

Chapter 31

After lunch, Zee and Jessup checked their core once more. It was noticeably smaller, but only by about half. With all that work, they'd used less than Zee had hoped for.

According to Aureosa's notes, greater quantities of their core was used when engaging in combat, simulated or otherwise, particularly when using Abilities. They couldn't really do that, and since they had to keep their forging a secret, they couldn't ask anyone for help, either. All they could really do was practice on their own in secret and forge as much as they could to stretch their crucible and grow their core.

"Then Zee and Jessup should forge," Jessup said brightly. "A lot."

Zee smiled up at his big friend's undampened enthusiasm. "Forging it is, then."

They spent much of the rest of the afternoon forging, filling their core, refining the Empyrean ore and forming it, then mining more. The process was just as painful, but drained them less than it had last night.

When they finished forging for the third time that afternoon, Zee collapsed back against the kraken's cheek. "Sorry, Jessup, I don't think I can do it again right now."

"That's good. Jessup is hungry anyway." Zee slid off of Jessup's arm and Jessup slipped into the cavern lake.

Zee said, "You be careful out there."

"Jessup is always careful," his friend replied, then climbed the rise at the mouth of the cave and leapt into the sea, crying, "Whee!"

Zee rubbed his face, chuckling, then went out for a run to clear his head.

Zee was tired when he returned from his run, but he set to his regular workout routine. He'd done similar training nearly every night on the ship, but now he'd adapted it to match what

the recruits at the academy were made to do – only he did more repetitions than they did. That day he focused on pushers, then crunchers, then started over again and did them four more times.

One thing was for sure, he didn't have nearly the strength or stamina he had when Jessup was around. He'd felt the difference before they'd started forging, but now that they were apart the disparity was even more noticeable.

He new that both riders and dragons of bonded pairs lost the power of their bond when they weren't together, and that it diminished more the further they were separated until they were back to their normal strength. The distance limit was about a hundred feet, a little longer for each higher class, but not a whole lot. Some bonds were stronger than others, too, and that could add to the distance. Working out away from your bondmate was just as important as training together.

Zee groaned as he stood from his last set of crunchers. Pullers were usually another part of his training, but there wasn't anywhere to do them in the cave. When he and Jessup were staying at Beastmaster Mahfouz's shack, he'd use the rafters. He supposed he could go out and find a suitable tree limb. He looked over the spacious cavern while he got his breathing under control and the burn in his stomach muscles and chest faded, and had an idea. He'd need supplies, but he knew just where to get them. And he had money. It was the weekend, though. It would have to wait until Monday after work.

Frustrated over he and Jessup's failure to control their attack ability, if it even was an attack ability, Zee sat at the table nibbling on dried banana chips, flipping through a stack of books he'd pulled from the shelves, trying to find anything that might help. There was nothing there. All the while, his eyes kept going to the book Dr. Aenig had given him, which he'd taken out of his and Jessup's Keep before Jessup got too far away. He decided to give it another try.

Bells later the light at the cave entrance was dimming and Zee still hadn't made any progress with the book. He snatched up his latest sheet of notes, crumpled it, and flung it away, adding it to the many wads on the floor.

He felt Jessup arriving back and watched as his friend climbed over the lip at the cavern entrance, swam across the lake, and slid his front arms onto the cavern floor.

Jessup's eyed the mess of paper on the floor. "Zee tear up book?"

Zee ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Those are my notes.” He set about picking them up and tossing them into a wicker waste basket. “What did you have for dinner, or do I even want to know?”

Jessup said, “Good dinner. Squids and kelp.”

“I remember you chewing on kelp when you were tiny,” Zee said with a smile.

“Kelp is good.”

“Dragons only eat meat, but my ma used to say, ‘Every good boy should eat their vegetables to help them grow big and strong.’”

“Vegetables?”

“Plants. Squids and fish are meat. Kelp is a vegetable.” He scratched his chin. “I think, anyway.”

A mischievous smirk quirked on Jessup’s big rubbery lips. “Zee needs to eat more vegetables.”

