

## Chapter 1

“Hurrah!” Zee cried, clinging to the harness of his pig, Midge, as she ran along the rocky shore. Out off the coast was a ship, not often seen in the rocky waters off this side of the remote key where Zee lived on the island kingdom of Tosh. He wondered if maybe they were surveying the coastline after last night’s earthquake. The trembling of the earth was a regular occurrence in that region of Tosh, but last night’s had almost knocked him out of bed.

The pig veered toward the water. “Not so close, Midge!” he shouted. She obeyed with a begrudging grunt. “Do you see the flags? That’s one of His Majesty’s Tradeships. It’s a galleon, with cannons and harpoon guns – and dragons!”

Two of the beasts, larger than the largest horses, swooped through the air closer to shore, with riders on their glistening backs. Their armor and saddlery marked them as Dragon Knights and officers in His Majesty’s Dragon Corps – true guardians and heroes of the realm. The knights wore scale mail shirts with half-sleeves over padded blue aketons, and gleaming helms.

“That green dragon with a silver belly is a Greatwing,” Zee explained to Midge with bubbling enthusiasm. “They fly fast and really far. The smaller white one is an Ice Diver. Instead of breathing fire, their projectile is ice particles. Isn’t that crazy? They can dive into the water to catch fish, too. They can’t stay under for long, though, because dragons have hollow bones, you know.”

If the pig did know, or care, she didn’t show it.

To hoots of encouragement from its rider, the Greatwing chased a flock of fat gulls and blasted them with a streak of flame. The air shimmered yellow around the dragon and rider, and the pair shot forward without the dragon flapping its wings. It snapped up the cooked birds with its long toothy maw.

Zee cheered. “Did you see that! That’s one of the Abilities bonded dragon and rider pairs can do when they reach a certain class. I think it’s called Haste.”

Yellow light flashed as the rider touched her chest with both hands and she was suddenly holding a fishing net in one hand and a line attached to it with the other.

“Keep!” Zee shouted. “She used their Keep! That’s a magickal space in a pair’s Empyrean core where knights can, you know, keep things.”

The dragon swooped low and the knight flung the net into the sea where it was dragged swiftly through the water. When the dragon swooped back up, the net was full of flopping fish. She swung it up as if it weighed nothing and wrapped the rope around a post on her saddle.

“That’s the best way to catch fish, ever!” Zee exclaimed.

The Greatwing swung closer to shore and flew along the beach. The knight saluted Zee while the dragon eyed the pig hungrily. Midge oinked with concern. The dragon grinned and rocked its wings before heading back out toward the Ice Diver.

“Hello!” Zee waved with enthusiasm. “Look at their shiny silver armor, Midge. That means they’re bond rating is Silver Class. That’s pretty high.” He pointed to the other pair, whose mail and helm were polished blue-gray. “They’re Iron Class.”

The sharp dorsal fin of a sheel cut along the surface of the water, its silver-black body undulating through the waves while it searched for prey. The Ice Diver swooped and blasted it with a jet of ice particles. The sheel bobbed to the surface among chunks of ice and the Greatwing shot a gout of fire, thawing and cooking it, setting the water around it bubbling. The Ice Diver snatched the fish out of the water, but the Greatwing bit hold of the sheel’s tail. Together they tore it in half and swallowed the pieces. The riders shouted at one another, laughing, and veered back toward the ship.

Zee couldn’t wait to tell his ma and da. He wanted to be a dragon rider more than anything. Da would say, “It’s all right to dream, but dreams don’t feed the pigs or pay the king’s taxes.” Ma would say, “To dream is a beautiful thing.” Zee wasn’t sure what that meant, exactly, but he liked it.

In his excitement, Zee began to wheeze and struggle for breath. He retrieved an old perfume decanter and squeezed the bulb to spray mist into his mouth, inhaling sharply, then concentrated on calming himself and controlling his breathing like Ma had taught him. Eyes closed, he drew air through his nose and blew out through his mouth, deeply as he could, and slowly. He felt his tension ease and his airways clear. Soon he could breathe normally again.

Zee’s heart was gripped by a fist of yearning as he watched the dragons fly away. His gaze wandered to where the ocean flowed onto and retreated from the beach like fingers of water

scrabbling endlessly ashore, grasping with futility to crawl upon the land. To grab him and drag him to the depths. And yet, something about it called to him, hypnotic and desirable...

He scratched absent-mindedly at his chest through the light cloth of his long sleeve shirt, then realized what he was doing. "Stop it, Zee," he reprimanded himself, repeating his ma's words. "You'll just make it worse." Still, he rubbed his neck and adjusted his scarf.

He sighed loudly. He'd better get his head back in the dirt, as his da liked to say. Time for work.

The beach looked different from yesterday. The earthquake last night must have been stronger than he'd thought. It had knocked some things about in the house and set the pigs to squealing, but done no real damage. It'd been a long time since the last big one, and from what Zee had heard about it, this didn't come close to that. Still, familiar stone formations were broken and ridges of sand and rock were heaved up where they hadn't been yesterday. More than he'd ever seen, in all his seven years.

He slid off Midge's back and set to combing the shore, gathering things for his mother to use in her medicines, like rutroot and wallowed, as well as things to eat. There wasn't always enough to eat. They couldn't eat the pigs, they sold for too much to keep for themselves. Midge wasn't for eating or selling. She was for riding and pulling the cart to town. She also helped Zee find things by rutting in the sand.

Zee caught a crab for crabby soup. It was a little skinny thing, but Ma would use it to flavor soup. He also gathered kelpy, slogs, and winkles, altogether making a slimy mess that he put in sacks and oilskin pouches strapped to Midge's back.

They stayed well away from the water's edge. He reminded Midge again when she strayed too close, and again, the pig grunted and obeyed. Zee's parents gave him his independence for the most part. He *was* seven years old, after all. But one rule was hard and fast. "Inviolable," his da called it. Don't go near the sea, and never, under any circumstances, was Zee to swim in the ocean, or even wade in the tide pools.

Zee sang part of the little song his mother had taught him.

*"Don't go near the water*

*Stay away from the sea*

*The riptides and the monsters*

*Will be the end of me.”*

As far as Zee knew, everyone in Tosh learned similar rhymes from a very young age.

*“The ocean is full of dangers  
Your distance you must keep  
Terrible toothy creatures  
Wait hungry in the deep.”*

And all of them involved krakens.

*“Most fearsome of all is the kraken  
King monster of the sea  
When the kraken comes arising  
Even dragons flee.”*

Zee couldn't imagine dragons being afraid of anything, and Da recently confessed to him that no one had seen a kraken in a thousand years, if they weren't a myth to begin with. The other dangers were real, though. Only really brave or crazy people swam in the ocean around Tosh, or anywhere else that Zee knew of. His ma would have a heart attack if she thought he even considered it. Out of love and respect for her and Da, he'd never tried. A good healthy fear and sense of self-preservation had something to do with it, too.

*“Don't go near the water  
Stay away from the sea  
The mighty monstrous kraken  
Will make a meal of Zee.”*

“Hey!” Zee shoved the greedy pig's snout away from a scraggly patch of King's Balm and jerked the torn shoots from her slobbery mouth. He stuffed the plants in a sack, then heard something that struck him silent and still.

A little sound, strange and heartbreaking, like a baby bird was drowning. Midge's ears stiffened and she cocked her head toward a broken outcropping of sharp black rocks.

Zee swiftly tied his sack to her harness. "Come on, Midge. Something needs our help!" He ran to the tumble of black stone. Ignoring scrapes from the sharp rocks, he scabbled up it with purpose.

This could be his chance to be a hero. Like a real Dragon Knight of the Realm, with his trusty dragon, Midge.

He came to the crest of the rocks, wheezing again, and peered over.

## Chapter 2

In the sweltering sun was a muddy pit, like a tide pool but drained into a crack in the earth, with broken stone around it. Lying in the thrust up mud were two torn-open eggs, similar to turtle eggs, but black, oval-shaped, and almost as big as Midge's head. Beside one of them was a creature Zee didn't recognize. Much like a squiddy or octopoo, with multiple arms, but different. Midge, who had found an easier way around, nudged it with her snout. Shining blue carcass-flies buzzed up as it flopped over, dead.

Zee gulped and tears formed in his eyes. He was too late. But then the arms of another one of the things squirmed weakly in the mud.

Zee scrambled down the rocks to where the pig snuffled at it. "No, Midge, don't eat it." Midge backed away with a grunt as Zee slopped through the sucking muck. He poked the little creature with a stick of drift wood, but it didn't react. Then he heard the gargling peep he'd heard before.

A third egg was mostly buried in the mud. Its surface undulated from feeble movement inside. Through a split in the shell, a tiny mouth peeped with fright.

Zee was frightened as well. He shouldn't have been going anywhere near these things. They could be dangerous. Poisonous even. But they were in trouble and needed help. Zee's help. Heroes had to be brave.

He set his little jaw, mouth formed in a determined frown, and went to his knees next to the egg. "It's okay. I'm here to save you."

He dug at the mud and tugged on the egg until it came loose with a sucking sound. "Oh, you're heavy."

