm not mistaken. Strained for impurities, I'd guess, and with a hint of lyptus oil." He screwed the lid back on and set the spritzer down.

The surgeon felt Zee's ribs and placed a stethoscope on his chest. "Breathe in. Deeply, please."

Zee did, and marveled once again at how easy it was.

"And out. Keep breathing."

After several breaths, the surgeon moving his stethoscope to different areas of Zee's chest and back, he pulled the stethoscope from his ears. "The sound is different from what I'm used to hearing, but quite clear. Your ribs seem to be more flexible than in human physicality as well." Before Zee could respond, the surgeon continued. "This rash you had, do you know its cause?"

"No, sir."

"And you've always had it?"

"Yes, sir. My ma made an ointment that helped the itch and redness, but it never went away."

"Until now."

Zee brushed the rash-free skin of his belly with his fingertips. "Yeah."

Zee didn't flinch as the surgeon traced the roundish patch of rough gray skin on his chest with a long, thick finger. Zee noticed the scars on the man's hands, then the deep creases on his weathered face and crows feet at the corners of his eyes. He stared at the surgeon's one milky eye with a scar below that cut up through his bushy eyebrow above. He'd be a scary-looking pirate of a man if it weren't for the crystal-clear inquisitiveness and deep thoughtfulness of his good eye.

"And this?" the surgeon asked, regarding the gray patch.

"I don't know what that is, Sir. I haven't had it long."

The surgeon gently scraped the tough gray area with a fingernail, then pinched and poked it softly. "It's not scale or the lepsy. I'd say it's safe, though we'll keep an eye on it."

The first mate scrutinized the patch skeptically.

Zee looked directly at the surgeon. "What happened to me in the water, Sir? Is there something wrong with me?"

The surgeon watched him a moment. "No, lad, your just different from most people, is all."

Zee recalled what the surgeon said when he saw him lifted from the bay. "What's a murfolk?"

The surgeon's good eye seemed to sparkle. "Something rare and wonderful, lad. Rare and wonderful indeed." His face became grave. "Though in this day and age, it does not come without a cost."

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The surgeon lead Zee along a short hall, his cane tapping on the floor. The first mate trailed behind them. Sailors pressed against the wall, staring at Zee, some of them scowling. The surgeon opened the door to his quarters.

The first mate said, “I have my orders, Doctor. The gilly is to be oriented and fitted for weights straightaway.”

The surgeon stared down at her. Tammet was not a small woman, but the surgeon struck an imposing figure when he straightened on his crippled leg and squared his shoulders. “Perhaps the next time you come to me with an affliction from one of your visits to a less than reputable establishment at port, Ms. Tammet, I may find there is no remedy other than to burn it out with a hot iron.”

Tammet paled. “Just... don’t be long, then.”

The surgeon ushered Zee through the door and closed it behind him.

The quarters were not large, but Zee’s mouth hung open at the collection of items that packed shelves on every inch of the walls. Rocks and fossils, creatures floating in bottles of liquid, feathers, skulls of strange creatures, but mostly books.

Zee touched book covers, marveling at the embossing and strange symbols. He jumped and pulled his hand back as the doctor spoke.

“Do you like books, Zee Tarrow?”

“I might, Sir, but I don’t know how to read.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes sir. My folks neither.” Pain stabbed at his heart. Would he ever see them again?

“First of all,” said the doctor, moving to half-sit on the edge of a small desk piled with books and scattered with trinkets, paper, and quills. “My name is Drall tak Aenig. You are to call me Dr. Aenig.”

“Yes, Sir. I mean, Dr. Aenig, Sir.”

Zee caught sight of a globe attached to a stand. He approached slowly, hand reaching as if on its own. He stopped himself and looked to the doctor.

“Go ahead, it won’t bite.”

Zee wiped his fingers on the rough wool of the ill-fitting pants he’d been given from the ship’s stores, then turned the globe gently. The entire world of Zhera, right there at his fingertips. Zee knew Zhera was almost entirely ocean, but to see it like that... The island kingdoms that scattered its surface looked insignificant in comparison to the vast blue of the sea.

The doctor stopped the globe and pointed to one of the little patches of land. "This is Tosh." He moved a fingernail along the writing on the area of brown and green. "That's what this word says."

Zee leaned closer. "Tosh."

"And here," the doctor pointed with a quill from his desk, "is mon Tontuga, where we are right now."

Zee tilted his head in amazement. The world suddenly seemed so very huge and so very small, both at the same time.

Dr. Aenig pulled a folding canvas stool from a peg on the wall and set it up in front of his desk. He patted the seat, pulled a book from the shelves, and squeezed around to the other side. While Zee sat, the doctor eased into his chair with a groan, stretching his leg out beneath the desk.

Aenig tapped the cover of the book. Zee noticed stains of red on the frayed and graying edge of the cuff that was buttoned snugly to the man's wrist. Zee wondered why the doctor hadn't rolled up his sleeves to examine him.

"This is the only text I have that makes any mention of murfolk, the people of the sea. Even in all my travels, I have learned very little about them, though I've met a few on other ships. They aren't a talkative lot, though they can hardly be blamed for that."

"Why don't they like to talk?" Zee asks.

The doctor frowned and breathed a sigh through his nose. "Murfolk are exceedingly rare. For the longest time they were considered a myth. Then, twenty years or so ago, one was found wandering on a beach in a daze. Over the years since, more were discovered rolling in the surf, barely alive, or found hiding among the population in remote coastal villages. All were young, sometimes only infants, and had washed up on shore after a recent storm."

Zee's mind reeled. "You mean... is that what happened to me?"

"Most likely, yes."

"Then... Ma and Da, aren't my ma and da?"

"They absolutely are, in spirit, which is the only way that truly matters."

That comforted Zee in a way, but, "Where did I come from?"

Aenig spread his hands. "No one knows. Beneath the sea. Somewhere."

Zee sat stunned and silent.

“But now the mystery of your rash and breathing condition is solved. The murfolk can live on land, breathe the air, and pass entirely as human, except every so often they must return to the sea, even if briefly. It was the sea that cured you, Zee. Your true home.”

Tears formed in Zee’s eyes. “But... Ma...”

“I’m assuming your mother knew, and she’s obviously a skilled healer. She figured out how to soothe your skin and ease your breathing problems without having to resort to submerging you in the ocean, which would have revealed your true form. She did that to protect you, Zee. So did your father.”

“So people wouldn’t know what I was?”

“And, I would guess, so you didn’t either. So you wouldn’t feel different, out of place, any more than you already did, perhaps. I’m sure they would have told you eventually, but you’re still quite young.”

“I’m seven.”

“Well, yes...”

“Is it a bad thing to be a murfolk?”

“No, but it comes with a heavy price.” Dr. Aenig considered before continuing. “By law, all murfolk are subject to seizure and conscription into service on ships of the realm. The youngest will do the work of a ship’s boy or girl, but all are tasked with the work for which they are best suited. Difficult and dangerous work.”

Zee’s eyes darted about as he thought on that, then back to the surgeon. “In the water?”

“Deep sea retrieval, crew rescue, underwater light repair, and scrubbing the hull.”

“Oh... For how long, sir?”

The surgeon’s features twisted uncomfortably at having to deliver the news. “It is... a lifetime service, lad.”

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“Shut yer hole, gilly-boy!”

Zee flinched as a sailor jabbed his canvas hammock with a broom handle. He didn’t know which sailor it was, and he didn’t care. Curled up high in one corner of the berth, he rubbed his little fists in his eyes, trying not to cry. Or at least to cry more softly.

It was all too much to take in. Far too much. What he was. What he was to become. Everything he knew and loved was gone. Ma and Da, the farm, Midge, maybe even his dreams

of being a dragon rider. All gone. And, somehow, the worst of all was losing Jessup. An indescribable loss, in body and spirit.

Zee placed a hand on the gray patch, which was now cool to the touch. The sense in his gut of the little creature had cooled as well, leaving a chilling void.

“*Jessup?*”

No answer.

Zee held in a sob. Would he ever see his friend again? Would he ever *have* a friend again?

He fingered the chains coiled and locked around his wrists, rubbed a heel at the ones on his ankles, and shifted in his hammock in an attempt to find a more comfortable position for the chains locked at his waist. There was no more comfortable position.

“Even a gilly can’t swim long with that much weight, so don’t even try it, boy,” the ship’s carpenter, Loris, who was also the blacksmith, had told him. “You’ll sink to the bottom and something will make a meal of you.” Just the thought of being alone and lost in the open sea terrified Zee, so he wasn’t sure why they bothered.

All the lamps in the berth but one were extinguished. Zee furrowed his brow in the darkness. When he’d had lunch with Dame Toomsil she’d said sometimes people who normally wouldn’t have a chance do get into Triumph’s Citadel were accepted. Under special circumstances, and if they proved themselves worthy. Zee figured he was definitely under special circumstances, and decided then and there, even with all that had happened to him, that *would* happen for him. He’d cling to his dream of being a dragon rider and never let go. He would prove himself worthy, no matter what.

“You never know what the fates might have in store for you,” his Da would say. “What seems bad can swap to the good. What seems good can swap out to bad. Personally, I think it’s kinda up to us.”

Zee held on to that with all he could, let the heat of it grow and warm him and give him strength. Postune knew he needed something. He’d work hard, make himself stronger, and grow bigger. Even under these circumstances, if it was possible to make himself worthy, he was going to do it, or die trying.

To the soft movement of the ship, creaking of lines, muffled sounds of the night shift above, and snores of sleeping sailors, Zee wept silently until he could cry no more, and finally drifted off to sleep.

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*“Swimmy, swimmy, in the sea.  
Swimmy, swimmy, and be free.  
Just be careful, watch the deep.  
Keep eyes open, safety keep.”*

The silver-blue light of Zhera’s moons faded as Jessup swam deeper, singing the little song Zee had made up just in case Jessup ever had to go into the sea. He kept close to the bottom, eyes swiveling in vigilance, acclimating himself to the sounds of the ocean. Looking, listening, feeling out for danger.

A sheel circled in from the darkness. Jessup squeaked, blew out a cloud of dark blue ink and dove into a narrow canyon in the coral. He kept going, winding his way through and swimming deeper.

*“Swimmy, swimmy, and survive.  
Swimmy, swimmy, stay alive.”*

Jessup added his own lines to the song.