Zee laughed and threw one of the wads of paper at him. “You are not my mother!”

They laughed together, then Zee returned to his chair and sat in a huff.

Jessup said, “Something is bothering Zee.”

“It’s nothing, really. Just this book. Dr. Aenig gave it to me for a reason, but I can’t figure it out.”

“Can Jessup see?”

Zee thought for a second. “Why not? Just be careful with it.”

He picked up the book and was about to stand, but Jessup reached to the table, attached small suckers to the book’s cover, and took it out of Zee’s hand.

Jessup pulled the book to himself and opened it with the tip of another arm, then turned pages with a delicate care Zee wouldn’t have imagined possible.

After studying it for a while, Jessup said, “Gibberish.”

Zee snorted. “I told you.”

Jessup closed the book and inspected the cover. He held it to his nostrils and sniffed, then pressed the tip of his tongue against it.

“What are you doing?”

Jessup held it up. “Murfolk book?”

“That’s the idea, I guess.”

Jessup dunked it in the water.

“Ahh!” Zee leapt from the desk. “Jessup, no!” He ran to the edge of the lake, but Jessup still held the book under water, watching it. Zee skidded to the edge, ready to dive in, but just below the surface, the book was emanating blue light, and the webbed hand on the cover glowed bright.

When Jessup lifted it out, the hand imprint still glowed. “Murfolk book.” He handed it to Zee.

Amazed, Zee took the book and opened it. The first pages still contained the strange symbols, but they were swirling in odd patterns. He closed the book and placed his palm on the hand stamped into the cover. The light pulsed softly, then dimmed. Opening it again he witnessed the symbols change into a slowly spinning circle with ten arms waving gently. “A krakenbond,” he breathed. “Jessup. You’re a genius.”

Jessup just grinned.

On the following page, the symbols were now uniformly sized and more clearly written in orderly rows at the top of the page and in a column along one side. Zee still couldn’t read the language, but a simple color illustration took up most of the page – and it moved in a loop. It looked to Zee like it was about breathing.

Jessup spoke softly. “Magick murfolk book.”

The next pages still had the same strange symbols as before. Apparently they’d have to go through it one step at a time, then it would hopefully reveal more. Zee hoped against hope it would be about attack Abilities, and more than that, about kraken attack Abilities.

The illustration was a diagram of a murperson with webbed hands and feet, gills on its neck and along its ribs, and on the left side of its chest was a krakenbond. Just like Zee’s. Other than the bond, there was no sign of a kraken. He recalled that during forging the rider was the conduit for mining ore from the Aether. Could this be the first lesson in forging Marisean?

There was only one way to find out.

At the bottom of the lake, by the light of the book in Zee’s lap and some from the glowing spots on Jessup’s body and tentacles, Zee studied the diagram. Arrows moved in through the murperson’s mouth and nose. Some went out through the gills on the neck, but more passed through the lungs and what Zee took as a representation of a small crucible, then out through the gills, all in a repeating, continuous motion.

Zee hadn't thought about it in quite some time, but breathing underwater was more of a continuous process than the in and out of breathing air. He assumed the position of the murperson in the illustration, sitting with legs crossed, hands on knees with palms up, eyes closed, and tried it. The sound under the lake and the circular movement of water flowing in and through him was even more soothing than breathing above.

After twenty minutes he found that his mind had drifted into a serene state, half conscious, as if in a waking dream. Through his eyelids he caught a pulse of light.

Zee opened his eyes. The diagram had stopped moving, and the page turned all on its own to reveal another diagram. It was similar to the first, but this one showed pathways, or channels, in his body, all connecting to the representation of the crucible in his chest, just below his heart. There were channels that went from the bottoms of his feet, from his palms, and from the center of his forehead, all connecting to the crucible. Zee remembered the burning sensation from mining Empyrean had follow those exact paths. The channels were shown as being constricted in random areas, the walls uneven.

The channels moved in this diagram, slowly expanding, the walls straightening and becoming clearer, then repeating itself, over and over.