The creature let out another peep as Zee slid the egg out of the watery hole. Zee hesitated again, then crooked his fingers into either side of the rip in the shell and pulled. It wasn't easy, like trying to rip kelp or wet leather. Zee grunted with effort and the split widened. Two little arms with rows of suckers along one flat side each forced their way out and reached for Zee. The creature peeped louder.

Zee set to the task with more ardor. "It's okay little thing, I've got you." It was even more difficult to tear at the egg with the creature's arms grasping one of his arms, but Zee finally pulled the baby free and held it out in front of him. And a strange baby it was.

It was basically a gray cone-shaped shell with ten wriggly arms protruding from its base (Zee counted them out loud). Several of the arms wrapped Zee's arms, holding tight. Not tight enough to hurt, just to secure itself, seeking safety and comfort.

Zee turned the thing this way and that, inspecting it for injury – and trying to figure out what it was. “Where did your mouth go? Where's your face?” he asked. “If you even have a face...”

As if in reply, more of the creature pushed itself down out of the shell, then a horizontal lid popped open and a bright green orb of an eye shoved out, looking right at Zee.

“Eee!” Zee squeaked. Only the grip of the thing's arms kept him from accidentally dropping it.

“Eee!” the thing squeaked, hanging on tighter so it wouldn't get dropped.

Recovering from his initial fright, Zee held the baby nearer to get a closer look. A nictitating lens slid down from over the creature's eye, leaving it clearer and brighter. The creature blinked, pushed itself farther out of its shell, and another eye opened. It had an octopod-like brow, a bump for a nose with two slanted slits for nostrils, and a wide mouth with rubbery lips. It blinked again and stared at Zee.

“Hi... *thing*.” Zee inspected it more closely. The shell had a slight corkscrewing ridge from bottom to top. Small nubs of the same color as the shell were randomly placed on its surface. He tilted the baby back, then up, then turned it all the way around. No more eyes opened, but the creature rotated its ocular orbs to keep an eye on him the whole time, even when he pointed the tip of its cone-head at himself.

“Oh...” Zee said. “That's nifty. Handy when swimming, I'll bet.”

Midge grunted, seeming as fascinated with the creature as Zee was. One of the baby's eyes swiveled to Midge and the baby peeped again, showing stubby triangular teeth.

Cautiously, the little creature probed out toward Zee's face with two of its arms. Zee didn't flinch, though he grimaced when the slimy things touched his cheek. Surprisingly, they were warm to the touch. The creature cooed, and Zee didn't protest when it reached with more arms and pulled itself closer to nestle against his shoulder and chest. Its head, or head-body, more like, vibrated as a little rumbling sound flowed through it. To Zee, it sounded like a cat purring, and his heart swelled.

A soft slap in the mud drew his attention to the other baby that was still alive. It gurgled pitifully, and Zee's swelled heart nearly broke.

He pulled the one he'd saved from the egg gently away from his chest. "We need to get you two out of the sun. And I bet you're hungry."

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Zee huffed and wheezed, what muscle there was in his skinny arms and legs burning. He'd trudged over a mound of rock and made his way down the other side, a baby squiddly-thing under each arm. He laid the sick one in the water of a clear tide pool further away from shore in the shade of a cluster of pom trees. The creature livened up a little, but didn't open its eyes.

Zee used his lung spritzer to ease his breathing while the other baby, the one he'd saved from the egg, squirmed under his arm. He leaned to the water, but the creature was reluctant to let go. "It's okay. I'm not leaving you." Not yet, Zee thought, as he checked the sun sinking from late afternoon toward evening.

*"Fear the shore in the day time  
A dangerous place to be  
But night time is the fright time  
The darkness you must flee."*

Sea creatures crawled onto the beach at night. Hungry, venomous, and toothy things. Zee had seen the tracks of their dragging bodies, claw prints in the sand, and the slime trails they left behind. Some of them were pretty big.

That's why he'd chosen this pool, a hundred feet from the shoreline, fed with fresh seawater from an underground fissure in the rock. He'd never seen any creature tracks near it, or anyone else come here. Rarely did people come to this remote stretch of rocky, inhospitable shore.

The baby allowed itself to be submerged and finally let go of Zee's arms. It settled on the shallow sandy bottom near the edge with just the pointed top of its shell sticking out, looking up at him from beneath the surface.

Midge had followed, and Zee offered the baby some slogs from one of the oilskin sacks. It gobbled them down, humming with a strange sound that resonated in the water. The creature's



big eyes followed a silver minny as it swam around the creature. On the minny's third pass, the baby snapped open its mouth, wider than Zee would have thought it could open, causing a rush of water to suck the fish in. Zee couldn't get the other one to eat, which made him sad. He hoped it would survive the night.

Zee spent much of the afternoon eagerly catching minnies from other tide pools with a small net Da had made for him and dumping them in the pool with the baby creatures. Some he kept in a water sack to take home for salt-drying and soup. He also buried the baby that had died, saying a solemn prayer to Postune to look after it in the great Sea of Heaven.

It was only when he heard Ma's bell ringing from over the high rocky dunes and up the steep slope that he realized what time it was.

"Oh, no." He was crouched at the edge of the pool, watching the baby thing swim clumsily around. "I'm sorry, but I have to go."

The baby swam to the edge in front of Zee, where it used its rubbery arms to pull itself out until its face was above the surface.

"You'll be okay here for the night," Zee assured it, hoping it was true. "I'll be back tomorrow, I promise." The baby blinked at him and held out one of its arms. "I'm sorry," Zee said, "I haven't introduced myself." He took the curled end of the arm in one hand. "My name is Zee Tarrow." He shook the arm gently. "And that over there is Midge, Queen of Pigs." Midge grunted from where she snuffled in the dirt for bitter pom fruits, but didn't look up.

The baby looked to Midge, then back to Zee, and peeped.

Zee's face scrunched. "'Peep' isn't much of a name." He thought a moment. "I think I'll call you Jessup. How does that sound?"

The creature peeped again, which Zee took as affirmation.

"All right then. Hello, Sir Jessup. It's very nice to meet you." He shook Jessup's arm again to make it official. It occurred to Zee he had no idea if the thing was male or female. Gazing at the creature, though, who gazed back innocently, Zee got a strong feeling it was a boy. At least that would do for now.

The bell rang again.

Zee hopped up. "I really have to go. I don't want to make Ma cross. I'll be back as early as I can in the morning." He scratched at the cloth of his home-sewn pants, frowning at the thought of leaving Jessup and his sickly sibling alone for the night. He'd briefly considered

taking them back to the house, but had quickly decided that wouldn't be a good idea. In fact, after some deliberation, he'd decided not to tell his ma and da about them at all. At least, not yet.

He hated the idea of keeping a secret from them, but Da was very practical. He might decide these sea things might be good to eat. Or maybe they were rare, since Zee had never seen one before, not even in the market or the fishers' fresh catches at the docks. They could be worth something. They might even be considered a delicacy. In that case, Da would surely sell them to help the family and the farm. Zee's da wasn't a bad man at all, he just always put family and practical matters first.

"You be careful down here, Jessup." He waved a stern finger at the creature, which looked up at him with its big green eyes. "Don't go crawling out." Zee eyed the pool and pointed to the center. "In fact, you and your brother should hide under those deeper rocks for the night if you can, okay?"

Jessup blinked and peeped.

"Okay. Have a peaceful night. Don't let the kraken bite." It was a silly saying, Zee knew, but it came naturally since his ma said it every evening when she tucked him into bed.

He trudged up the slope to where Midge waited, then looked back down at Jessup and waved, calling out, "See you soon," then climbed on Midge and they trotted off toward home.

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Jessup watched the boy and his mount disappear over the rocks that rimmed the pool. He pushed himself up in an attempt to see them still, but they were out of sight. His lips moved as he made little sounds, until he formed a word that sounded very much like, "Zee." Then he lowered himself beneath the surface, blew some bubbles, and went to drag his sibling beneath the rocks in the center of the pool.

### Chapter 3

Midge ran fast up the steep winding path from the coastline, Zee leaning forward and hanging on tight. They crested the slope, ran past the ramshackle sheds and the pigpens Da had built, then around the rickety barn, Midge kicking up dust all the way. The two scrawny chickens they owned squawked and scattered as Midge skidded to a halt in the barnyard.

“Hi, Ma. We’re back!” Zee slid off Midge, cheeks flushed, and began untying his bags.

Ma stood from where she was tending her herb garden. “Zepiter’s feathers, Zee.” She wiped her hands on her apron and placed her hands on her hips. “What in the great wide sea have you and Midge been up to?”

He was filthy, and so was the pig. Midge was one of the few animals that Da let him name – officially, anyway, since Zee had secretly named most of them – saying you should never name an animal you weren’t going to keep because it would hurt too much when they had to go away. Zee hadn’t yet learned that lesson. He had named the baby creature he’d saved. He wondered if that had been a mistake.

Zee looked down at himself, only now realizing the extent to which he was covered in mud and dust. “Um...” he flustered. “We gathered some good stuff today. Midge found sprigs of King’s Balm!”

“Looks like you both had to wrestle slop monsters in the Land of Mud to get it.”