*“To see Zee again.  
To see best friend...”*

## PART 2

### Chapter 14

#### Ten Years Later

*There can be no doubt the boy has suffered, working the worst jobs on the ship, suffering harsh treatment, being harassed, and, perhaps worse, simply ignored. The most difficult and dangerous of his assigned tasks is scrubbing the hull while at sea. Each time he goes down there is a chance he won't return, at least not whole and alive. And yet, he has, every time.*

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Zee stood at the rail in his swim trunks, gazing over the sea while Loris checked the heavy chains what wrapped his wrists, waist, and ankles, then prepared a nearby capstan that was wound with cable.

The HMT Krakenfish had been approaching Tosh from the north before dropping anchor. The island was too long for Zee to see its full expanse, but his gaze was locked on the fading landmass to the east. At the far end of the island would be the key where he'd spent his youth; the house where he'd once lived, and, he hoped, his ma and da still did. Home. Below the secluded farm would be the rocky shore where he'd found Jessup and spent the best weeks of his life. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Someone else's life. A story he'd been told. A dream. One day he would see it all and his parents again. One day.

As hard as Zee's life had become, he'd never regretted the decision to save Jessup, and knew he never would. For months he'd tried to reach out with his mind to his little friend, to ask Jessup if he was all right, and just to see if he could. Jessup never answered. Never a twitch did Zee feel in the patch on his chest, which had grown very little over the years, and the feeling of Jessup's presence had chilled to a cold hollow in Zee's heart. A hollow that persisted to this day.

One of the dragons spoke gruffly to a squire who was shining armor on the high perch deck at the back of the ship. For a moment Zee expected to see Dame Toomsil with her dragon, Peloquin, and their squire, Temothy jal Briggs. But, no. Representatives of Triumph's Citadel Academy had come to announce Tem's acceptance seven years ago, when Tem had completed his three year squireship and turned seventeen, the requisite age for first year cadets, and taken



him to begin his training. Dame Toomsil had no more squires after that, but she had been transferred away to another ship several years ago.

Zee watched the dragon criticizing the squire's work. How it moved. The muscles rippling beneath its scales. The twitch of its mighty wings. The regal curve of its neck. Though he saw dragons every day now, and they would have little to do with him, he'd never lost his fascination with them, nor his desire to ride one, and to be a knight of the realm.

Corl barked orders to the crew, who were busy scrubbing the decks, polishing the rails and brass fittings, and touching up paint. In two days time academy representatives would be arriving again, this time for the squire who was shining armor above, Derlick don Donnicky, who had reached the end of his three year squireship. The captain wanted the ship in pristine condition.

Derlick's eyes met Zee's and they shared in a nod. Of all the people on the ship, Derlick had been the most decent to Zee since Dame Toomsil had left, other than Dr. Aenig. They were the same age, would converse about dragons and squireship, and sometimes spar together down in the hold when no one else was around. He was the closest thing Zee had to an actual friend and colleague. Zee was certain Derlick would be accepted by the academy, and wished him well.

Loris clipped a cable to the chain at Zee's waist then tapped his shoulder, letting him know the rig was ready. Zee climbed to balance easily on the rail, breathed in deeply, then blew it out and held his breath, ready to suck in salty water as soon as he hit the waves. He took one more look at the island kingdom in the distance, then dove gracefully into the sea, producing nary a splash as he slipped beneath the waves.

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*Mr. Tarrow remains short for his age, and slim, but what muscle he has is hard as iron, forged through a decade of hard labor forced upon him by cruel masters, and arduous training he forced upon himself in the wee bells of the night. The scars from an affliction of his youth are now layered beneath many others. Some from terrible wounds inflicted by teeth of creatures of the sea while scrubbing the hull and sent deep on retrieval dives, others caused by accidents, and more from axe and dagger of marauders who nearly took the ship. The most wicked, however, were inflicted by the quartermaster's whip, for a petty crime I am certain Mr. Tarrow did not commit.*

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Zee jabbed at the base of the barnacles with his chisel, cracking them away from the hull. Seawater flowed easily through his mouth and nostrils, out through the gills on his neck and along his sides as his ribcage rhythmically expanded and contracted. Breathing in the ocean was more natural for him now than breathing air had ever been.

He rolled his shoulders to work out the ache, reached hands marred from barnacle shards and bites from fish into the pouch attached to the coil of chain at his waist, and retrieved his scraper. Moving the tool forward and back, pressing hard, he worked to clear the debris from the area he'd chiseled. When he was finished with the scraper he'd use a holystone, either hard pumice or harder sandstone, depending on how tenacious the remnants were, to scrub the hull smooth.

It was grueling work, but Zee had never had a problem with hard work. "If a job has to be done, best to get it done and do it right," his Da used to say. "Especially if you ain't got a choice." After all this time, the words of his father still came to him often, and he cherished them.

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*When Zee was barely nine years old, our carpenter, Mr. Loris, was thrown overboard in a fierce storm on a darkest of nights. While Loris sank, tangled in line, dazed and being dragged down by his tool belt, the crew shrieked and fumbled for lifebuoys and poles. All but Zee Tarrow, who without prompting clipped a line to his waist and dove after the carpenter, a man who had been most cruel to our young murman, swam deep, then tugged the line to be hauled in.*

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A slim cooda dashed after a shining saltperch. In an instant, Zee had his stinger out of its loop on his belt of chains and jabbed the attacking predator. Blue light sparked from the stinger, the fish thrashed and twitched, then was still. He watched it sink in the water. As expected, a larger fish shot in and gobbled it up.

The curious saltperch circled closer. Quick as a striking sheel, Zee snatched it with his hand, then bit it behind the head to cease its struggles. He returned the stinger to his belt and continued chipping away at barnacles while finishing his fishy snack. Discovering his ability to catch small fish and stomach eating them raw had helped keep him healthy in spite of the meager meals provided him on the ship. Dr. Aenig also snuck him extra food from the kitchen when he could.

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*I was able to revive Mr. Loris, alone in the infirmary and in my own way, of which all on the ship remain ignorant.*

*Earlier this year, another crew member was caught high in the rigging of a broken spar with a line around her neck. Even with the heavy chains Zee is made to wear at all times, he was first up the ratlines to free her. As far as I know, neither of them thanked the boy, though they no longer chided him, and more than once their cold glares or a well placed fist silenced the jeers of their mates.*

*Mr. Tarrow has also seen the ship boarded by pirates of the most heinous nature, and engaged in the bloody battle that ensued. He not only survived, he fought alongside his crewmates with honor, aplomb, and a cold fury that surprised us all.*

*Through it all, the boy's spirit has remained indomitable. He has never lost his humble and generous nature or his sense of wonder, and his lifelong dream to be a rider burns as bright as ever.*

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Zee paused, listening in the water while peering into the haze at the perimeter at the edge of his vision and scanning the depths. His hearing was better here, and his eyesight sharp, especially in the dark, both in and out of the sea. With the nictitating lenses he could raise over his eyes, he didn't even have to blink. He'd also seemed to develop a heightened sense of impending danger. He was rarely surprised by a predator, large or small, and his terror of the sea had long since been replaced with a healthy vigilance.

The ocean brightened around him and he looked to the shoal they'd anchored near. Multi-colored fishes flitted amongst bright corals in sunlight that beamed from between clouds high above. A sea turtle flapped calmly by. With all the terrors held by the sea, and Zee had seen plenty, there was beauty here as well.

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*He still has his secrets, but I feel I have come to know Mr. Tarrow well. His character, and his will. The frightened boy that came to us, the weak, sickly, illiterate child has grown into a powerful, skilled, and confident young man who knows only the wisest kind of fear.*

*For my small part, in the periods of time Zee could spare from his duties, I have taught him to read, basic maths, natural science, history, and geography. Since his arrival, I have devoted myself to learning all I can about murfolk, going ashore at every port to seek out books and ask*

*questions of scholars, and passing what I learned on to Zee. The records are scarce and the accumulated knowledge limited mostly to legend and speculation, but one theme persists. All the stories about the murfolk also involve tales of krakens, the ancient terrors of the sea.*

*Now I know why...*

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Zee finished scrubbing as far as he could reach from his current position. He tapped three times on the cable with the chisel. On deck, the carpenter or another sailor who had taken his place pulled Zee starboard three feet, where he began work again.

The cable formed a loop that stretched around the ship, passing through pullies with cranks on capstans that were mounted to iron tracks against the railings of the ship – the same rig Zee had seen the captain and Mr. Corl use to keel haul a crew member who had been caught stealing from the captain’s quarters. Zee kept the hull so smooth it had taken four times under for the man to die. Zee had been horrified, but it was only one of many atrocities and violent deaths he’d seen in his years aboard the HMT Krakenfish.

The cable pulled again, and kept pulling. Zee hadn’t tapped it, but he stuffed his tools in his pouch and gripped the cable, preparing to be drawn to the side of the ship and lifted back to deck, though he didn’t know the reason. He was suddenly jerked to a stop.

The skin on the back of Zee’s neck tightened and the hair stood on end. Danger lurked in the sea. He spun in the water, seeking its source. When he spotted the long sleek shape approaching at speed on the side of the ship away from Tosh, and heard its terrible shriek, it wasn’t what he’d expected. It was worse.

Seadragons weren’t related to dragons, he’d been told. Rarer than other sea serpents, and larger, they had heads similar to a dragon’s and bodies like a snake, with four short winglike fins. They were brutal and vicious beasts, with no more brains than a sheel, twice the hunger, and none of the caution.

Zee had seen one once before. He’d even had a hand in slaying it with a harpoon cannon. That time, however, he’d been on deck and the beast had been nowhere near the size of the shrieking terror that was heading straight for the ship.

## Chapter 15

Dr. Aenig whipped around at the shrill whistle of the lookout.

“Seadragon!” the sailor high on the main mast cried, pointing north. Another rang the quarterdeck bell in alarm. Sailors poured up from below deck.

Captain Ion Bomba stepped out holding a chicken leg like a club. He flung it into the sea, ripped off his bib, wiped his greasy hands on the jacket of his uniform, and snatched a spyglass from one of the watch.

The seadragon’s undulating body humped through the waves, approaching fast. It was easily as long as the ship itself.

“To the cannons!” the captain ordered.

Sailors scrambled to positions and dragons were saddled and harnessed, all with swift and practiced efficiency.

“Bring Mr. Tarrow up!” Dr. Aenig shouted. The carpenter and another sailor heaved at the crank on the cable rig.