Zee closed his eyes and breathed as he had before. When his mind had settle once more, he quested inward, concentrating on the channels in his body, then focused on opening them. It was difficult at first and he kept having to calm himself again and starting over, but after several more attempts he could feel the pathways inside him, and they began to clear. As they did, he felt freer, more refreshed. The breathing became even easier. It was as if he'd always been wrapped in something constricting, never knowing it, and was suddenly free of it.

All the while, Jessup had stayed silent, his only sound the soft, deep whoosh of his breathing, like the breaking of distant waves.

Another pulse from the book and Zee opened his eyes in eager anticipation. The murperson was still in the same position but smaller on the page. Behind it was a large triangle with round eyes below its base, and ten arms, each looped through the other in a circle around it. The murperson sat on the front loop.

Arrows repeated motion coming out of the center of where the kraken's forehead would be, and out of the center of the murperson's chest. The arrows went above them, then looped around and down to the openings of the murperson's channels.

“I’m guessing this is reaching out to see the Marisean, like we did for the Empyrean, and maybe mining, too,” Zee said through their bond. *“Do you think you can hold your arms like that?”*

“Jessup will try.”

Zee pushed himself away from where he’d been sitting on one of Jessup’s arms held the book out for Jessup to see. Studying the diagram with one big eye, Jessup tipped and squirmed his arms into the exact position.

“Perfect!” Zee shouted out loud in the water. The sound was different than when he spoke on land, but still comprehensible. Zee was a little surprised his friend didn’t make a joking reply. Instead, Jessup sat completely still, eyes closed, breathing deeply. He was taking this seriously. Zee projected appreciation and respect through their bond. Jessup replied with a hum of satisfaction.

Zee climbed up on the loop in one of Jessup’s arms and assumed the meditation position shown in the diagram.

Using their combined will, they tried visualizing the Mariseal Plain, but it didn’t work. Instead, they felt a pressure, like a pushback, and Zee realized they’d forgotten to visualize their crucible first. Once they brought their crucible and core into view, Zee concentrated on the breathing and opening the channels again, expanding them, opening them, and without seeking it out or demanding it to reveal itself as they had to do with the Empyrean Plain, the Mariseal Plain appeared before their mind’s eye.

“Ooh…”

Zee felt his friend’s amazement, but he was plenty amazed himself. Unlike the thin vein of yellow they seen on the Empyrean Plain, a great river of glowing blue particles flowed from dark cosmic horizon to dark cosmic horizon, much wider and denser than the Empyrean had been. And without asking or demanding, the light began to flow toward Zee, through the channels in his hands, feet, head, and chest, into their shared crucible.

The feeling was very different from mining Empyrean. Where they had to exert their will, dig and pull at the golden power of Zepiter and basically shovel it into their crucible, the Marisean ore trickled like water into their crucible as if drawn by a vacuum pump. And instead of causing pain, it felt cool and refreshing, even cleansing.

“We’re doing it, Jessup,” Zee whispered through their bond, as if speaking to loudly would scare away the ore. *“We’re mining Marisean.”*

“Jessup likes feeling of mining Empyrean, but this is better.”

“It’s what we’re made for, I guess. We are creatures of the sea.”

“You are creature. Jessup is person.”

Zee chuckled. *“That’s fine with me.”* The flow had slowed while they’d been conversing. *“Okay, we need to pay attention.”*

He continued his breathing, thinking on the channels, and Jessup matched his breathing and state of mind.

Marisean ore continued to fill their crucible, floating around their formed core. It took concentration to keep their breathing steady and the channels open, but it was far less arduous than mining Empyrean had been.

They achieved that feeling of fullness in their crucible they’d experienced when mining Empyrean, but it felt more substantial, and the flow began to slow. Zee thought for a moment. *“You know how we contract our crucible when forming? Let’s try the opposite. Expanding it, like we would our lungs when breathing air.”* Zee felt rather than heard Jessup’s assent.