Zee tried to wipe the mud from his pants, only managing to smear it and get it all over his hands. “Sorry, Ma.”

She flashed him a stern look, tinged with worry. “You didn’t get near the water?”

“No, ma’am!”

She took a deep breath and blew it out, shaking her head, then smiled and trod toward him. “You get yourself cleaned up. Midge can take care of herself.”

“Okay.” Zee hated to worry his Ma. “Here’s the King’s Balm.” He handed her the sack.

She took it and rubbed his head, then scowled at the filth that came away. “I’ll get the rest of your catch. Off you go to the sprinkler.”

“But, I can help—”

“Shoo!”

“Yes, Ma.” He also hated to make more work for his ma. She toiled from before sunrise to well after sunset every day. Not just cooking and cleaning, but mending clothes, which he and Da were particularly hard on, taking care of her garden and making tinctures, pastes, powders and salves to sell to merchants in the market. What she made didn’t fetch much coin, but every little bit helped. It hurt his heart to see her so tired every night, so he tried to help in any way he could. It looked like today he’d failed – though he had, he recalled, save a couple of baby creatures from almost certain death.

With that thought in mind, he scratched his trusty mount between the ears. “Thank you for your help today, Midge.” The pig grunted and Zee sprinted around to the back of the modest three-room house.

Other kids took baths, he knew, but Ma and Da insisted they all use the sprinkler that Da had rigged behind the house to trickle rainwater from a tub on the roof. “Why soak in your own juices when you can rinse them away?” Da said.

Zee stripped off his clothes and dumped them on a bench before Ma came around to check on him, as he knew she would. His lungs tightened again, and he scratched at the body rash he always bore while he calmed his breath. The rash had been with him for as long as he could remember.

He tried not to scratch too much, and Ma had developed an ointment of kelp goo, aloishus, and salt that eased the itch and reduced the redness. When he was younger, before Ma perfected the salve, he’d dig himself so badly he would bleed, and he bore scars all over his arms, legs and torso, some light, some dark and deep, as if he’d been attacked by wild beasts. He remembered how bad it was before the salve, the itch terrible and incessant. Now it stung and burned mightily, but he’d grown more accustomed to the constant irritation. He tried harder to bear it without showing discomfort, too, and never complained any more. He didn’t want his ma and da to see him suffering, it pained them so. Besides, he’d heard stories of the terrible burns and other grievous wounds Dragon Knights would receive in battle but still keep fighting. If they could do that, he would bear the pain and irritation the best he could.

His thoughts were interrupted as Ma came around the corner with a fresh bar of lard soap. “Here you go. Now get in there and scrub up good.”

“Yes, Ma!” Zee hopped under the spigot and pulled the rope, dousing himself, then rubbed the soap in his hair.

Ma scrutinized the rough red patches on his skin, running over with muddy water. “Rinse real well and dry up when you’re through. I’ll fetch the ointment.”

“Thank you, Ma,” Zee replied, downhearted she had to see it. He was old enough to put the ointment on himself, though she often insisted, and he couldn’t reach his back anyway.

He scrubbed himself with a natural sponge from the shore, careful not to rub too hard on the more afflicted areas of his skin because it made them burn worse.

Da trudged out of the sparse woods behind the house with an armload of firewood. “Hail, Sir Zee!”

Zee splashed the soap from his eyes, beaming at the nickname. “Hi, Da!”

Zee’s da paused, peering at the dark water that pooled at Zee’s feet before trickling away in the shallow trench dug just for that purpose. “You and Midge do some wallowing together today?”

“Oh, um, we were just busy combing the beach, as usual.”

“I hope you found something good.” Da stepped to the lean-to at the back of the house to stack the wood. “By the looks of ya, it was quite an adventure.”

Zee grimaced, then tried to hide it by scrubbing the gray suds in his hair. Once again, it bothered him to keep the secret of Jessup and the other strange little creatures from his parents. But he did have something to tell—

“There was a ship in the bay, Da, and Dragon Knights!”

Having completed his stacking of the wood, Da pushed up with a groan, his knees creaking. “You don’t say?”

“I swear it on Postune’s seaweed beard!” Zee replied, making an exaggerated sign of a trident over his heart.

Ma came around the corner carrying another set of clothes for Zee. “Dragon Knights, you say? You’ll have to tell us more over dinner.”

“Okay!” was Zee’s enthusiastic reply, rinsing off with a pull of the rope.

Da chuckled as he clapped his hands to clear the dust from his palms. He and Ma knew there was no shutting Zee up once he got talking about dragons and riders.

“Let’s get you finished up, now,” Ma said, placing the clothes on a bench. Da stepped up and held the rope while Ma scrubbed through Zee’s hair to help with the rinse.

Zee shivered with the chill and sputtered through the water. “You think they had squires on the ship? If not, maybe they need one.”

Da and Ma traded a look, partly amused, partly sad. “Maybe they do, son,” said Da, “but you know only fancy folks with loads of money and fancy little words in front of their surnames get to squire for knights and go to the Citadel for training and bond with a dragon. We ain’t got neither of those.”

“I know.” Zee suddenly felt bad about bringing it up again. It wasn’t his parents’ fault they weren’t rich and didn’t have a “mon,” “si,” “jal” or some such before their last name. Only the highborn had them. There were some merchant families who had gotten very wealthy without them, though. “Maybe one day we’ll have money. One can always hope, right Ma?”

Ma rubbed Zee with a towel, rough and quick on his head, then dabbed more carefully at his body. “Yes indeed, one always can, Zee, and should.”

Da added, “As long as it’s a practical hope.”

Zee grabbed the towel. “I can do it Ma.”

“All right. Such a big little man you’re getting to be.”

Zee wasn’t big at all and he knew it. He was small for his age, and skinny. Sometimes people would gape at him when he spoke to them, surprised he could talk so well for his size.

“Then I’ll scrub my clothes in the creek and hang ‘em to dry,” Zee volunteered, tugging on his pants.

Ma tossed his dirty clothes on the stones under the trickler and pulled the rope. “Let ‘em soak awhile.” She helped him pull his shirt down over his head. “We’ll do that later.”

Zee frowned, plopping down to pull on his boots. Then he brightened. “I’ll go feed Midge and the others, then.” With that, he hopped up and ran off around the house.

“Tie your boots!” his ma called after him.

“Yes, Ma!” he shouted back without slowing.

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Da shook his head. “Tires me out just watching him.”

“He’s a spritely one,” Ma said with a smile of motherly fondness. “Even with his rash and breathing problems.”

Da chuckled, then dropped his tall slim frame to sit on the bench next to the weathered teak table he'd built and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "He doesn't get his energy from me, that's for sure."

She sat next to him, her smile shifting to sadness. "He doesn't get it from either one of us, Jad Tarrow, and you know it."

Da took her hand. "I know it, Seela."

She placed her hand on his. "We'll have to tell him, one day." Her expression saddened more deeply and her voice grew softer. "I only pray that he understands what we've done for him, when he also realizes what we've done to him."

Jad reached his arm around her and held her close. "He will, Ma," he said, followed by a troubled sigh. "One day."

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Zee chattered all through their supper of crabby-minny soup and fried root crisps, describing the ship he'd seen and its rigging and the knights and dragons and their armor in great detail, gesticulating wildly with his arms the whole time. "Then the Ice Diver froze a sheel and the Greatwing cooked it with fire, and they ate it!"

"An Ice Diver?" Da asked with the proper amount of enthusiasm. "I haven't seen one of them in years."

Zee put on his seven-year-old's serious thinking face, which always made Ma grin. "Ice Divers are pretty common for riders to bond with at the academy. Their natural projectile is ice particles, but they can also produce heat. Not as much as the firebreathers, though. They use it for hollowing out nests in the glaciers where they live. That's where they lay their eggs."

"What are the other kinds of dragons that knights ride?" Da asked.

"Oh, Da, you know that."

"Nope, I've forgotten," Da lied. "You'll have to remind me."

There were books on the subject, but like his ma and da, Zee couldn't read. He'd learned all he knew from his parents and by pestering sailors at the docks across the key when they'd go to town for market once a month. Since his family couldn't read, they couldn't write things down either. They had to commit everything they wanted to know to memory, which required developing strong memory skills, and often meant repetition of things they knew. "Well, there are Greatwings, of course. They can fly really far and shoot fire in long streams. Most knights

ride Royals, though, because they're real strong and can shoot out huge blasts of hot flame. There are two kinds of those, and they have different tribes. Royal Crimson's have red scales. Royal Ebons are black, and bigger than Crimson's. They can shoot their flames farther, too, but not for as long."

Zee counted on his fingers while muttering the dragon types he'd mentioned. "And Rocks! There aren't as many of those. They're not all that big, and they're slow fliers compared to the others, but they're strong and have really thick hides, so it's harder for other dragons to hurt them. Their natural projectiles are globs of hot dragon ambergris, which is pretty nasty."

Ma asked. "Is that all the kinds of dragons?"

"Maybe not in the whole world, but those are the most common for Tosh, and the ones whose tribes the kingdom has made pacts with. Other kingdoms might have other kinds, but I don't know what they are." Zee was disappointed at the hole in his knowledge about other kinds of dragons. He'd have to make sure to ask about them next time he was in town.