With a roar, the dragons took to the air. The first of the cannons, including a swivel cannon on the main deck, fired and missed. The dragons dove toward the threat, a Royal Crimson spouting flame, but the serpent submerged with a splash from its whipping tail.

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Beneath the surface, the seadragon’s eyes gleamed upon Zee as it barreled toward him. Zee steeled himself, stinger in one hand, cable held in the other. Attached to the cable as we was, he had nowhere to flee, and nowhere to hide. He’d have to save himself in the open water, and alone.

Mouth full of sword-like teeth gaping and forked tongue reaching, the serpent lunged. Zee jerked himself up against the hull to avoid the snapping jaws, but a horn on the serpent’s head slashed his thigh and he was slammed him into the hull. The creature’s speeding body pummeled him against the hull as it rushed passed. The water was blasted from Zee’s lungs and his skull pounded against the hard wood.

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Aenig steadied himself against the sudden lurching of the ship.

The captain roared to the crew. “Keep your wits about you, and your eyes peeled!”

Corl leaned over the rail, peering into the water. “Does anyone spy the beast?!”

The seadragon burst from the sea and launched itself over the rail. Corl tumbled back with a cry, barely avoiding the creature’s jaws. Its long thrashing body sent sailors and barrels flying as it slithered fast across the deck, shrieking as it went.

Loris leapt out of the way, but the other sailor at the cable rig wasn’t so lucky. The serpent crushed him in its jaws, taking the capstan with it and snapping the cable. It crashed through the rail and dove into the sea.

Aenig spied the cable breaking loose, dropped his cane and dove the best he could with his lame leg. He scrambled to grab the cable, cursing as it eluded his grasp.

A sailor swung his axe at the length of the beast as its body scraped along the deck, but his blade barely scratched the monster’s scales. Its tail slithered through the broken rail and the monster was gone.

Aenig cried out as the frayed end of the cable slipped through his fingers and slid over the rail.

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Zee shook his head to clear it. It did nothing to reduce the throbbing of deep bruises all over his body and only increased the pain that stabbed through his skull. He closed his eyes and breathed water in deep, purposeful breaths, just as he had when he was a child and suffered from his breathing affliction. The sharp jab of broken ribs caused him to gasp. He could barely move his right arm due to damage to his shoulder, and the wound from the seadragon’s horn stung terribly. Worst of all, he recognized the deep ache of internal injuries.

His eyes snapped open at the sound of a something heavy hitting the water. The seadragon plunged back into the sea at the side of the ship, spitting out the body of a sailor and the broken capstan.

Zee stared at the end of the shredded cable sinking slowly, then began to swing down and away from the hull. Realizing what had happened, he returned the stinger to its place on his belt of chain and grabbed the cable with both hands. Gritting through the pain, he pulled himself along it toward the opposite side of the ship where it still hung from the surface.

Hand over agonizing hand, he made his way along the hull. Then the other end of the cable came loose from above, and he began to sink.

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Riders shouted as they and their dragons caught sight of the beast. The Royal Crimson swooped closer to the surface, scorching it with fire. Most sea beasts they'd encountered would retreat upon seeing dragonfire. Not this one. The serpent shot out of the water, jaws snapping. The dragon tucked its wings and rolled, evading the attack, but received a glancing blow. It tumbled and nearly hit the waves while the serpent snapped at the dragon's wings. The dragon of the other pair, an Ice Diver, blasted the serpent with ice, turning the side of its head frosty white. The serpent shrieked and dove.

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As strong a swimmer as he was with his webbed hands and feet, Zee had no chance against the weight of the thick chains on his wrists, ankles and waist, let alone the length of cable locked to his belt. Through the water above, distorted images of the dragons searched the sea around the ship.

The serpent circled and fixated on Zee once more.

Hard as he fought, as grave as his circumstances were, his injuries and fatigue sapped his strength and his sight began to dim. Then he realized the sea itself was darkening from above. Muffled thunder rumbled through the water, followed by a distant roar.

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Dr. Aenig pushed himself up on his cane, gazing toward the east end of the island of Tosh. Black storm clouds had formed where moments before there had been none. The storm grew quickly, heat lightning flashing – and it was moving swiftly toward the ship. A great roar vibrated through the ocean, like that of a pod of whales, but also a squadron of enraged dragons. With it came a gust of wind that rocked the ship and nearly blew him off his feet.

Holding his cap to his head, Captain Ion Bomba took labored steps, leaning against the gale, to grip the rat lines where the surgeon steadied himself.

He shouted over the wind as the storm grew closer, shutting out the sun. “As if the biggest and most ill-tempered Postune-damned seadragon I’ve ever laid eyes on wasn’t enough. What is this fresh terror, surgeon?”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you there, Captain.”

“You take me for a fool, surgeon?”

“You know I do.”

Bomba scowled. “You must have a guess.”

“I do not,” the doctor lied. He did have a guess, but only a guess, and a preposterous one at that. He said no more.

Bomba grunted, preparing a coarse retort, when the storm reached them, black as night. Waves and wind rocked the ship, causing it to buck and heave. Seawater splashed over the rail. The roar came again from the deep. Closer. Louder. And lightning flashed.

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Lightning flickered on the surface above, strobing the depths in eerie luminescence, and a roar shook Zee to his bones. In a fever dream of half-consciousness, a warmth Zee hadn't felt in nearly a decade swelled in his gut, and the rough gray patch on his chest tingled. Then a voice intruded into his mind.

*“Jessup is coming, Zee. Friend is coming.”*

The voice was deeper than Zee remembered, but... *could it be?* An approaching darkness took shape at the far reaches of his vision. Large, crackling with zig-zags of blue electricity, and moving fast. “*Jessup?*”

A rushing sound in the water and the seadragon shot toward Zee from below, mouth gaping wide. The massive speeding shape collided with the serpent with a concussive whump, followed by a shriek and a roar.

Zee spun violently in the wake and became tangled in the cable as he sank. He fought to stave off the oblivion that threatened his consciousness, and the world went black.

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The ship lurched and shook as it was slammed from beneath. Drenched and in terror, the crew hung on for their lives.

Dr. Aenig swiped the brine and soaking hair from his eyes. Roars and shrieks came from below the surface, on this side of the ship, then that, then below again. Bomba cursed as he clung to the ratlines. In strikes of lightning, they caught brief glimpses of dark octopod-like arms wrapped around the sea dragon, a flash of a gray thorned shell, and thrashing that sent up great spouts of seawater.

Bomba looked on in disbelief. “Postune save us all.”

The ship was struck again, harder than before. The crew cried out. Blue light flashed in the deep. There came a monstrous keening cry – then nothing.



The lightning diminished to soft flashes high in the sky and the wind slowed, but the darkness remained.

Dr. Aenig glanced about, scanning the calming sea for any sign of the creatures, and for Zee. With a groan of creaking timbers, the ship began to tip forward.

In a flicker of heat lightning, the doctor caught sight of a thick, suckered arm slung over the forecastle. Then another writhed up over the rail next to it.

The captain saw it too. “No...”

The arms pulled and a great weight tipped the ship further. Aenig and the captain clung tighter to the rat lines and hung with feet slipping beneath them. The crew screamed, scrambling to catch hold of something, anything, some sliding on the deck toward the bow of the ship to slam into stair rails, masts, and the forecastle wall. The dragons, driven to the perch deck by the storm, dug their claws in to keep from sliding off, their knights hanging tight atop them as the back of the ship rose out of the water.

The forecastle rails splintered beneath the weight of the beast. A gray, thorned shell rose, partially seen over the forecastle deck, then a great green eye beneath a massive octopod brow glared upon them.

Bomba gaped in terror. “It can’t be...”

“It is...” Aenig replied.

Bomba screamed, “Kraken!” He waved manically at the crew. “Attack, you sea-cretins!” None of the crew were in any condition to fight. He screamed back at the perch deck. “Dragons! Repel the beast!”

The dragons hesitated, working up the courage to do battle with a monster they instinctively feared but had always been told didn’t even exist.

“Wait!” Aenig shouted.

Another arm was lifted above the bow. It uncoiled slowly, then gently deposited the body of Zee Tarrow on the deck.

A voice like the sea itself rose from an unseen mouth below the shattered rail of the bow. “Save friend. Save Zee.”

All on the ship were stunned to silence.

Aenig was the first to recover, and the only one to move. He lowered himself to the main deck and let loose of the rat lines, allowing himself to slide to the stairs at the fore.

“Surgeon!” Bomba shouted. “What in Postune’s hells do you think you’re doing?!”

The doctor ignored him, straining to raise himself on the stair banister and step awkwardly across the steps, now nearly horizontal.

He stopped, staring down the inclined deck into the eye of the beast. Of all the horrifying sights he had seen in his life, never once had he laid eyes upon a kraken. No one had. He had no doubt now – this was a kraken. Alive, on their ship. *And it knew Zee.*

That thought, and the sight of Zee, battered, unconscious and barely breathing, gave him strength, and courage. He let go of the banister, using his palms and heels to slow his sliding descent, until he lay next to Zee, staring up into the eye of the one true beast of the sea.

He swallowed, dried salt stinging his throat. “I’m a surgeon. I will help him.”

The creature’s eye narrowed as it studied him. “Promise, surgeon?”

“I swear to mighty Zepiter and great Postune, and in the name of Zhera herself, I will do everything in my power to heal him.”

After brief speculation, the beast pulled even closer. “Jessup will be watching, surgeon.” It took an effort of will for Aenig not to cringe back. The kraken began to lower itself, setting the ship to rocking.

Aenig shouted, “Wait!” The creature paused, raised up to look once more at the doctor. “Jessup. Is that your name?” There was suspicion in Jessup’s eye and he remained silent, but did not leave. “Why are you doing this?”

“Zee is best friend,” Jessup answered as if it was obvious. “Zee saved Jessup.”

Aenig watched, incredulous, as the beast lowered itself into the water. With great care, it let the bow ease up until the ship rested, rocking gently, and the kraken disappeared into the sea.

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The carpenter kicked open the door to the infirmary and rushed in with Zee’s limp body bundled in his arms. Dr. Aenig followed, the captain behind him. Corl and several mates also shoved in. A dozen crew crowded in the hall, craning for a look.

There were murmurs from the crew in the hall. Snippets of, “A real live kraken...,” “saved Mr. Tarrow...,” “saved the ship...” “never in all my years...”