As it turned out, expanding their crucible was more complicated than Zee had thought it would be. It was a lot to think about. Breathing, keeping his channels open and clear, and expanding their crucible was like trying to use a muscle they never knew they had. Their first attempts were akin to trying to rub your stomach and pat your head at the same time, and failing miserably. Finally, they could not only feel their crucible expanding, they could see it, the walls thinning as it stretched. More focus on breathing and keeping the channels open, and more Marisean flowed in, slowing to a dribble as they reached their limit. They felt as if they’d inhaled very slowly until they couldn’t do it any more. Zee actually began to feel dizzy.

Zee allowed the channels to constrict, then purposefully tightened them further. The channels didn’t completely close, but Zee was relieved that no Marisean leaked out. The Mariseal Plain faded away and for both of them it was as if they could finally breath out again. Though the process had been less strenuous than mining Empyrean, they were still spent.

Zee gasped out, *“We did it!”*

“Best kraken and murman team ever.”

Zee grinned, watching the misty blue Marisean ore floating around their core. *“You up for some refining and forming?”*

“For smart tiny murman, Zee asks dumb questions sometimes.”

“All right, all right.”

Another page in the book had turned. The animated illustration showed their crucible wall moving in an undulating motion, squeezing and relaxing, churning blue light in the pair’s crucible, which was now larger and positioned above and beside the murperson and kraken.

“Looks the same as refining Emyrean,” Zee said.

While mining Marisean had been easier than mining Emyrean, refining it proved to be much more difficult. Zee considered it must be because Marisean was more dense. It took a while, but they managed to infuse it thoroughly with their aura, nearly exhausted from the effort

The next page in the book turned to a diagram that showed a process much like forming with Emyrean. Once again, the increased density of the Marisean ore particles presented a greater challenge.

They contracted their crucible as much as they could, pushing until Zee felt his head and chest would burst, then rested and did it again. Zee noticed that the blue motes condensed into the blue in their core, leaving the vein of yellow pure, but as they continued forming the Emyrean grew brighter.

A bell later of what felt like hard labor, they made a final grueling push and the newly mined motes of Marisean clicked into place with the rest. Exhausted, they stared at their newly forged core. It was closer to perfectly round than it had been, and now almost two feet in diameter.

Zee asked, *“You ready to give it a spark?”* then sensed Jessup’s amusement and corrected himself. *“Forget I said that. Let’s spark it and see how it feels—wait...”* The book had flipped to the next page without him noticing.

The illustration was the same as the previous one, but with the core sparking and growing brighter, then repeating. *“Looks the same as what we’ve been doing.”*

They focused on the center of their core and it sparked bright. Power shot through them as before, but significantly more intense, and it felt different. The power wasn’t nearly as hot as before, somehow more stable, and much more powerful. The spark continued to grow brighter, then suddenly burst into flaming blue and gold.

Both Zee and Jessup could barely breathe, so overwhelming was the joyous exhilaration and total sense of invincibility that flooded through them. They felt as if they couldn't move. They didn't want to anyway, so thrilling was the sensation. After a few moments it leveled off and they breathed freely. Their core no longer appeared before them, but it was still sparked.

Zee pushed away from Jessup and spun back to look at him, wide-eyed and grinning like an idiot. Jessup had the same expression.

"What happened, Zee?" Jessup asked.

"I think we just leveled up."

"To what?"

Zee racked his brain. Without being assessed by the Orb or having one of the enchanted assessment badges there was no way for them to tell, and the commandant's notes didn't provide any hints on how to gauge their level or class by the condition or size of their core. And of course, they still couldn't really ask anyone. Just bringing it up could get them all into trouble. *"I wish I knew."* Not knowing was no reason to stop what they were doing, though. *"The important thing is we're progressing, and that we keep doing it."*

He checked the book. Two more pages had been revealed to them, but they contained only columns of text, which Zee couldn't read. He was disappointed, but now that the symbols had been revealed as an actual language, he'd try again to decipher it. Meanwhile, they'd keep forging and training, as much and as hard as they could.

They doused their spark and were suddenly exhausted. It was a good kind of exhaustion, infused with contentment and a real sense of accomplishment, but exhaustion nonetheless.