"I think you're forgetting one," said Da.

"Oh!" Zee slapped himself in the forehead. "Mogon! Slan hai Drogo's dragon was a Blue Tasarabat. They were huge! As big as a fire drake. There aren't any of those around anymore, though. I don't know why."

"Who's Slan hai Drogo?" his da asked, feigning ignorance.

"Da, everybody knows that. The Heroes of Tosh! Drogo and Mogon beat a whole fleet of ships and bunches of dragon knights all by themselves in a huge battle a long time ago, but they were so badly injured they died." Mild sadness mixed with admiration crept over Zee's features at the thought of the sacrifice his heroes' had made to save their kingdom.

Da raised his eyebrows. "What about Pig Dragons?"

Zee rolled his eyes. "There's no such thing."

"What about Midge?"

"She's just a pig."

"Don't let her hear you say that. You'll break her piggy heart."

"You're silly."

"No, you're silly."

"All right, you two," Ma interjected. "Help me with the dishes, Zee?"

"Of course!"



As excited as he'd been to talk about dragons, his favorite subject, Zee's mind returned to the little creatures he'd found that day, and how they'd be down by the shore at night, all alone. He thought about Jessup especially, and his big googly eyes.

He realized he'd stopped halfway through drying the dish in his hand when his ma said, "You feeling all right, Zee? You haven't said a word in almost a whole minute."

"I'm fine, Ma," he replied, then added, "I'm just tired and thinking about the dragons," wincing inwardly at the lie.

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Ma applied ointment to the worst areas of Zee's rash while he sat on the edge of his bed. "What's this, then?"

Zee craned his neck back and tried to see the area high on his left pectoral muscle she had touched. All he managed was to cross his eyes and make a silly face. "I can't see it. What's it look like?"

"Let's see." She got up from her stool to fetch the oil lamp closer.

Zee ran his fingers over the small area on his chest. It felt rough, like sandstone.

She sat back down, handed him an old cracked mirror, and held up the lamp. "Here you go."

Zee angled the mirror so he could see the spot. It was light gray and roundish, about the size of the tip of his finger. "I don't know what that is, Ma. It tingles a little, but not like when I have a new rash coming on. It doesn't hurt or anything."

She felt around it. "Did you hit yourself on something or touch anything you wouldn't normally?"

Zee scrunched his face in thought. "I don't think so." Then he sat up straight as he realized something.

"What is it?"

Zee scrambled to think of what to say. "I, um, was up by the pom trees. Maybe there was something there, like itch-weed." It wasn't exactly a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth either.

She cocked her head and he tried to look as innocent as possible. She took a deep breath. "It doesn't look like itch-weed, and it isn't red around the edges. It could just be the start of a wartlump, or a type of mole. If it's not painful, we'll just keep an eye on it." She set the lamp and mirror on top of the plank shelves where Zee's clothes were kept. "Into bed with you."

She'd tucked him in and kissed him on the forehead. "Have a peaceful night. Don't let the krakens bite."

"Good night, Ma," he said with a smile.

After she'd blown out the lamp and closed the door to his tiny room, Zee let out an exaggerated "Phew!" It was true he didn't recall touching anything like itch-weed. With his rash, he was especially careful not get near anything like that, and his ma had taught him to recognize all the poisonous plants in the area.

He did, however, pick up a weird squiggly octopoo thing and its sibling and carry them around. Could he be allergic to Jessup? Then again, if he was, he should have it all over himself. It wasn't very strong reasoning, but it was enough to dampen his fears some.

He stared out the window at the two moons that watched over night on the watery world of Zhera, gently touching the patch on his chest and worrying about Jessup and the other baby creature. The patch felt warm, but in a pleasant way. It comforted him and even helped him bear the incessant sting and itch of his rash, which never ceased entirely, even with a fresh application of ointment.

When he finally fell asleep, he was disturbed by dark dreams about all manner of sea beasties creeping up on the tide pool where he'd placed the little creatures he'd saved.

## Chapter 4

Zee sat upon Midge at the top of the rocky rise that sloped down toward shore, watching over his shoulder in nervous anticipation as morning light brightened. He'd risen early, gobbled down his breakfast and run out of the house before he usually did, leaving his da chuckling and Ma shaking her head.

As soon as the crown of the sun's bald head peeked above the hills, he slapped Midge on the shoulder and thrust an arm in the air. "Take flight!"

Midge couldn't launch herself into the air like a dragon, of course, but she did her best by bolting down the slope. Zee cried out as he nearly tumbled off, but caught himself and hung on while they wound their way down, burlap bags and oilskin sacks flapping at the pig's sides. Midge knew exactly where Zee wanted to go, and took the shortest route to the tide pool where they'd spent most of the day yesterday.

She skidded to a stop at the top of the rocks near the pool, nearly toppling Zee forward this time. Zee slid off, knees shaking, but instead of being angry or frightened, he was flushed with excitement. He hugged Midge around the neck. "Good pig!" Midge grunted and snuffled off to rut for more pom fruits.

Zee picked his way down to the pool and peered into the clear water. "Hello? Jessup? Are you awake?"

There was no sign of the babies, causing Zee to worry all the more. Then Jessup poked his gray cone-shaped head out from beneath the black rocks at the center of the pool and shoved out his eyes. He caught sight of Zee and peeped under the water, then reached out with his arms and extricated himself from the tight space.

Zee grinned and waved. "Good morning!"

Jessup sat on his arms under the water, blinking up to him. Zee moved closer to the edge and leaned over. "I can't come in after you. I'm not allowed to go in the water. You'll have to come to me." Jessup cocked his head. Zee beckoned with his hands. "Come on. It's okay."

Jessup shuffled along the bottom with a squirmy-armed waddle, then stopped, appearing to be thinking about something, puffed out his cheeks, and floated up until his shell popped to the surface like a cork. Zee watched in amazement as Jessup wriggled awkwardly with his arms,

then got the hang of treading water and pushed himself up until his face was out of the pool. The little creature grinned at his accomplishment.

“That’s awesome!” Zee cried. He waved his hands toward himself in encouragement. “Come on.”

Jessup paddled to the edge, and with more determination, pulled himself further out. Then he tipped and fell over backward with a peep, where he flailed about, half-in, half-out of the pool.

“Hang, on!” Zee crouched and snatched hold of an arm. “I’ve got you!” The creature wrapped Zee’s wrist and allowed himself to be lifted and tipped up into Zee’s arms.

Zee sat back, grinning, with Jessup in his lap. “There you go, safe and sound.” The creature stared up at him, making little gurgling sounds. “Did you have a good night?”

Jessup blinked wide and said, “Zee!” The sound of it gave Zee such a start he cried out and nearly slipped into the water.

Zee sputtered, “You can talk?”

“Zee!” Jessup said again.

Recovering from his shock, Zee asked, “Can you say anything else?”

“Midge!”

Midge jerked her head up and stared at the little creature.

Zee was overcome with joy. “That’s amazing! What else can you say?”

“Zee!”

Zee giggled. “That’s a good start, I guess. I’m going to talk all the time so you can learn some new words.”

Midge’s eyes fell on Zee, the look on her piggy face practically communicating, “Nothing new there.”

Zee peered into the pool once more. “Where’s the other one?”

Jessup gurgled softly, the sides of his mouth turning down and the lids of his eyes lowered at the sides. A sadness rose in Zee’s chest, emanating from his touch with the creature on his lap, and he knew the other baby was dead.

A bell later, Jessup had pulled the limp body of his sibling out from under the rock and drug it to the edge of the pool, where Zee had fished it out of the water with a piece of driftwood. Now Zee shoved the sharp end of a marker made of sticks lashed together with vines in a crude

rendering of Postune's trident at the head of the grave where he'd buried it next to the one that had been dead when Zee found them, beneath the cluster of poms. Jessup watched quietly from where he clung to Zee's back, peering over Zee's shoulder. Like he'd done before, Zee commended the little creature's soul to the Sea of Heaven. They returned to the tide pool and Zee proceeded to gather tasty things for Jessup to eat, which cheered the little fellow up quite a lot.

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A small skinny boy, a little ten-armed sea creature, and a pig, scrounged through the stony sand of the beach, as had become their daily routine after Jessup had been fed each morning. Jessup shuffled along on his arms, moving much better than he had early on. His head, or body, though Zee figured it was both, was oversized for his limbs, and at first he'd fall over with a squawk quite often. It was an effort to squirm his legs under and right himself, so Zee'd had to tip him back up on many occasions.

Jessup was becoming more adept at swimming, too. He could tuck his legs forward, then fan them out and shove them back in the water to push himself, but he'd also learned to hold them behind him and wave them to move more evenly and faster. When he wanted a burst of speed, he'd shoot a jet of water out his bottom between his legs, stirring up the sand. Round and round the tide pool he'd go, humming under the water.

Zee spotted the telltale spout-hole of a particularly tasty find and shouted, "Clammys!" He knelt and proceeded to dig with a sharp stick.