Aenig pressed a hand to Zee’s pale and damp forehead, checked his pulse, then his eyes, which were rolled up in his head. He gently probed the deep purple bruising on Zee’s ribs and

lower abdomen, then grabbed the lock that held the coil of chain at Zee's waist. "Get these damnable things off of him!"

"Absolutely not," Bomba commanded.

Aenig turned on him. "I cannot treat him properly under these conditions, Captain!"

Bomba scowled.

"I'll do it," said the carpenter.

The captain frowned more deeply. "Only if you fancy a dance with Mr. Corl and the cat-o-nine tails, Mr. Loris."

Aenig growled. "Do you want to lose your precious hullscrubber merely for fear he might escape, in his condition? On deck, you called upon Postune to save us all. She may have done exactly that. What will you do to help save this boy?"

The captain grumbled, then acquiesced. "All right!"

Loris said, "I'll get the keys," and bolted out of the room, shoving crew out of the way as he went.

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The last of the chains clanked to the floor. Aenig tied off the catgut he'd used to stitch a gash in Zee's scalp, then spun to the room. "Everyone, out!"

"You can't mean me," said Bomba.

"Especially you."

Bomba growled, "You just make sure that gilly lives."

"I'm doing everything I can, captain. Now, out."

Bomba swiped a hand at the others. "You heard the man!" He grouched as he pulled the door shut. "Bastard thinks he's captain, now."

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In the hall, Bomba slammed the door and turned on the crew. "Back to work, you lot. There are repairs to be done." He grabbed Tammet and another sailor as they began to move off. "Not you two. Stay right here and make sure that gilly goes nowhere."

"Aye, captain."

The captain glared at the door, clenching his fists, then spun and stomped down the hall behind the scurrying crew.

\*\*\*

Aenig leaned on the table where Zee lay as peaked as a whitefish, breathing in short, gasping breaths that grew weaker by the minute. He looked at the lad with grave concern, but also wonder, then sighed, half groaning.

Truth was, Aenig hadn't done everything he could to save Zee, and the boy was fading. His expression squirmed with inner turmoil. The boy was worth it. More than worth it. Perhaps essential. And he had made a promise – to a kraken, no less.

He limped to the door, jerked it open, and shouted at the nearest mate. “Tammet, go to the kitchen and get me eels. Two buckets full.”

Tammet stared blankly.

“Hurry!”

“Aye, doctor!” Tammet spun and sprinted down the hall.

Aenig shouted after her. “Live eels, mind you!”

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Tammet hurried in with a bucket in each hand, sloshing water. “There were only enough eels for one bucket, the other is sea slogs. The cook wasn't happy.”

“The cook be damned. That will have to do. Put them there and take your leave. Quickly.”

Tammet set the buckets near the table and rushed out the door, closing it hard behind her.

Aenig eyed the squirming buckets of sea life.

He would try, for Zee's sake. He just hoped he still had the power to accomplish the task.

The doctor held his hands out over the buckets and rubbed them together as if washing them in the air. He closed his eyes and set his jaw, all the while taking deep, even breaths. He reached out with his mind and spirit. An old feeling returned as he drew elements of Empyrean deep into what was left of his crucible. Mining it. Refining it. Forming it. Once he'd gotten it fully processed, he sparked it to life, feeling the old power flow through him. When he opened his eyes he was pleasantly surprised to see golden light swirling over his fingers and palms. The residual power of creation, left over from the world's forming. It was a tiny ember compared to what he was once able to conjure, and his crucible was withered and weak, but he prayed it would be enough.

He muttered arcane words – an incantation the magickers at the citadel would never teach their students or use themselves, even if they knew it. Red light, licking the air like flames, limned the golden glow of his hands, wreathed in black shadow. A forbidden power, deeper, and

darker. Continuing his incantation, thin tendrils of red reached from the creatures in the buckets to his hands. The eels and slogs writhed as the red light left them, then thrashed wildly, splashing water over the floor as the tendrils throbbed and grew brighter

Aenig drew the power to his hands. The red began to consume the gold like crimson fire. With it came an icy chill he remembered well, and abhorred, so cold it burned at his soul.

He moved his hands until they hovered over Zee. “Young Mr. Tarrow, forgive me.” He slammed his palms onto Zee’s chest.

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The mates in the hall jumped as the door thumped behind them and a wind of blackness mixed with red and golden light blasted through the crack beneath it. They gazed at each other in shock, then thrust open the door.

“What was that?!” Tammet shouted.

Aenig was hunched over Zee, leaning on the table edge, his hair hanging down over his face, drenched in sweat.

Tammet stepped in cautiously. Steam rose from the buckets on the floor. Inside, the eels and slogs were black and shriveled in a slop of black goo.

“What happened to those?”

The surgeon turned his face to her, exhaustion lining his grayed, feral features. “I’m sure I don’t know, Ms. Tammet. Perhaps bring me better ones next time?”

On the table, color returned to Zee’s cheeks, and his breathing was steady and deep.

\*\*\*

A match sparked and the flame of the desk lamp glowed in Dr. Aenig’s quarters. The surgeon slumped back in his chair, pinched his nose and rubbed his face. Though the method he’d used to heal Zee had been far weaker than he could once perform, it had taken far more out of him.

He poured himself a snifter of brandy, took a generous swig, then retrieved the letter he’d been writing from a drawer. After setting a dish of red wax on a heating stand, he inked his quill and continued writing.

Upon completing his task, he signed it:

*With all sincere urgency,*

*Dr. Drall tak Aenig*

*Ship's Surgeon*

*HMT Krakenfish*

Aenig retrieved a stamp from a hidden and locked box. He folded the letter and affixed a family seal he hadn't used in many decades, then placed it in an envelope, addressed it, and sealed it with the stamp of the ship.

## Chapter 16

The rough gray patch on Zee chest prickled, stirring him from deepest sleep, and a pleasant warmth spread through him. A voice came to him in his mind. *“Zee okay?”*

Zee eyes snapped open. “Jessup?”

Posted inside the infirmary door, Tammet jumped, dropping her mug of morning grog to crash on the floor. “You’re awake,” she uttered. She ran from the room. “Doctor! He’s awake!”

The voice came again. *“Zee?”*

*“I... ohh...”* Zee groaned out loud at the pain in his ribs, gut and limbs as he sat up, then winced, placing a hand on his bandaged head. He looked himself over, at the bruises and wraps, then grimaced as he bent his elbows, then knees. *“I’m pretty beat up, but I’m all right, I think.”* Then the full realization of who he was speaking to hit him. *“Jessup? Is that really you? I thought it was a dream!”*

*“Zee is okay. Jessup go now. No more trouble.”*

*“What? No, please stay!”* Zee felt Jessup’s relief flood into him through the invisible tether that connected them. He didn’t want to go. Zee threw off his sheet and swung his legs over the edge of the table. *“Wait, what trouble?”*

Dr. Aenig hobbled in on his cane, then stood staring at Zee as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. The surgeon looked haggard, like he hadn’t slept in days, but smiled and came closer.

“How are you feeling, Zee?”

“Aching, but—”

“Can you walk?”

“I think so.”

The surgeon helped Zee steady himself as he lowered his feet to the floor. “Good, good. Now you must come with me.” He handed Zee a pair of his best pants and a new white blouse. “Put these on, quickly now.”

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They hurried down the hall. Even with the pain and stiffness of his injuries, Zee felt stronger, lighter. He was still in a daze as the memories of what had happened when the seadragon attacked came back to him – that it was Jessup that had struck the beast, that his childhood friend

was actually here – so it was only then that he realized his chains had been removed. He touched his waist in amazement, checked his ankles, and stared at his wrists, the skin calloused, scarred, and stained from years of being shackled. They'd used more and heavier chains as Zee had grown, and only taken them off to put more on. Now they were gone. "What's going on, Doctor?"

"Your little escapade with the seadragon, and especially your manner of rescue, have created quite a stir."

"How long was I asleep?" The quarterdeck bell rang above. "What's happening?"

The surgeon stopped at the bottom of the steps to the main deck and turned to look down at him with a glint in his good eye. "You were unconscious for two nights and a day, but you're mending well. And, the citadel is coming."

Zee had almost forgotten. Representatives from Triumph's Citadel Academy were coming to inform Squire Derlick don Donnicky if he'd been accepted into the academy or was to be relieved of his duties and sent back home.

Dr. Aenig lead the way up the stairs.

Zee winced and raised a hand at the brightness of the morning sun as he followed Aenig onto the main deck. A shadow passed across the bow. He lowered his hand. It was a dragon. One of many. More than Zee had ever seen. They soared the air, fully armored knights on their backs, all around the ship and out over the water.

He spun slowly in astonishment. On the glassy sea were ships of His Majesty's Navy. Dozens of them, in a perimeter several hundred yards across around the ship, with cannon ports open, guns at the ready, and harpoon cannons manned on decks. But why?

"Jessup..." They were here because of the kraken. Fear for his friend gripped him. The feeling in his stomach grew warmer, more taut, as if an invisible line tugged at his core, and the patch on his chest heated. Jessup was close.

A call came from the crow's nest and the quarterdeck bell rang out the signal of someone approaching in the distance. Bell's rang on the other ships as well. On the perch deck, the riders and dragons drew to attention, armor gleaming. Squire Donnicky stood rigid and nervous as he awaited judgment, peering at the sky in the direction of Tosh.

Three specks appeared through low clouds, off the coast of the island nation. The representatives from the citadel were approaching.



“Tarrow!” The captain’s gruff voice made Zee jump. Bomba stomped up to gaze down at him. “It’s about time you were up and about.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Bomba thrust a hand over the deck. “Join the crew, then!”

The crew was all on deck, dressed in their finest, which meant their shabby clothing was at least freshly laundered and pressed, but they weren’t in formation yet – and those who weren’t peering over the rail were staring at him.

Zee swallowed and looked to the doctor, who nodded. He went to lean on a set of ratlines, grimacing at the lingering pain from his injuries. He noticed the condition of the rails. They’d been hastily repaired from damage taken during the seadragon attack, Zee assumed.