The kraken stretched and yawned. *"Jessup is knackered."*

"Knackered? Where did you hear that word?"

"Robhat Hayes says it at work. It means very tired."

Zee grinned. He'd known what the word meant, but all he said was, *"Then I'm knackered too."*

Jessup surfaced and curled several arms on the edge of the lake. He was asleep by the time Zee had stripped off his swim trunks and crawled into bed.

"Skotadi," Zee uttered, dousing the Emyrean lamps in the cavern, then lay his head on his pillow with a tired smile on his face.

Tomorrow was another whole day off, and he planned on putting it to good use.

Chapter 32

Zee was up at 5AM the next morning, fully awake. He realized he was looking forward to the day more than he had in many years. Jessup was still asleep and the sun hadn't risen, so he ate a cold breakfast while quietly reading a book on the history of Triumph's Citadel Academy until morning light crept through the cavern opening. Jessup groaned and swiped at him sleepily without opening his eyes when Zee told him he was going out for a run.

Zee had been running on the shore of the harbor during the week and decided to see if he could find a path in the forested hills at the base of the mountains. There was a ledge that lead from the cavern around to the hills blocked with boulders and rubble. He could dive in the sea and swim around, but running in wet clothes wasn't the most comfortable. He picked his way around and clambered over rocks. He'd have to ask Jessup to help him clear it at some point.

Once away from the sea he found a runnable if rocky path. It was rough going, up and down the foot of the mountain, through ravines and into the wooded foothills. Zee explored with boyish glee, thoroughly enjoying the opportunity, the first of its kind he'd experienced since he was a boy. Monkeys screeched and hopped through the trees. Colorful birds sang and bobbed their heads. As he jogged past the trunk of a tree covered in vines, his senses tingled. Without thinking, he spun, shooting out his hand, and caught a striking snake behind the head. It hissed, mouth wide with poison dripping from its fangs, and Zee flung it into the underbrush. That sort of thing had been common when he'd been under water while working on the ship, and he was glad to see he still had a sense of unseen danger on land. His reflexes were also even quicker since he and Jessup had begun forging.

The sounds of cursing, coughing, and laughing, came from up ahead. Zee knew he should turn around and head back or take another route, but curiosity got the best of him and he snuck forward to peer through the low branches of a tree.

On a ledge of rock beneath the thickly leaved branches was a flight of five cadet's smoking something from a pipe they were passing around. They wore civilian clothes, apparently enjoying a day off themselves, but Zee recognized them. The second year cadets who'd been sneering at him and Jessup at the tournament. Zee's ire rose and he had to take several breaths to calm himself.

One of their dragons sniffed the air and turned her head toward where Zee was hiding. “We have company.”

The cadets cursed, swiftly hid the pipe, blew out whatever smoke they held in their lungs and wafted at it with their hands.

“Who is it?” one of them asked.

The dragon sniffed the air again, then chuckled. “It’s the murman.”

There was more cursing, then the tallest of the bunch stood. “Come on out, murman, or were coming in after you.”

Zee considered running away. He might be able to lose them in the rocks and woods, but they could be high level Lead Class, or even Copper. He could feel their auras, but without their badges or armor it was hard for him to tell. He wasn’t going to run, he decided. He’d been backing down his whole life.

He felt Jessup stir though their bond. “*Zee all right?*” Zee couldn’t draw on the strength of the bond at this distance, but the connection was still there.

“*I’m fine,*” he said, hoping it was true. “*No need to worry.*”

Jessup grunted, but said no more. Zee stepped out.

The tallest of the cadets said, “What are you doing up here, gilly shouldn’t you be splashing around in the ocean?”

The other cadets took turns throwing gibes.

“Where’s your monster?”

“Look how tiny he is. He’s even smaller up close.”

“Show us your gills and tail!”

Zee sighed. He’d heard worse, and these were some of the most childish. It might have had something to do with whatever they were smoking. “I don’t have a tail.”