Jessup slithered an arm into another watery hole in the sand. "Zee!" he cried. "Jessup found thing!"

Zee turned from where he was brushing sand off the clammy he'd dug up, still amazed at how quickly Jessup was picking up words and putting them together. There was still plenty for him to learn, though. "Jessup found *something*," Zee corrected.

Jessup's nodded his whole head. "Yes!"

Zee chuckled. "What is it?"

With a grunt, Jessup tugged his arm free and held up his catch. Gripped in the curl at the end was a rotted perchy, the tail-end of it mostly spine and rib bones. "Fish!"

"Ew!" Zee exclaimed, then seeing Jessup's disappointment, said, "I mean, 'Oh!' That's very nice, but I don't think we need it today. Is that all right?"

Jessup looked perplexed, then held it out to the pig. "Midge! Fish!"

Midge came closer to snuff at Jessup's prize, but shook her head with a snort and backed away. Jessup held the fish to his nose, sniffed, then popped the whole thing in his mouth. Zee fought between laughing and gagging at the crunch and slurp of Jessup chewing the nasty thing.

Jessup swallowed and patted his shell above his eyes. "Yummy!" He got a serious look on his face and repeated his version of what Zee had told him when it was time to get to work. "Head back in dirt."

Zee's lips spread in a smile as Jessup turned and continued his waddling beachcombing with a diligence to match Zee's own.

There were few other children in the area where Zee lived, and his family couldn't afford to pay for the only school in town, several miles away on the other side of the key, so Zee had no friends other than Midge. Now, he had Jessup too. He hadn't realized how alone he had been until Jessup came along. He felt oddly calm around the little creature, in stark contrast to his usual high-speed self with his mind whirling all the time, and sometimes he imagined he could sense Jessup's emotions, and even hear – no, *feel* – what Jessup was thinking. On a few occasions he swore Jessup reacted to what he was about to say before he said it, while the words were still forming in his mind. He put it down to his overactive child's imagination and happiness at having rescued this strange creature he was becoming so incredibly fond of.

Zee watched his little friend shuffle over the sand, the gray patch on his chest warming with the thoughts of their friendship. The pleasant feeling spread through his heart and stomach as Jessup turned and smiled at him, then surged with elation when the little creature pounced on a small crabby.

"Got you!"

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As they often did at the end of a day on the beach, Zee sat on a flat rock overlooking the sea, singing to Jessup while flinging stones to skip on the waves. Today it was the simple rhyme his mother had sung to him since he was a babe in the cradle, the mantra that helped keep him safe from the dangers of the ocean. Jessup hummed along and chimed in with the last word of every verse – or one of his own making – which never failed to make Zee grin.

*"Don't go near the water*

*Stay away from the sea*

*The riptides and the monsters”*

*“Will be the end of—”*

*“Zee!”*

*“Fear the shore in the day time*

*A dangerous place to be*

*But night time is the fright time*

*Before then you must—”*

*“Flee!”*

*The ocean is full of dangers*

*Your distance you must keep*

*Terrible toothy creatures*

*Wait hungry in the—”*

*“Deep!”*

*Most fearsome of all is the kraken*

*King monster of the sea*

*When the kraken comes arising*

*Even dragons—”*

*“Flee!”*

*“Don’t go near the water*

*Stay away from the sea*

*The mighty monstrous kraken*

*Will make a meal of—”*

“Jessup!”

“Very good!” Zee complimented. “You’re a better singer than I am.”

Jessup chuckled to himself. “Zee silly.” He picked a stone off the pile between them and threw it. It flew straight up, then came back down to bounce on the edge of the rock in front of him and plop into the water below Zee’s dangling feet.

“You’re getting better,” Zee encouraged.

“No!” With a determined frown, Jessup took up another stone.

Zee felt the dogged resolution, tinged with anger, that his little friend exuded when trying to accomplish something new.

Jessup wound back an arm and threw again. Zee ducked, the stone spinning wildly past his head.

“Be careful!”

“Sorry, Zee.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry, but try throwing from the side, like this.” Zee made the sweeping motion slowly, then picked up a stone. “See how I hold it? Now, watch me.” Jessup watched carefully as Zee threw, sending the stone skipping across the waves.

Jessup took another stone, practiced a side-arm throw slowly, then took a deep breath like he’d seen Zee do when he was concentrating on something, and threw. The stone didn’t go far, but it skipped twice.

“Hurrah!” Zee cried, thrusting his fists into the air. “You did it!”

“Jessup skipped!” The little creature thrust up all ten arms. “Hurrah!”

“Yes, you did.” Zee placed a hand on Jessup’s shell. “Now, I want to show you something.” He took Jessup by the base of the shell and lifted him into his lap. “You’re getting heavy!”

“Heavy Jessup!”

“And bigger, too.” The creature had indeed increased in size over the last few of weeks. His shell had become harder too, while the little nubs that rose from its surface and the ridged spiral that corkscrewed up from the base of his shell to the point of his cone, where a raised point in the form of an arrow head was taking shape, had become more pronounced. Sometimes at



night, instead of sleeping under the rocks in his pool, he would corkscrew himself into the sand at the bottom, using his arms to unscrew himself in the morning.

Zee reached into his shoulder bag, made from a grain sack, and retrieved a lacquered wooden box, which he set down in front of them.

Jessup pointed with one of his arms. "What's that?"

Zee laughed. That phrase had been Jessup's favorite thing to say for almost a week. He'd point at something and say, "What's that?" Zee would explain, then he'd point at something else and say it again, then something else, over and over again, with a desire to learn that matched Zee's own. Even Zee would become exhausted answering all Jessup's questions. That phase had passed for the most part, but Jessup was still curious as ever.

"It's my treasure chest. My Da made it for me. It's where I keep my treasures." He opened the lid.

"Ohh," Jessup exclaimed. "Pretty."

Inside was a collection of crystals and smooth shiny rocks, colorful sea shells and bits of sea fan, tiny fossils, a shiny brass belt buckle, a couple of malformed pearls, and other trinkets.

"These are all things I found on the beach," Zee explained. "I keep it hidden under my bed because you have to keep treasure chests secret, you know. Otherwise pirates might steal them."

"Secret," Jessup said softly, then climbed down off Zee's lap for a closer look. He poked through the items carefully.

"I found an old King's coin one time. Ma said it would have been enough to buy more pigs and maybe pay for schooling so I could learn to read, but Da is an honest man, and all real treasure that's found on land belongs to the king. He took it to town and gave it to the lord governor's men."

Jessup uncovered something in the box that caught his eye. "Ohh..." He had to use suckers near the tips of two arms to lift it out. He stared at it wide-eyed as it gleamed in the sun. "What's that?"

"It's a marble. People play games with them." The ball of glass was clear with swirls of all the colors of the rainbow. Zee had always marveled at how anyone could make such a thing.

"Pretty marble," Jessup said, then popped it into his mouth.

“Hey!” Zee admonished. He held a hand down in front of the little creature. “Spit it out.” Jessup swiveled his eyes up at him. “It’s not good for you. It would probably make you sick.”

Jessup spat it into Zee’s palm, along with a generous amount of baby-creature spittle. Zee wiped the marble and his hand off on his pants.

“Sorry, Zee,” Jessup uttered, and Zee could not only see the remorse on his face, he could feel it in his heart.

“Don’t be sorry. It does look like something tasty,” Zee said in an attempt to cheer him up. He lifted a loop of cord over his head. Hanging from it was a pointed black object, smooth and lustrous from being polished in the sea. “Here’s another treasure. Da says it’s a dragon tooth. He drilled a hole in it so I can wear it for good luck.”

Jessup touched it gently. “Shiny dragon tooth.”

“It’s my favorite thing I ever found on the beach.”

“Favorite?”

“Yup.” Zee replied with a smile. “Except for you.”

Jessup had to think about that, but then his expression brightened. “Favorite Jessup?”

Zee grinned. “Very favorite Jessup.”

Jessup lifted several of his arms toward Zee, grinning to himself. “Very favorite Zee.”

Zee lifted him into his arms and held him close, the warmth of the spot on his chest spreading through his body. The spot had grown to almost the size of a King’s copper, its surface rougher, and it was turning darker gray. His mother treated it with ointment like she did his rash and said nothing, but he could tell she was concerned about it. He’d even heard her talking to Da in whispers, saying she hoped it wasn’t a more dangerous manifestation of his lifelong condition. It didn’t itch, and wasn’t spreading all that fast, so Zee didn’t worry too much. “Worry is only suffering over something that might never happen,” his Da would say.

“Even though it’s a secret,” Zee said. “I wanted to show you my treasure chest because you’re my best friend, Jessup.”

“Best friend Jessup.”

“And best friend Zee.”

They sat together watching the ocean, the only sounds the splashing waves, a warm breeze through the pom trees, and Midge snuffling in the sand. The bell rang from home, and

Zee had to go. Parting each evening was heartbreaking, but they were both tough little fellows, and there was always the promise of seeing each other the next day.

## Chapter 5

The weekend at the end of the third week since Zee had found Jessup came, and it was market day. Zee hated to leave Jessup alone for so long, but he'd promised to come to the beach and see him when he and Da got back that afternoon. Zee was excited, too. If he could figure out how to ask his questions without raising suspicion or giving Jessup's existence away, he was going to see if he could find out exactly what kind of creature his little friend was.