He reached out to his old friend. “*Jessup, are you all right?*”

“*Jessup okay.*”

“*Where are you?*”

“*Swimming, not far.*”

“*Good. Don’t go anywhere, okay?*”

“*Jessup stay.*”

A tingle beneath Zee’s shirt brought his hand to the patch on his chest, and he smiled at the warmth that surged in his heart. He could sense his friend was nervous, but also happy to be nearby. “*Thank you.*”

Zee watched the three dragons approach. Other dragons parted before the new arrivals, some falling into formation to escort them.

Zee had seen this ceremony before – though with nowhere near this many dragons, and no ships. First, when they came for Tem. He’d been accepted after the Academy’s Academic Board board considered reports of his service from Dame Toomsil, and, Zee assumed, because of his name and status. His father was a White Titan class lord commander, after all, as well as a governor.

Twice more the citadel had come for squires during Zee’s tenure on the ship, to embark on the next step in their lives’ adventures. To be chosen by a dragon to bond with and trained to be riders in the hopes of becoming Knights of the Realm. Each time they soared away over the glinting waves, Zee had watched with wistful yearning. As unrealistic as it was, he still dreamed of being a knight.

Zee's gaze roamed over the crew. People he'd spent years of his life with, and none of which he'd ever really gotten to know. The two other cabin boys who never spoke a kind word to him, now promoted to sailors in their own right. Loris, the carpenter, and the lookout, whose lives he'd saved. The scowling captain and cruel Mr. Corl.

After all the years he'd spent on the ship, one thing hadn't changed much since his childhood. He still had no real friends, and when he had someone close, they eventually had to leave.

At least he'd had Donnicky, and before him, Dame Toomsil. She'd taught Zee how to use a sword, knife, and hatchet so Tem would have a sparring partner, much to her squire's chagrin.

Then there was Dr. Aenig, who'd given him everything. He was more a mentor than a friend, but he'd bestowed upon Zee the ability to read, knowledge of the world, and even hope. Other than the fact that Zee was one of the murfolk and Aenig was clearly interested in them, Zee didn't know why the man spent so much time with him or treated him so well, and perhaps never would. Still, Zee would be forever grateful.

"Attention!" the captain roared. All the crew but those manning the guns ran to their places in formation. Zee headed for his usual position at the back, but Loris and old Mr. Trib pushed the sailors next to them to the side to make room for him in the front line. Zee was surprised by the uncharacteristic show of respect, but took the space between them and stood at attention, ignoring his aches and pains.

The dragons drew nearer from the citadel, one with the blue and gold banner of the academy flapping on a spear shaft that rose from the back of the rider's saddle, which was typical of these occasions. But the dragon and rider pair in the lead...

The knights, dragons and squires on the perch deck stiffened to even greater attention. Murmurs arose from the crew. The dragons from the academy circled the ship, and with a sharp intake of breath, Zee saw why.

The lead dragon, a Greatwing with silver-green scales, was larger than other Greatwings he had seen. Shining red barding adorned her chest, and she wore a red helmet fitted between her horns. The rider was not in combat armor, nor the drab uniform normally worn by an academy admissions representative. Instead, he wore a blue dress uniform and a red mail vest festooned with medals and ribbons, with two sea stars on his shoulder plate.

This was no ordinary representative or dragon knight, but Peleus ran Aureosa, a Daimyo General, Red Titan class, and the commandant of Triumph's Citadel Academy.

Zee watched in slack-jawed reverence as the commandant landed on the perch deck, the ship's dragons and knights pressing back to make room. One of the other representatives landed there as well, and the third flew to the front of the ship to alight on the forecastle. Both were Gold Class Lord Commanders, fully armored and armed.

Zee looked to Dr. Aenig, who stood among the mates behind the captain, calm as could be, hands clasped in front him, holding his cane. The surgeon's eyes met Zee's, revealing nothing, then returned to the perch deck.

Together, the commandant dragon and rider pair struck an imposing image. Not only were they in one of the highest positions at the academy, reporting only to the superintendent, equal to the dean of academics and the dean of magicks, and in charge of all military training and discipline, they're Red Titan Class meant they were one of only three pairs that held that threat level in the entire kingdom.

As the man dismounted, the knights and squires saluted crisply while their dragons lowered their heads. Commandant Aureosa saluted back and his dragon nodded. The commandant and his dragon spoke briefly, then he went to greet the ship's knights and their squires, including Derlick don Donnicky. All the while, the captain and crew waited at attention on the main deck.

Commandant Aureosa made his way down the steps from the perch deck to the quarterdeck, followed by the knight armored in gold, then down more steps to the main deck. He appeared to be in his sixties, though younger than Dr. Aenig, but it was difficult to tell. Riders who advanced to bond ratings as high as his lived longer than normal people.

Aureosa set foot on the main deck, followed by the Gold Class knight who had also landed on the perch deck. The Gold Class knight who had landed on the forecastle joined them.

The captain saluted the best he could, which wasn't very well. "Welcome aboard, Daimyo General Commandant. It is a great honor to receive you on the HMT Krakenfish. The admiral sent me a message by carrier gull after I reported to him about our being attacked and, of course, the kraken that I found."

Aureosa's stern features revealed a hint of amusement. "That you found, is it?" He headed toward the rail.

The captain huffed and stepped quickly to keep up with the man's long stride. Dr. Aenig followed as well, along with Corl and the mates.

"Why, of course," Bomba said. "It took all the might I and my crew could muster to fend off both a particularly large and ill-tempered seadragon *and* a kraken, but we accomplished it with brave aplomb." He leaned closer, speaking in a conspiratorial tone. "We've come across more rare beasts of disproportionate size and disposition of late. It's unnatural, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask, but thank you, Captain. I'll make a report of it." The commandant placed his hands on the hastily repaired rail and looked out at the waves. "You're certain the kraken is still here?"

"We believe so, sir. We hear a rumble from below now and again, a terrible sound, and its monstrous shape is seen moving in the depths." Bomba glared at the water. "We would have dispatched the demon, but the admiral ordered us to leave it be. I have no idea why."

The commandant's dark amber eyes fell on the captain. "Because I asked him to."

"I... of course, Commandant. My apologies."

The commandant's brow knit in contemplation as he gazed at the sea, then he removed his hands from the rail and addressed the captain while looking over the mates. "I would speak to your surgeon. A doctor..." his voice trailed off as his eyes fell on Aenig, his eyes widening ever so slightly.

Before the captain or commandant could speak, the surgeon stepped forward, reaching out his hand. "Daimyo General Commandant, Sir, I am Drall tak Aenig, ship's surgeon, at your service."

The commandant collected himself and shook the doctor's hand. "Aenig... of course."

"May I propose we retire to my quarters for conversation and a glass of wine?"

"I believe that would be in order. Thank you, Doctor."

Aenig gestured to the stairway that lead down to his quarters. "This way, please." One of the knights in gold opened the door for them.

The captain's face burned with indignation. "This is highly irregular."

The commandant peered down his nose at the man, one eyebrow with a burn scar raised high. "Is it, captain?"

Bomba flustered. "I... suppose not, Daimyo General, Sir." The commandant turned to follow Aenig below. "Will you be staying for lunch, Sir?" the captain asked. "We've prepared—"

“My apologies, captain, but I’m needed back at the academy as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Sir, of course, Sir.” Bomba fumbled another salute, sweat beading on his ruddy face.

When the door had shut behind Aenig, Aureosa, and the citadel knights, Bomba cursed and wiped his sweaty hands on his jacket. He glared at Corl, who shrugged.

Zee had no more idea what that was all about than they did. All any of them could do was wait. Corl ordered the crew to return to their ease, so Zee went to the rail and looked down at the sea, hoping for a glimpse of Jessup. He knew it was best that his friend stay out of sight, but he could still talk to him.

“*Jessup?*”

“*Zee, you okay?*”

“*I’m fine, though I’m not sure what’s going on. Are you all right after fighting with the seadragon?*”

“*Jessup fight worse monsters than seadragon.*” Zee could sense that his friend was smiling. “*Jessup talking to Zee. Seadragon dead.*”

Zee chuckled. He wasn’t sure how to best broach the subject, so he just asked, “*Do you remember when I told you what you are, on the ship?*”

A moment passed before the answer came. “*Jessup is a kraken.*”

Zee tried to sense how Jessup felt about that, but he couldn’t tell. “*Those silly songs we used to sing were wrong. Krakens aren’t bad. At least not all of them. You’re not bad.*” Somehow, Zee could tell that his old friend was amused, somewhere in the deep. “*What?*” he asked.

“*Songs not silly. Jessup still sings them to feel better, to remember Zee. Songs not all wrong either. ‘When the kraken comes arising. Even dragons flee.’ That part true.*”

Zee laughed softly. “*I can’t believe you’re really here!*”

“*Jessup can’t believe either.*” The joy they shared through their connection bloomed.

“*How did you find me?*”

“*Jessup felt Zee was in trouble.*”

“*Wait, where were you?*”

Jessup didn’t answer.

“*You stayed, didn’t you? After I told you to leave, and never come back.*”

“*Jessup left for long time, went deep and far. Saw many things. Fought many fights. Survived. But... comes back sometimes, hoping to see Zee.*”

*“You are a bad kraken.”* In spite of the admonishment, Zee was grinning, and he could tell Jessup was too.

*“Bad kraken. Not sorry.”*

Out of the corner of his eye, Zee glimpsed a couple of sailors staring at him as if he was crazy, and realized he was giggling like the seven year old kid he’d been when he and Jessup used to romp on the beach. He cleared his throat and forced a fake scowl until they turned away.

While everyone else waited impatiently for the commandant and doctor to reemerge from below, Zee and Jessup passed the time telling each other what they had been doing since they’d last seen each other. Zee told Jessup how he’d discovered he was one of the murfolk, the people of the sea, the day he had rescued Jessup from the ship. Zee could feel Jessup growing angry when he explained the kinds of duties he’d had aboard the ship, so he tried to make it sound not quite so cruel or grueling.

Zee learned that life had been no easier for Jessup than it had been for him, comprised largely of hunting for food, avoiding ships, hiding from predators until he’d grown large enough to fend them off, and fighting for his life.

Zee asked, *“Have you seen any murfolk in your travels?”*

*“No murfolks.”*

*“Any other krakens?”*

A sadness seeped to Zee from his big friend. *“No krakens either.”*

*“That doesn’t mean there aren’t any, just that we haven’t found them yet. We’ll look again, one day. I promise.”*

That cheered Jessup up. *“One day.”*

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Bomba paced the deck, becoming increasingly irritated as the time passed, and it was over a bell before the door swung open. The crew rushed back to formation, then saw it wasn’t the commandant but one of the citadel knights.