It was just before sunrise as Da hitched up Midge and Boaris, an older male hog even larger than Midge, whom Zee had also been allowed to name since he was kept for breeding. The two older hogs lead four half-yearling pigs to pull the cart. Zee helped pack and load Ma's tinctures and powders, along with some teak chairs Da had made to sell.

Ma often went with them, but she wanted to stay and get some housekeeping done. She handed them their packed lunches, kissed them both on the cheeks, and waved them off.

Da promised to bring her something special, at which she frowned and shouted after them. "Don't you spend any coin you don't have to, Jad Tarrow!"

Da pretended he didn't hear her, but winked at Zee.

It took a while to cross the key, what with the pigs' slow pace and Da unhitching them part way to get a drink and wallow in the shallows of a pond to cool themselves. It also afforded a last chance for Zee and his father to clean them up before they arrived at market. Wiping them down and spreading oil over their bodies to make their hides shine, Zee realized how much he missed Jessup already, like an empty space had been left in his heart.

The market in the central square of the small coastal town of mon Tontuga was already set up for Market Day, but the stalls and tables weren't as crowded with customers as they had been last time.

"Where is everybody, Da?" Zee asked.

"Tax time is coming," Da answered with a touch of defeat. "Folks don't have as much coin to spend this time of year." When Da saw the concern on Zee's face, he forced cheer into his voice. "Don't worry your little head, son. It's not a boy's concern. Your ma and I have been saving up."

That put some pluck back into Zee's mood – as did the cry of gulls and sight of masts rising from the port at the edge of town. "Can I, Da?"

His father smiled. "Like I could stop you. Try not to talk the sailors ears clean off. They need them, you know."

Zee grinned back. "Okay, Da. I'll try." He grabbed his shoulder bag and clambered down from the cart. He patted the bag. "Got my lunch. Meet you at the auction at one bell after midday?"

"As always, and don't you be late. Your mother would worry something fierce."

"I'm always on time. Sometimes early!"

"Come to think of it, you are. Forgive my lapse in memory."

"Oh, Da." They had this conversation every time they came to town. He backed away, waving. "Good luck!"

"Who needs luck? I've got pigs!" With that, Da slapped the reins like he was driving horses. "Yah!" The pigs grunted and trudged forward. Da pretended like he was being thrown back by a sudden burst of speed.

Zee laughed and watch them go, then turned toward the docks, considering his mission to find out what kind of creature Jessup was, and took off at a run. Every time Zee's parents brought him to market he'd slip away to question anyone he could about ships and the sea, but especially about dragons and Triumph's Citadel Academy, the most elite and only school for riders in the kingdom of Tosh.

Zee strode along the wharf, keeping an eye out for a likely sailor to approach. Most sailors were happy to tell yarns, especially after a few cups of grog, then caught his breath at the sight of shining armor over a blue quilted aketon that could only be worn by a Dragon Knight of the Realm. She and her squire sat at a table on the outdoor deck of a saloon.

The lady knight looked right at him and his knees went weak.

"You all right, lad?" she asked. "Never seen a knight before?"

Zee swallowed and forced himself to speak. "Only from a distance."

She pointed toward his neck. "What's that you have there?"

For a moment Zee feared his scarf had come loose and she'd seen his rash. His hand flew to his neck and he realized his necklace was hanging outside his shirt.

"My Da says it's a dragon tooth, Sir."

The woman's squire, a boy of fourteen or so, glared at Zee with disdain. "A lady knight is to be addressed as Ma'am, boy. Have you no couth?"

Zee took no offense at the squire's scornful manner, and responded innocently. "I don't know what 'couth' is, but I might like to have some."

The knight chuckled, and the squire snorted. She shot him a look that wiped the derisive sneer from his face. "Manners, Tem."

"My apologies, Ma'am."

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to."

The squire balked, but under the stern gaze of his master, he nodded formally at Zee. It was apparently as much of an apology as he was willing to give, and it pained him to offer even that.

The lady knight beckoned Zee closer, nodding toward his necklace. "May I see it?"

Zee gulped, tucked his scarf tighter to the skin of his neck, then stepped onto the deck.

She lifted the tooth. "It's a dragon tooth, all right. From a Rock, I'd say. One of the smaller teeth from the bottom jaw near the middle." She let it drop back against his shirt. "That's quite a prize."

Zee beamed with joy at having his treasure verified by a real knight. He tucked it back under his collar.

"Thank you, Ma'am."

"What's your name, lad?" the lady knight asked.

"Zee Tarrow, Ma'am." The scorn returned to the eyes of the squire. Zee knew why. There was no fancy little word in front of his last name.

"Have you had your midday meal?" the knight inquired.

Zee patted his shoulder sack. "Ma packed me a lunch."

"Perhaps you'd like to save it for your next meal. Pray join us in our repast. We have plenty and can always order more." The squire squirmed at the invitation, but the knight paid him no attention.

Zee grinned. "Thank you! That is very kind."

To the squire's obvious discomfort, Zee climbed up on one of the chairs. His chin barely cleared the tabletop, so he tucked his knees under himself.

The knight introduced herself. “I’m Dame Zara mon Toomsil, Knight Chevalier of His Majesty’s Dragon Corps, assigned to His Majesty’s Tradeship Fleet.” She held a hand toward her squire.

The squire looked down his nose at Zee. “And I am Temothy jal Briggs, Esquire.” A raised eyebrow suggested Zee should recognize the name. He didn’t.

Flushed with excitement and hardly believing his grand luck, Zee responded. “It’s an honor to meet the both of you.”

“You see,” Dame Toomsil said to Tem, “Zee Tarrow here has couth to spare.” Her voice hardened. “Now fix him a plate.”

Tem jal Briggs’s face turned red as he tore a leg off one of the glazed seaducks on the platter and placed it on a plate, along with boiled tubers and jellied redberries. He appeared to resist flinging it at Zee before sliding it across, then handed over a knife and fork.

Zee waited, utensils in hand, not sure if he should begin.

Dame Toomsil took a bite, then noticed Zee wasn’t eating. “Go ahead. We’ve already started.”

Zee tasted the seaduck. It was so delicious he had to force himself not to shovel it in. Still, the squire seemed put off his meal just from watching him. The lady knight had no such compunction and ate heartily.

The saloon proprietor’s tray rattled as she stopped short at the sight of what could be considered a street urchin sitting at one of her tables – with a Knight of the Realm, no less. “Is everything all right here, Dame Toomsil?”

The knight took a healthy slug of her wine. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Realizing her mistake, the proprietor said, “I... was just wondering if I could bring you anything else.”

“Zee Tarrow, would you like something to drink?”

“A small cup of water would be lovely,” Zee replied.

Back to the proprietor, the knight said, “A goblet of sweet-wine for the young gentleman.”

“Right away, Ma’am.” The woman sped off.

“I’ve never had sweet-wine,” said Zee.

“I’m sure you’ll like it.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “And I wouldn’t drink the water here if I were you.”

“Oh.” Zee had never eaten at an establishment like this before, so he had no idea. “Thank you.”

She nodded and set to her meal. Zee inspected her raiment with admiration, then awe as he caught sight of the band of green satin scales that circled her wrist.

“What do you think, now that you’ve seen a knight from a closer distance?”

Zee jumped at her voice, then swallowed so as not to speak with his mouth full. “You are glorious.” She grinned and his cheeks turned red. “Ma’am,” he added. His gaze returned to the wristband of scales. “Is that your dragonbond?”

She pulled up her sleeve and turned her wrist so he could see the wide band scales went all the way around. “You know what this is, then?”

“I do. Well, only from what I’ve been told.”

“And what have you been told?”

Zee took a deep breath and repeated what he’d heard from old sailors and townsfolk, his eyes shining with excitement. “After a dragon accepts a rider at the academy, and if they are truly compatible, a bond develops between them and a band of the dragon’s scales will grow on the rider’s wrist, proving to the world and Zepiter they are one, bonded for life. The longer a rider and dragon pair are together, the stronger they get, developing more Abilities, and the wider the band grows. Some older riders have scales all the way up to their elbows!”

Dame Toomsil nodded, her lips curving on one side at Zee’s youthful enthusiasm. “Well said, and entirely correct.” Her gaze returned to her dragonbond and she gently touched the scales. Her voice brimmed with affection. “It was the greatest day of my life when the bond was complete and Peloquin’s scales fully encircled my wrist; an honor beyond anything I had ever imagined.”

Zee’s gaze went from her dragonbond to her armor, then back to her dragonbond. “Were you flying near the beach on the other side of the key a few weeks ago?”

“I was.”

“I saw you!”

“That was you? The boy on a pig?”

Tem choked on a bite of seaduck.



“Are you all right there, Tem?” Dame Toomsil asked, perfectly aware of why he’d choked.

Tem held up a hand and swallowed, then cleared his throat and wiped his napkin across his lips. “I’m fine, Ma’am.”

Zee answered the knight’s question. “Yes, Ma’am, that was me and Midge. You and that other knight and your dragons were amazing!”

“Thank you.”

“I remembered that one of the dragons was a green Greatwing, and the scales of your bond are the same, and the knight wore Silver class armor, just like yours.”

“That’s very observant of you, Mr. Tarrow.”

Zee giggled. “No one ever called me that before. Mr. Tarrow is my Da.”

“And so are you. If you worked on a ship, that’s what you’d be called all the time, even at your age.”

Zee looked over her armor again. “I saw you use some of your Abilities. I bet you’re high level Silver class.”

“Thank you kindly, good sir,” she said, making Zee blush again. “But Peloquin and I are medium level.”

“Medium level Silver is still very impressive, if you ask me.”

She smiled. “We have some work to do before we achieve high level. Progression becomes more difficult as you rise through the classes.”

“Then you can progress to Gold,” Zee said with enthusiasm. “Then White Titan, Red Titan, and Black Titan!”

“That would be quite a feat,” she replied with a chuckle. “No pair has achieved Black Titan Class since Sky Marshall Slan hai Drogo and his dragon, Mogon, who are gone these last eighty years and more.”

“The Heroes of Tosh,” Zee exclaimed. “They’re legendary!”

“The Terrors of Tosh,” said Tem derisively.

Dame Toomsil said, “They have been called that as well.”

“Why would anyone call them that?” Zee asked.

“Let’s just say they used some unconventional methods in their last battle and leave it at that.”

“Okay.” From the tone in her voice, Zee could tell he shouldn’t push the issue. “But they did save the kingdom, right?”

“They did. The forces of Tosh and our allies were greatly outnumbered. If it weren’t for Drogo and Mogon, we would be under rule of the Luftoo Empire today.” Her eyebrows lifted in regard. “Drogo and Mogon were surprisingly young when they achieved Black Titan Class and held an almost unheard of high level at the time of their deaths. Both of them were only twenty-nine.”

Zee’s eyes were alight with glee. “Wow,” was all he could manage to say. Twenty-nine seemed pretty old to him, but learning anything new about Drogo and Mogon was a rare treat.

“Tosh may have no Black Titans,” the knight continued, “but we do have three Red Titan’s. The king and his dragon are a low level Red Titan pair. The academy’s commandant pair is high level, as are the deans of magicks. And the commandants and deans not only hold the highest classes in Tosh, they are the last remaining of the riders who fought beside Drogo and Mogon in the last great war. You’d never know it from looking at them. Higher bond ratings extend lives beyond that of normal people, and dragons naturally live longer than human beings anyway.”

“I’ve heard about that,” Zee said. “I’d love to see them in battle,”

Dame Toomsil chuckled. “Be careful what you wish for, Mr. Tarrow.”

He had learned so much already, Zee tried not to be too much of a pest for the rest of the meal and wear out his welcome. He ate more and spoke less, but that didn’t mean he didn’t ask a few more questions. He just couldn’t help it.

Dame Toomsil didn’t seem to mind. She spoke easily, encouraged by his innocent inquisitiveness, as if she had all the time in the world – which Zee found out she practically had.

“Several days after you saw us flying near the shore our ship ran aground on a rock where one shouldn’t have been, thrust up by the recent earthquake,” she explained. “We wrested it free, but the damage was too severe to continue sailing. Peloquin and I flew to call on oartugs to bring us around to the closest shipyard, which just happens to be here in mon Tontuga. Repairs are almost complete, and we should be ready to sail within a few days.”

“Thank Zepiter,” Tem said under his breath.

The effect of the ointment Zee’s ma had applied to his rash that morning was beginning to wear off, and the sting and itch to return. With a great force of will developed over years of

suffering with the affliction, he refrained from scratching or even rubbing his skin through his clothing. He had to leave soon, though, and finally he worked up the courage to ask, “Do you know of any knights that are looking for a squire?”

Tem snorted once again. Dame Toomsil shot him a glance that slapped the smirk from his face, then answered Zee as sympathetically as possible. “You are much too young, yet. The minimum age is thirteen, though most are fourteen, like Tem, when they begin. It is also extremely competitive.”

Zee hid his dismay the best he could. He knew she was really saying that a boy with no money and a name like Tarrow had no chance. When he’d first learned that, he’d only let it get him down for a short time. He was determined he’d get there, one way or the other. He just had no idea how.

And so, it was with delight he heard her add, “There have been exceptions, however. Those outside of the system, so to speak, have been granted squirehood, and even acceptance into the academy directly, if they were deemed particularly worthy.”

“Really?”

“It’s very rare, but it does happen.”

Zee beamed with hope.

It was with joy in his heart that he climbed off his chair to make his leave. His face glowing with appreciation, he performed an awkward salute. “Thank you again, Ma’am. I will never forget you.”

Dame Toomsil raised her goblet. “Somehow, I have a feeling I won’t forget you either, Zee Tarrow.”

Zee grinned, cheeks pinking, then turned and ran down the wharf.

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Timothy jal Briggs dropped his scowl as his master turned back to him. “Begging your pardon, Ma’am, I’m only asking for my own education, but is it within a knight’s purview to give false hope to the peasantry?”

Dame Toomsil’s features darkened. “Here are two lessons for you, young squire, *for your education*. First, a good and proper knight never uses the term ‘peasantry.’ Second, it’s a knight’s highest duty to give hope to all who need it, regardless of wealth or status, and those without either, most of all.”

Tem jumped as she slammed her hand on the table to drive her point home. He sat up straight. “My sincerest apologies, Ma’am. Lesson learned.”

“I doubt it,” she grumbled, taking another drink of her wine. “And make a note to remind me later that we need to have a talk about your manners.”

Tem gulped.

## Chapter 6

Spirits soaring like a dragon in flight, Zee skipped along the wharf. He couldn't wait to tell his da that he'd had lunch with a real Dragon Knight. Da was going to be so surprised. And especially about how sometimes people did get into the citadel academy, even without money or fancy names. Zee just had to prove himself worthy, somehow.

He stopped short. "Oh no, I forgot to ask about what kind of creature Jessup is." He'd been wracking his brain for days, trying to figure out how to pose his questions without arousing too much attention. If someone suspected Zee actually had the creature and started asking questions, he didn't know what he'd do. He didn't like lying, and worse, he was terrible at it. He couldn't imagine lying to a dragon knight, anyway. Somewhat eased from the worry at having missed an opportunity, and further considering how he was going to broach the subject of what Jessup was, Zee continued along the wharf. A high pitched roar stopped him in his tracks.

Out over the harbor, a white Ice Diver dragon approached the docks, a knight rider on its back. It screeched again and swooped, snatching a toona from the bay, then carried it straight to a ship raised out of the water and propped on beams on the wharf ahead of where Zee stood.

The beast dropped the vigorously flopping fish on the main deck, to the surprised shouts of several sailors, then flapped out and around to the perch deck at the back of the ship, higher than the quarterdeck where the wheel resided behind the forward-placed mizzenmast. Longer and wider than the poop deck on a regular ship, the perch deck was designed specifically to accommodate dragons on His Majesty's Tradeships and larger private tradeships that could afford to pay for dragon protection. Warships in His Majesty's Navy had more space for dragons, and dragon transport ships even more, with special holds for them below as well.

Zee eyed the dragon and rider, both of them outfitted in shining blue-grey armor that designated them as Iron Class, then the silhouette of the galleon, and realized they were dragon and rider he'd seen flying with Dame Toomsil, and this had to be their ship. At the other side of the perch deck the Greatwing, which must have been Dame Zara mon Toomsil's beast, Peloquin, was lying down on his belly. His long neck was curled upward, chin held at his chest as he dozed, either unaware or uncaring of the other's arrival. The green of his scales was exactly like Dame Toomsil's dragonbond wristlet.

The knight patted his dragon's neck and dismounted. His squire ran up the stairs from the quarterdeck and began removing the dragon's saddle and harness.

Zee caught his breath as he saw the carved figurehead at the front of the ship. All the figureheads Zee had seen were dragon heads, wild gods, naked sea-people, or old kings of Tosh. This one, however, had a beast that looked just like Jessup.

Well, not exactly, but close enough. It had a cone-shaped shell like Jessup's, and multiple wavy arms clinging back to the prow. Zee counted them out loud as he walked closer, his excitement rising. Ten arms. Just like Jessup. The ridges on the shell of its head were different, running from bottom to top instead of in a spiral, and they had serrated edges like Da's crosscut saw. Its eyes were smaller for its size, too, and more menacing, and its mouth, thrown open in a silent shriek of attack, was packed with fangs.

Then Zee's mouth fell open as he saw the name of the ship painted in chipped golden script – the *HMT Krakenfish*.

Zee's thoughts whirled as he tried to grasp the prospect. "Krakenfish..." Could Jessup possibly, against all odds and common sense, be a baby *kraken*? The most feared creature of legend and myth in the whole wide world? Could krakens be *real*?

Zee felt faint, and he began to wheeze. He was reaching into his pocket when he was grabbed from behind and yanked back between stacks of empty barrels, leaving his lung-spritzer to drop in the dirt.