*“The commandant requests the attendance of Mr. Zee Tarrow,”* the knight announced.

Zee turned back from the rail. *“Me?”*

## Chapter 17

Bomba glowered at Zee, who stared back in shock. “You heard the man, hullscrubber. Hop to it!”

Zee gulped, patted his shirt and trousers to straighten them, then hurried across the deck.

Bomba stepped to block his path and spoke with soft menace. “Be careful what you say about your captain in there, gilly. Wouldn’t want the daimyo general to get the wrong impression.”

“I’ll try not to speak of you at all, Sir,” Zee replied, caught off guard.

“Oh, you will, boy. And it will be glowing praise. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

The captain stepped aside. “Hurry, then. Mustn’t keep the commandant waiting.”

The knight followed Zee as far as the bottom of the steps. “They’re in the surgeon’s quarters. You know where it is?”

“Yes, Sir.”

The knight nodded and Zee headed down the hall. The other knight was posted at the far end. Whatever the commandant and Dr. Aenig were discussing, they didn’t want to be interrupted, or anyone else hearing.

Zee’s mind spun as he wondered what the commandant wanted to speak to him about, and doubted very much it had anything to do with the Captain Ion Bomba. All he could think of was that it had to be about Jessup, and that worried him.

He smoothed back his hair at the doctor’s door, took a deep breath, and knocked. He was beckoned to enter, and went inside.

Aureosa stood with his back to the book shelves at the left, a wine glass in his hand. He’d unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. The shining silver-green scales of his dragonbond went from his wrist all the way up to disappear beneath the rolled sleeves below his elbow. Dr. Aenig stood behind his desk. Zee waited, frozen until the commandant spoke.

“You must be this Mr. Tarrow your surgeon has been telling me so much about.” Zee looked to Dr. Aenig, who gave him an encouraging nod.

Breaking his stunned silence, Zee snapped to attention and saluted crisply, just like Dame Toomsil had taught him. “Yes sir, Daimyo General Commandant, Sir!”

Aureosa looked amused but also impressed by Zee’s perfectly executed salute and proper address. He saluted back. “At ease, lad.” Zee dropped his hand stiffly to his side. The man indicated a stool at one corner of the desk. “Please, take a seat.”

Zee swallowed, his throat painfully dry. “Yes, Sir.” He sat while the commandant seated himself in a folding chair near the other end of the desk. Aenig eased into his own chair behind his desk.

It took all Zee’s concentration not to fidget under the commandant’s scrutinizing gaze. The man took a sip of his wine, then sat back in his chair. “The good doctor here has told me quite an astonishing tale, Mr. Tarrow.”

“He has?” Zee croaked. His eyes met Aenig’s, who only smiled at Zee’s anxiety.

“A tale of a young boy who snuck onto one of His Majesty’s tradeships and released a small creature that had been taken as a prize for a local Lord Governor.

“Oh...”

“A boy, who, as it turned out, was actually one of the rare murfolk. A murman who, ten years later, was saved by an oddly similar creature, albeit much larger. In fact, Dr. Aenig, and the captain and crew, are absolutely certain this beast was none other than a kraken. Not only that, but the surgeon says his name is Jessup.”

Zee gulped and stared at Aenig. He trusted the doctor as much as anyone he had ever known, but had never spoken to him about Jessup, and Aenig had never asked. “How...”

“He told me,” the doctor said, “when he placed you on the forecastle deck, bedraggled and half dead, and asked me to help you.”

Zee could only stare as the doctor poured a finger of bingberry brandy in a tumbler and slid it toward him. Zee lifted the glass and downed the sweet liquid in one swallow. He grimaced, but was thankful for the wetting of his throat and the warmth that spread after the burn subsided.

“So it’s true,” said the commandant. “You know this creature.”

“Yes, Sir, I do.” Aureosa watched him expectantly. “I found him on the beach near my home when I was seven years old, and named him Jessup. He’s... my friend.”

“Are there others of his kind?” The commandant asked.



“Not as far as we know, Sir. I asked him, and he says he looked but found none.” Zee stiffened, realizing he’d just revealed he could communicate telepathically with a kraken. For some reason, neither the commandant nor Dr. Aenig seemed surprised.

“That is not unexpected, I suppose.” Aureosa scratched his chin. “You can speak to him, then?” He touched his temple with a calloused and scarred finger. “Here?”

They *had* noticed. It felt wrong, revealing his secrets about Jessup after keeping them for so long, and swearing he never would. But it was also oddly elating to be able to share them. “Yes, Sir.” The commandant and Dr. Aenig exchanged glances. “But, I haven’t had contact with him since I let him loose. Not until he came to save me.” Tears welled in Zee’s eyes. All the lonely years he and Jessup had been separated, then his friend had risked discovery, maybe even his life, to save him. And he was still here, waiting.

“Could you speak to him now, while sitting in this cabin, from this distance, through the bond?”

Embarrassed, Zee quickly wiped his eyes. “I could, Sir, but... wait... the ‘bond?’”

Surprise registered on the commandant’s features. “You didn’t know?”

“I...” Zee’s voice trailed off as he slumped on the stool, jaw slack at the revelation. Bonding was something he’d only thought happened to people and dragons, and even then it was something not just any person and beast could do. Some cadets and dragons had to leave the academy because they couldn’t find a suitable bondmate.

“You’ve already told us you can communicate with each other telepathically,” the commandant stated. “That is something only dragon and rider pairs can do when bonded, sometimes not fully until the bond is complete. Do you also sense his presence, a warmth, here?” The commandant placed his hand below his own heart.

Zee nodded, staring as he tried to wrap his mind around what the man was saying.

“If he is content, you can feel it. The same if he is troubled, or in danger.”

Zee met the man’s gaze. “Yes, Sir.”

“I’m guessing it’s the same for the kraken. According to the doctor’s testimony, he came to you, from a distance, in your most dire need.”

Zee nodded.

Dr. Aenig said, “After what I now know and have seen, Zee, I have no doubt that the mark on your chest is the sign of your bonding with the kraken, just as the scales on the wrist of a rider is

the physical manifestation of their bond with a dragon. It's even the same color and texture as the beast's shell."

"But..."

"Have you noticed," the doctor continued, "since he came back to you, less than two days ago, it has grown?"

Zee fumbled with the buttons of his shirt. He ran his fingers over the patch. It felt thicker, and perhaps larger, but placed as it was over his left pectoral, it was hard to see. He looked to the doctor.

Aenig continued, "It has also begun to take a shape." He placed a book Zee recognized on the table and slid it toward Zee. It was one of the old books on kraken lore they had read together, the first book the doctor had used to teach Zee to read. Just children's stories, Zee thought. On the cover, pressed in flaking gold foil, was a symbol Zee had always thought was the sun. A circle with ten curved points. The points were each slightly different, and it occurred to Zee, instead of flames on the sun, they could be arms...

The doctor nodded to a dressing mirror on the wall behind where Zee sat. Zee stood and turned to gaze at it, his mouth suddenly very dry again. Reflected in its surface were the doctor and commandant watching with knowing fascination. And on his chest... though the points, flames, *arms*, on the circle were shorter, the patch had indeed taken the shape of the symbol on the cover of the book. The sign of the kraken. He had a krakenbond.

Zee sat heavily on the stool. He slowly spun the stool to face Dr. Aenig, remorse and shame mixing with his shock. "I'm sorry I never told you about Jessup before now, Sir."

"Think nothing of it, Zee. You wished to protect him."

"Exactly, Sir. I promised myself I would never speak of him, for his own safety. I had figured out he was a kraken and was afraid of what people would do to him – were already doing to him."

"I completely understand."

"We could communicate, knew what each other felt, even then."

Aureosa paused as he raised his wine glass to his lips. "At such a young age... That is unprecedented among humans and dragons." He took a deep breath. "We are in uncharted territory here, however. Who knows what a murman and a kraken are capable of."

"Who knows, indeed," said the doctor, giving Aureosa a questioning look.

The commandant knitted his brow in consideration. He set his wine glass on the desk and sat straighter in his chair, eyes on Zeke. Penetrating auburn eyes that Zee felt looked right into his soul.

“Mr. Tarrow.” The commandant’s voice had suddenly become more authoritative.

Zee sat straight. “Yes, Sir.”

“It is my understanding that you have always wanted to be a dragonrider.”

Zee was blindsided by the statement and took a moment to answer. “Yes, Sir. More than anything.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

Zee’s heart sank.

“However, how would you feel about the possibility of training to be a *kraken*rider at Triumph’s Citadel Academy, the first in the history of the Kingdom of Tosh?”

Zee gaped, his mind whirling at the very thought of it, then finally found his voice. “I think... I mean, I would, Sir. Very much.”

“I may be getting ahead of myself, and I want to make myself very clear. This must be presented to the board and passed by majority vote. You and the kraken will have to come to the citadel so the board members can see for themselves that he truly exists and is willing before it can even be considered, otherwise I will have an even more difficult time making my case. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes, Sir, that only makes sense. When would we leave?”

“As soon as possible, today.”

“Today...” Zee’s head felt light. He took a deep breath to gather his wits. The feeling faded, but did not go away entirely. “I’ll have to ask him first, Sir. Jessup, I mean.”

“Of course. We have never taken a cadet into service, person or beast, without them expressing an explicit desire to do so. I wouldn’t dream of attempting it with a kraken.” The commandant raised one eyebrow and a corner of his lips curved up.

As shaken as Zee was by what the commandant had offered, it took him a moment to see the humor in his statement. He emitted a nervous laugh. “Yes, Sir.”

“Could you ask him now?”

“Um... yes, Sir,” Zee stuttered. “But, would you mind if I asked him in person? I haven’t seen him yet, you see...”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” The commandant stood from his chair. “I’d very much like to see him myself.”

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Zee proceeded down the hall in a daze, Dr. Aenig at his side, the commandant and one of the Gold Class riders in front of him, the other behind. He looked up at Aenig who, for the first time in all the years Zee had known him, actually winked. Before Zee could respond, they were moving up the stairs and onto the deck.

The crew was hustling back into formation, and everyone was staring at him – Captain Ion Bomba with fierce scrutiny. Zee wasn’t surprised, since he’d never seen the captain look at him any other way. Somehow it didn’t have the same effect it once had. In fact, Zee found it almost comical. Bomba turned his dour gaze upon Dr. Aenig, who ignored him entirely.

Commandant Aureosa shouted to the crew. “At ease!” Then his voice carried over the ship and to the dragons in the air nearby. “Stand down. Take no action unless expressly ordered to do so!”

On the quarterdeck, signal flags were waved and the bell was rung to pass the order to the Navy armada. Acknowledgments were received from the decks and crows nests of the surrounding ships.

Dr. Aenig leaned down and spoke close to Zee’s ear. “Call to him.”

Zee closed his eyes and spoke to his friend. A tense moment passed, long enough that Zee wondered if Jessup was going to answer.

Then a deep reverberating roar rose from beneath the waves. The surface of the sea rippled at the sound, the deck shivered, droplets of water dancing on its surface, and loose fittings rattled where they were attached to the wood of the ship. Crew members backed away from the rail.

To Zee, it sounded like music.

A dragon roared off the port bow. The watch in the crow’s nest pointed, shouting. “There! Bearing oh nine hundred, straight off port!”

Zee looked to the doctor, who nodded. Zee ran to the port side rail. Aenig followed, his cane tapping on the deck, as did the commandant.

Just inside the perimeter of the ships, a dark shape beneath the surface approached the HMT Krakenfish. A giddy elation that Zee hadn’t felt in ten years rose in him.

A thorny gray shell partially broke the surface. Zee couldn't help the grin that spread on his face. His little friend had gotten bigger. A lot bigger, and gnarled spines stuck out where the smooth knobs used to be on Jessup's baby-shell. Zee gripped the rail in anticipation.

The captain shouted. "Remember, you scum, do not fire upon the beast unless ordered!" He grumbled under his breath. "Commandant's orders."

The tension of the crew, knights, and dragons was palpable. The shell submerged, the shadowy figure slowed, then paused, thirty feet off the port side.

Zee reached out to his childhood friend. "*Jessup?*"

The darkness rose. An arrowhead-shaped point two feet across at the base broke the surface, and kept rising. Straight up Jessup came, his cone-shaped, thorny and whorled gray shell stained in algae, barnacled, and scored with marks of claws and teeth from battles fought. Some of the spines were broken. Zee felt a twinge of sadness for what his friend must have gone through since they'd last seen each other. His life had not been easy. Just like Zee's.

When the base of the shell broke the surface, it stood nearly twenty feet tall. The shell tipped back and the kraken's octopod brow and eyes rose above the waves.

Jessup's eyes swiveled as he scanned the sky and the ship, then he caught sight of Zee and his big green eyes brightened. He rose further, pushing his nose-slits and wide mouth out of the water – and he was grinning. Even with the triangular serrated teeth that lined his mouth behind thick rubbery lips, to Zee it was a beautiful sight to behold.

Jessup spoke in a deep and gurgling but intelligible voice. "Hi, Zee."

The crew gasped and one of the dragons cried out in surprise. "It speaks!"

Zee wasn't listening to them. He leapt to the rail and dove.

## Chapter 18

Zee swam to Jessup and did his best to hug him, arms out and flat, cheek pressed to the kraken's great wide face. Warmth flooded through him. The pain and stiffness left him and he felt an elation he'd never known. Similar to what he'd felt when he and Jessup were younger, but deeper, stronger, and more joyous.

Jessup coiled the end of an arm around him, lifted him out of the water, and held him close. Jessup's body hummed with a deep vibration that thrummed through him. The kraken was purring.

The captain shouted in protest, but when Zee turned back to the ship with tears of joy in his eyes, everyone else stood astounded and staring. None moved to retrieve the captain's murman. Not even Corl.

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A touch of awe crept into Commandant Aureosa's voice. "And there it is. The kraken of myth and legend." He looked to his dragon, who had craned her regal neck up on the perch deck to peer down at the spectacle below. She returned his gaze with equal amazement.

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No one was more moved by the sight than Dr. Drall tak Aenig. Bittersweet tears trickled the creases of his cheeks. He remembered that feeling. What Zee and Jessup were experiencing now. Unlike Zee, though, the dark pit of emptiness in the doctor's soul would never be filled again.

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Jessup held Zee out to get a better look at him. "*We go now?*"

Zee was taken aback. He hadn't considered that. The chains were gone. They could just dive deep and swim away, right now. No one could stop them. Away from the hardships of the ship. Off on a new adventure, a new life, together, completely free, in the sea.

But, then what? Where would they go? What would they do? He eyed the ships and dragons. Would they be hunted, pursued to the end of their days? How would the dragons and Navy catch them, though? A kraken and a murman could stay underwater forever. And never see the sky...

Zee's thoughts and emotions were in turmoil. "*Actually, there's something I need to ask you. See that man at the rail, the one in the uniform and red vest?*"

*“Jessup sees.”*

*“That’s the commandant of Triumph’s Citadel Academy.”*

*“Jessup remembers academy. Dragon rider school. Zee wanted to go there.”*

*“That’s right. He’s asked if I’d like to attend the academy.” Zee sensed the mixed feelings swirling in Jessup’s mind. “To train to be a krakenrider.”*

Confusion added to Jessup’s thoughts. *“Krakenrider?”*

*“Maybe the first one ever. I’d need a kraken to ride, though.”*

*“Zee mean, Jessup go too?”*

*“That’s the idea. What do you think?”*

Jessup looked to the commandant, eyes narrowed. *“Zee trust him?”*

*“I trust Dr. Aenig, and I believe this is his doing.”*

Jessup looked to the rail. *“Man with one eye next to commandant?”*

*“That’s him.”*

Jessup studied the man, then his expression relaxed. *“Doctor is good man,”* he said as a matter of fact. After more consideration he added. *“Long shadow.”*

*“What do you mean?”*

*“Sad. Darkness. Not sure. But he has been friend to Zee?”*

Zee could feel Jessup’s deliberation. *“He has.”* Zee sniffed. *“Our friend.”*

Jessup’s grin returned. *“Jessup has hoped that Zee be able to go to academy and ride dragons.”* His green eyes gleamed with pride and joy. *“This is better.”*

*“So, you’ll go with me?”*

*“Jessup go anywhere with Zee.”*

Zee shot his fist in the air. *“Hurrah!”* He caught sight of the commandant and Dr. Aenig watching them from the rail. He cleared his throat, saluted and addressed the commandant. *“Sir, Daimyo General Commandant, sir!”*

Jessup swiveled his eyes to Zee, then lifted an arm from the water and held it over his brow to salute as sell.

*“Astonishing,”* Aureosa uttered. He returned the salute, then crisply dropped his hand.

Zee whipped his hand down, following formality. Jessup imitated his move, his arm slapping up a great spout as it hit the water, splashing Zee.

Zee swiped the brine from his face and tipped his head to Jessup. “Sir, this is Jessup. He’s... the kraken... Sir.” Zee winced at his ridiculously obvious statement. Jessup nodded.

“I’ve never seen a kraken before, Mr. Tarrow. I’ll have to take your word for it. It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Jessup.”

In an attempt to recover what dignity he might have left, Zee said, “Say hello to the commandant, Jessup.”

Jessup blinked his plate-sized eyes, then said in his deep gurgling voice. “Hello, Commandant, Sir.”

More exclamations arose from the knights, dragons, and crew.

From what the commandant had learned from Dr. Aenig and Zee, he should have expected the kraken could speak aloud, but apparently to hear it address him directly, and properly, was another matter. Recovering his military bearing, he said, “Mr. Tarrow, have you put the proposal to Mr. Jessup?”

The captain frowned. “What proposal?”

Aureosa ignored him.

“Yes, sir. We accept.”

Jessup nodded again, nearly dunking Zee in the sea.

“Very well, then,” the commandant replied.

Bomba said, “Accept what?”

Aureosa turned to regard the captain as if he was something one would want to avoid stepping in, then strode to the quarterdeck stairs, up and to the center of the rail. The Gold knights from the citadel followed and stood near.

Aureosa gazed over the crew, who drew to heightened attention. “On behalf of the Academic Board and the Board of Visitors of Triumph’s Citadel, I would like to welcome Derlick don Donnicky, Esquire, to the Dragon Corps Academy.” The crew cheered and applauded. The ship’s knights clapped Donnicky on the shoulders and the younger squire congratulated him.

“We will be leaving straightaway.” Aureosa paused, then announced, “Mr. Tarrow and Mr. Jessup will be coming with us.”

Gasps and murmurs spread through the crew. The ship’s knights glanced at each other in confusion. Donnicky frowned.



Bomba's face grew more red, veins bulging on his forehead. "Commandant, Sir! I have forgiven the offense of attending the surgeon instead of myself, the captain of this ship, but this! By all maritime law, the gilly and the beast are mine!"

Corl and the mates took an apprehensive step away from the captain as visible golden power pulsed from the commandant, shimmering in the air around him. Above and behind him, his dragon had the same golden glow. She raised her regal head with a growl. Yellow light flared in her eyes, and smoke seeped from her nostrils. She gave her wings a short but swift flap. The gust sent the captain's cap flying and the crew staggering back. The ship jolted as the sails snapped taut.

Mr. Trib, the sailor manning one of the starboard harpoon cannons, flinched, and the slow match he'd been holding brushed the touch-hole filled with gunpower. He slapped at it, trying to put it out, but the cannon fired. The noise was deafening, its report echoing off the wall of ships in the distance while the smoke cleared.

"Hold your fire, Zepiter damn you!" shouted Aureosa.

Signal crew on the quarterdeck waved flags and rang the bell to convey the message to anyone in the armada who might have gotten the wrong idea.

Bomba glared at Mr. Trib.

The old sailor seemed to shrink in on himself. "It was an accident, I swears!"

Only then did they see the harpoon stuck in Jessup's shell, with Zee gaping up at it. The point of the projectile had just penetrated the surface, and the thin cable attached to its shaft hung loose between where it stuck and the cannon.

"Jessup, are you all right?" Zee asked.

"Jessup okay." But the kraken was not amused.

He snaked an arm out the water. A bony spike, short but sharp, pushed out from the center of each sucker. Jessup wrapped the arm around the cable, and yanked.

The harpoon cannon tore from its bolts, crashed through the rail, and splashed into the sea. Jessup tugged the harpoon out of his shell and released the cable, letting it all sink.

Zee gaped. "Oh..."

Jessup watched the ship with narrowed eyes.