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A hand clamped over Zee's mouth as he was dragged further between the barrels. Zee was so shocked he didn't struggle and barely kicked.

A young voice said in his ear, "Don't shout. We're not going to hurt you, okay?"

Having no idea what else to do, Zee nodded. The hand was pulled away from his face. Zee spun on the ground and scooted away until his back was against a barrel. He struggled for breath, the shock and fright having further exacerbated the constriction of his airways.

Facing him were three children, dirty, in ragged clothes, and emaciated. The one that had grabbed and spoken to him was a boy of about fifteen, the other two a boy and girl with similar features to the first, crouched and clinging to each other, maybe eight and nine years of age. All of them had greasy hair and flea bites on their arms and necks. They also appeared to be just as frightened as Zee was.

Seeing Zee's difficulty breathing, the older boy held his grimy palms toward his captive. "We don't mean no harm. We're just..." He glanced at the other two. "We were wondering if you could spare any coin for us to get something to eat."

Even as he fought for breath, Zee took in the children's condition and the haunted looks in their eyes. He recalled the grand meal he'd just eaten and the lunch his mother had packed for him, then tried to speak, when the empty barrels he'd been drug between were suddenly flung away with a crash and clatter. The children cringed back as light of the sun fell on them, then was blocked by a shadow.

Dame Toomsil stood with her hand on the haft of her sword, glaring at the group. "Mr. Tarrow," she said firmly. "Are you well?" Seeing his difficulty breathing, she knelt and lay a hand on his small shoulder. "I believe you dropped this." His lung spritzer lay in her open palm. He took it and tried to blow off the dust, but his lungs were too weak. He wiped it on his shirt, then sprayed it twice into his mouth, inhaling at the same time.

She stood as another voice sounded from the other side of the space. "Well, well, what have we here?" came the haughty tone of Temothy jal Briggs. "Criminals, in mon Tontuga?"

The older boy pleaded. "We're not criminals, Sir, I swear!"

"Stowaways, from the looks of them," said Dame Toomsil.

Tem grabbed the two younger children and yanked them to their feet. "Come here, you scumsuckers."

A mad terror gripped the older boy. He jerked a rusted table knife from his waistband and screamed, "Leave my brother and sister be!"

Zee watched in shock as the stowaway leapt. Tem just had time to release the children and block the knife before the boy slammed into him and both went tumbling back through the barrels. They shoved barrels away and leapt to their feet.

The boy attacked with a ferocity Zee had never seen, swinging wildly with the knife. Tem's expression and movements were calm and focused. He blocked and dodged, then caught the boy's wrist and twisted viciously until bone snapped and the knife dropped. Tem threw an elbow into the boy's jaw, snapping his head back, then spun and flung him over his shoulder, slamming him to the dirt. The younger children shrieked as Tem twisted the boy's arm behind his back and shoved a knee into his spine.

Sweat glistened on Tem's forehead and mocking sneer, cruelty glinting in his eyes. "Won't be trying that again, will you, scumsucker?" He wrenched the boy's arm, causing him to cry out. The younger children wailed and clung to each other.

"That will do, Squire," Dame Toomsil ordered. Tem eased his torturing of the boy but kept his hold on him, scowling like a petulant child who'd been scolded. "Fetch the City Guard." To the boy Tem held, she said. "You won't try to run, will you, lad?" It wasn't a question.

The boy sobbed, face down, spittle dribbling in the dirt. He shook his head. Tem was reluctant to release his victim, but let go of his arm and shoved up as if pushing away from a pile of dung.

The knight helped Zee to his feet and stooped to lay a hand lightly on his small shoulder. "Are you sure you're well?"

"Yes Ma'am. Thank you."

"My duty," she replied. She lifted her hand from his shoulder and pulled his scarf back up to cover the rash on his neck. "And my pleasure."

Zee clutched at his scarf in embarrassment. She stood straight and looked back to the other children as if she'd seen nothing.

The tussle had raised such a ruckus that villagers and sailors were shouting for the City Guard, and the guard's whistles and pounding boots could already be heard.

Zee felt like he was going to cry – for the gentle kindness of the lady knight, and for the children who'd only wanted something to eat. Begging was forbidden in mon Tontuga, and everywhere else in Tosh, as far as Zee knew. But they hadn't tried to steal. They did the only thing they could think of – ask for mercy from another child. Someone like them. If they were stowaways, though, the punishments were harsh. Zee had heard stories of ships' captains tossing them over the side on the open sea when they were caught.

He forced down the lump in his throat. "What will happen to them?"

Dame Toomsil's hard look fell upon him, but her expression softened and she looked away without answering.

Zee reached into his shoulder sack and stepped to the younger children, who cringed back. "Take this," he said, holding out his wrapped lunch. They looked back at their older brother, who sat clutching his broken wrist to his chest, tears streaking the dirt on his cheeks,



awaiting his fate. He nodded to them. The girl timidly reached for the wrapping, then snatched it from Zee's tiny hands.

The children tore at the food, shoving it in their mouths. The girl tossed a tuber to her older brother. He let it fall in the dirt in front of him as City Guards marched in.

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Out on the wharf, Zee stood next to Dame Toomsil watching the guards lead the children away. Their feet drug on the flagstones from weariness and malnutrition, their heads hung low, and they put up no resistance.

Zee had never known that kind of poverty existed in Tosh. He knew what hunger was from when times were hard on the farm, but nothing like what he'd just seen. How could the king and the lords allow such a thing in their own land? There was nothing he could do about it, though. He was just a kid. But he wished he could.

His eyes moved to the figurehead on the ship and his attention shifted back to his purpose in coming to the docks.

"Ma'am," he asked, "is that really what a kraken looks like?"

"Know one knows," she replied, "but it's close to how I've seen them depicted on tapestries in the halls of Triumph's Citadel.

"Have you ever seen anything else that looks like that?" Zee immediately worried he'd said too much.

If he'd piqued the knight's interest, she showed no sign of it. "Octopods, I suppose. And squiddlies."

She pointed at the figurehead. "You'll notice, though, that krakens are portrayed with ten legs instead of eight. A naughtyliss has many legs, and a shell, but they are very different." She gazed at the kraken carving as if it was the first time she'd seriously considered it.

Zee had never seen a picture of a kraken, and the stories and songs just described them as huge and vicious, with nasty chomping teeth for eating ships and people, and lots of octopod arms. It never occurred to him that the gentle little creature he'd secreted away on the shore near his home could be one. He couldn't believe Jessup would hurt anyone. And what if he wasn't really a kraken, but something else? Something harmless? People might not believe that, though.

Then and there, he vowed to continue to keep Jessup a secret, and to protect him with his life. At least until Jessup was big enough to take care of himself, whenever that time might come.

A cold hole opened in his heart at the thought of Jessup shuffling into the sea and swimming away, forever. They hadn't been parted for a whole day and Zee already missed him terribly.

"Is something bothering you, lad?"

Zee wiped the wetness that had crept into his eyes and swallowed down the strange loneliness that filled his chest. "No, Ma'am. I'm okay."

"Would you like us to escort you home?"

"My da is at the livestock auction. It won't take me but a few minutes to get there." He glanced at the clock on the tower of the dockmaster's building. Zee may not know how to read, but he could tell time. "I'd better go."

He darted off without thinking, then stopped himself and turned back. "Thank you again for helping me, and for lunch, and for..." His eyes went to where the children had been lead around a corner down the wharf, and finally to the figurehead on the ship. "... everything."

She nodded. "Be well, Zee Tarrow."

"You too, Ma'am." He turned, but stopped once again and turned back. "Dame Toomsil?!"

"Yes?"

"Is it true that dragon's can talk, just like people?"

"It is true, yes."

"Oh..." Zee gawped. "Um, have you ever heard anywhere... could krakens talk?"

Stepping to the knight's side, Temothy jal Briggs smirked at the question, eyeing Zee with contempt. "That's impossible. Krakens were dumb, vicious beasts." Dame Toomsil raised an eyebrow, unsettling him. "So I've been told."

"Not that I've heard, Mr. Tarrow," the knight said. Zee's face drooped in spite of himself. She added, "But you never know."

Zee's expression brightened. He saluted her as he had done at the end of their lunch, and she saluted back.

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The knight watched Zee run off down the wharf. "Curious boy, that one."

Tem huffed. "That's one way to put it. He's diseased as well. I saw his neck."

Dame Toomsil, over a head taller than her squire, looked down at him. "And you'll never mention that again, will you?"

Defiance flashed on his features, then melted under her stern gaze. “Yes, Ma’am.”

She looked back along the wharf, eyes narrowed in thought. “He hides it well, but he has suffered much. Something you have not endured a day in your life, young squire. It builds a certain strength, and character.” She turned back to him. “As your master, I will do everything in my power to help you build some yourself.”

Tem’s face went white as she turned and strode toward the ship.

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Sprinting to get to the livestock auction in time, Zee said to himself, “What a day!” His da wouldn’t believe this story. Well, he would, but wouldn’t he be amazed.

As much as he looked forward to telling it, his most abiding desire was to get back to the shore and see Jessup. And the little creature wasn’t just his best friend anymore. Jessup was a *kraken*.