"Mr. Tarrow!" Aureosa shouted. "Mr. Jessup! I offer my sincerest apologies, on behalf of His Majesty's Dragon Corps and His Majesty's Navy." He glared at the captain. "And especially, His

Majesty's Tradeship Fleet." His dragon lowered her head and growled at the crew, the flames that licked from her nostrils reflecting in her golden eyes.

"You were saying, Captain?" Aureosa continued.

The redness drained from Bomba's face and sweat poured from his brow. "Nothing, Sir Commandant, Sir."

"Something about this being your kraken?"

The captain sputtered. "I was terribly mistaken, Sir Commandant. You're welcome to it."

"You forget your station, captain, besides appearing to have little control over your crew." Mr. Trib shrunk further under his glare.

Bomba gulped and went to one knee, smoothing back the sparse greasy hair on his head. "Of course, Daimyo General Commandant. My most sincere apologies."

"By maritime law, you will be properly compensated for your conscription contract with Mr. Tarrow." One of the Gold Class knights with the commandant reached into a satchel attached to her dragon's harness and tossed a sack of coins to the main deck, within Bomba's reach.

The captain's greed nearly overpowered his good sense, but he jerked his hand back before it could creep all the way to the sack.

"Thank you, Sir Commandant. You are most generous."

Aureosa addressed Zee. "Mr. Tarrow, I suggest you pack your belongings."

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It was tradition for anyone leaving service on the ship to shake hands with the crew. A duffel bag slung over his shoulder, Zee followed Squire Donnicky down the line. When Zee had tried to congratulate his friend, Donnicky had given him a cold stare and turned away, leaving Zee with a hand outstretched and unshaken. After Zee recovered from the rebuff, he admonished himself for having been so naïve as to think someone like Donnicky would ever be a real friend to him. Now that the squire had been accepted into the academy, and in light of the fact that Zee was also traveling to the citadel, Zee saw that their relationship had been predicated on Donnicky's superiority alone. Now that his status was threatened in the slightest, the squire wanted nothing to do with him.

Donnicky received claps on the back and kind words of good luck. The best Zee got was a nod from the Loris, the carpenter. Others were hesitant to touch him. No surprise there. That came when he reached Captain Bomba.

Bomba scowled down at him, and Zee was certain that was all he would get from the man. Then the captain reached out his hand. “You’ve done a fine job here, gilly. Your service will be missed.”

Zee hardly believed what he’d heard. The captain had said Zee’s service would be missed, not Zee himself, and called him a gilly, but it was the closest thing to a compliment Bomba had ever given him. “Thank you, Captain.” Bomba grunted in reply and stalked out for a better view of the higher decks at the back of the ship.

Last in line was Dr. Aenig, standing with his cane at the foot of the stairs to the quarterdeck. He wished the squire good luck, then turned to gaze down at Zeke with his one good eye, an inscrutable expression on his lined face.

Zee reached his hand to the man who had done so much for him, and had somehow arranged for this as well. He’d not only made it possible for Zee to leave conscripted service on the ship, Zee was going to the academy he always dreamed of. It wasn’t assured he’d be accepted, but still. A tightening in his throat made it difficult to speak. “Thank you, Dr. Aenig. I don’t know how I will ever repay you.”

The surgeon took his hand. “Don’t thank me yet. And you can call me Drall.”

Zee blushed at the kind informality. “Thank you, Drall.”

“Whatever may come, be strong. Work hard. Give it everything you have, and more.” The surgeon pulled him closer, as if to embrace, but spoke softly next to his ear. “Reach deeper than you could possibly imagine. Farther than you ever have before. Only at the moment of most dire need will more power come to you. The greatest potential lies with those closest to defeat. The most high will be those with the noblest intent, perhaps most aligned to the divine will of Zhera herself.”

The doctor released him. Zee could only stare back.

Dr. Aenig’s lips curved up in a smile, a knowing look in his good eye. “Show them what you’ve got, Zee Tarrow. I believe in you.”

“I... thank you, Sir.”

“I have a parting gift.” Aenig pulled a duffel from his shoulder and handed it to Zee.

Zee took it, beaming with gratitude. “You shouldn’t have.”

“Probably not, but take it anyway.”

Zee opened the flap to see a long waterproof bag made of layers of oilskin inside, its top edge rolled tight and secured. “What is it, Sir?”

“Much less than you deserve, but there’s something in there we were going to study next. Perhaps you’ll have better luck with it than I have.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Keep it close.”

He leaned back, eyeing Zee sternly.

Zee nodded without question. The doctor had taught him that, other than stories to scare children or for general entertainment, serious study of murfolk and krakens was frowned upon by the general populace, and especially the powerful Church of Zepiter, the official church of Tosh. If Aenig had acquired a new book about murfolk, Zee couldn’t wait to read it. “Understood.”

A lump formed in Zee’s throat as he put the duffel onto his shoulder. “Thank you, again.”

“Now be off with you. You’ve been nothing but trouble and a drain on my precious time.”

Zee smiled and shook the man’s hand again. For a moment, he didn’t want to let go. He looked over the ship and the crew. He was happy to be leaving, but he’d grown up here, with these people. Other than his childhood memories, he didn’t know anything else. For better or worse, this had been his home for most of his life.

Now his life had been set on a drastically new and different course. Whatever it held for him, he would embrace it with everything he had.

And now, he had Jessup.

He sighed deeply and met the doctor’s gaze with a smile. “Aye, Sir.”

He released his mentor’s hand and proceeded up to and across the quarter deck, then up to the perch deck.

“Mr. Tarrow.” Commandant Aureosa indicated over his shoulder to his dragon, who had a passenger’s saddle rigged to her back behind Aureosa’s. “You may ride with Vandalia and me, if you wish.”

Sitting on a similar rig behind one of the Gold knights, Squire Donnicky glared at Zee.

Vandalia grunted, scrutinizing Zee, head held high on her arched neck, looking down her long snout. All dragons were amazing to Zee, but Aureosa’s was particularly glorious, oozing with power, and intimidating.

Aureosa chided her. “He does look quite heavy. Are you worried you may not be able to carry him all the way to the citadel?”

“Please,” she scoffed, smoke puffing from her nostrils. “I could carry ten of those little things to the north ice and back if I wished.”

Back to Zee, Aureosa said, “That’s as much of a ‘welcome aboard’ as you’ll get from Vandalia. Up you go.”

Conflicting desires pulled at Zee. All his life he’d wanted nothing more than to ride a dragon, and his chance had finally come. But...

He stepped closer to the port side rail and looked down at Jessup, who waited patiently, watching. “Thank you, Sir, but I’ll go with Jessup.” He cleared his throat and raised his voice. “If that’s okay with you, Jessup.”

Relief and joy swelled in his chest from his friend in the water, making the decision more than worth it. That, and thousands of people of Tosh and from many other nations had gotten to ride a dragon. How many had ever ridden a kraken?

“It’s okay with Jessup,” the kraken replied through a wide rubbery grin.

Zee removed his shirt and boots, then stuffed them into the duffel that contained all of his meager worldly possessions. He handed the bag to one of the Gold knights, who stood with a hand outstretched to receive it. It would be safer with her than in the water, and definitely drier. He patted the bag given to him by Dr. Aenig. “I’ll hang on to this one, if that’s all right.”

She nodded. He thanked her, then dove over the rail.

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Zee tread water a few yards from the beast. “Permission to board, Mr. Jessup?”

Jessup let out a snort that sprayed droplets over Zee. “Permission granted.”

Jessup raised an arm to help him. Zee sprung from it and climbed Jessup’s shell with dexterity earned by years of climbing lines, masts and ratlines. He settled above Jessup’s brow, feet on two spines, hanging on to two higher spines.

Vandalia lowered her head down next to the commandant’s shoulder. “It speaks, *and* it has a sense of humor.”

“*That’s one thing it has that you haven’t,*” he replied through their bond.

She harumphed. “*It has many things I do not. Like a hideous ugliness and arms like worms. But it still cannot fly.*”

“*You cannot swim.*”

“*Swimming is for fishes.*”

*“By that logic, flying is for birds.”*

*“I will bite you.”*

*“No you won’t.”*

The commandant ran a hand along her neck, then called down to Zee. “We’ll travel at appropriate speed for your mount, and circle around if need be. Try not to lose sight of us.”

The kraken said, “Jessup knows the way to citadel island.”

“You do?” asked Zee.

“Jessup went to see it. For Zee.”

Zee smiled and patted his shell. “I appreciate that, but you shouldn’t have. It could have been dangerous.”

“It was dark.”

“In that case,” said Aureosa, mounting his dragon. “Perhaps we’ll follow your lead.”

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Zee looked over the ship that had been his home, and his prison, for over half his life. He’d survived, grown stronger, and learned much, which were something. Now he was leaving. Whatever awaited him, he was going to Triumph’s Citadel Academy, even if it wasn’t assured he would be a cadet. No matter what they had planned for him and Jessup, it could never be more difficult or dangerous than what he’d experienced on the HMT Krakenfish. He waved to the surgeon with the deepest gratitude. Aenig waved back, then gave him a crisp salute.

The commandants and Gold knights took to the air. Vandalia circled tight over Jessup and he shouted down. “Lead the way, Mr. Jessup!”

“Aye, Sir!” Jessup replied.

Zee made no attempt to suppress the grin that spread across his face as Jessup made his way toward where the ring of ships was opening for them to pass. He looked back at the long octopod arms waving beneath Jessup’s wake, to the sides at others that pulled up and pushed back in even, practiced strokes, altogether propelling them smoothly forward at the same speed the ship had cruised on calm seas.

In the sky, many of the other dragons fell into formation, with the commandant in the lead. Vandalia’s long, graceful wing stroke put them all to shame. Others flew in flights of five out further at their flanks, another flight ahead, and another behind. The Gold Class knight from the citadel who wasn’t carrying the squire flew close to the commandant to receive orders, then

soared off ahead toward the island. Sent to deliver the news that a kraken and a murman were on their way to the citadel, Zee figured. Wonder, confusion, joy, and trepidation all churned within him. He could tell that Jessup was feeling the same way. His chest warmed and his krakenbond tingled pleasantly as they comforted each other, setting off on a new course in their lives, wherever it may lead. Whatever may come, they were together at long last. Salty tears mixed with the saltwater of the sea that misted Zee's face in the bright sun and warm breeze.

And he was riding a *kraken*.