The tall cadet stepped closer. “Come on, we want to see your fish face,”

“It doesn’t work that way. I have to be in the sea.”

“Then you should get back to it. And while you’re at it, just swim away. No one wants you here.”

With a half smile, Zee said, “Some people do.”

Anger replaced the glazed mocking smile on the cadet’s face. He moved closer, a full head taller than Zee, and glared down at him. “Don’t talk back to me, gilly.”

Zee just gazed up at them.

“Great Zepiter,” said the dragon that had spoken first, “just kick his bassbutt, Lukas, and be done with it.”

They hadn’t sparked their core, but Zee could feel the bond between the cadet and his dragon grow stronger.

Lukas said, “Get out of here, murbrat,” and shot out a hand to shove Zee in the chest.

Instead of being struck and thrown backward, Zee turned, sidestepped, and slapped the cadet’s hand away as quickly as he had caught the snake. Lukas tumbled forward and nearly fell.

The other cadets guffawed.

“Gilly’s got some skills,” said another dragon, chuckling.

Keeping his eyes on the fuming cadet, Zee said, “Dame Zara mon Toomsil showed me a few things when she was stationed on ship.” That got their attention.

One of the cadets said, “You know Dame Toomsil?”

“I do.”

Lukas still fumed, but took a breath and straightened his jacket. “Run along then, little murman. You bore me.”

One of the others said. “He could tell somebody about... you know.”

“What’s a gilly’s word against five cadet pairs? Who’d believe him, and who’d really care what came out of his fish-face anyway?”

Zee said, “You might be surprised.” He backed away, eyeing them all, then spun and left at a comfortable jog.

Once Zee was sure there were no sounds of pursuit, he realized he wasn’t even all that angry at them, just himself. What was he thinking? What good would come from fighting? No more than if he’d fought when on ship. He’d get a beating, and for what? His best revenge would be to meet them in combat training one day. Then he and Jessup would humiliate them, and show them pain unlike anything they’d ever felt.

He nearly stopped short at the cold calculation and cruelty of his thoughts. It was Jessup’s influence, he knew. There was no denying it, Jessup was a predator of the highest order. Zee didn’t consider himself meek, but perhaps he needed more of that killer instinct. Though he had killed before, he’d never thought of himself as a killer; never let himself believe that’s what he

was, deep down. Maybe he should. It's what knights did, after all. That line of thought bothered him, but he had to do something.

Between he and Jessup, it was Zee who was the weak link in their bond. Even without the bond, Jessup was an extremely powerful beast with incredible endurance and fighting skill. He never would have survived all those years in the ocean if he wasn't. Zee himself could barely run well. He had to make more time to work on himself, and work even harder. He didn't care what those cadets thought of him. He would do it for himself, and for Jessup. He needed no greater driving force than that.

That evening, after exhausting themselves in the sea as much as they could, Zee and Jessup forged Marisean once more. It was still a lot of work, but easier now that they'd done it before, just like it had been with Empyrean. Zee still kept the book with him, but no new pages had revealed themselves.

As they rested for another forging session beneath the cavern lake, Zee gaze up to the soft glow on the surface of the lake cast by the Empyrean lamps. "*I want to try something else,*" he said through their bond. Unsurprisingly, Jessup was up for anything.

As an experiment, they visualized the Empyrean Plain while underwater and found they could see it just as well, though the vein of Empyrian ore seemed thinner than it had when they'd visualized it on the floor of the cavern.

They climbed out of the lake and positioned themselves to forge there. Zee was glad to see the book still worked and showed no signs of fading. They'd had to take it under water today to get the pages to reveal themselves, but apparently the pages would remain visible for some time after a good dunking. They breathed deeply and visualized the Marisean Plain again. It wasn't quite as dense, and when they tried mining it, it only trickled in through Zee's channels. Maybe it was also because they'd already forged, or, it occurred to Zee, maybe it could be the difference between the circular nature of breathing under water and the way they breathed air. He recalled one of the sailors on the HMS Krakenfish explaining to another how he breathed when playing the sackpipes, and had another idea. Like the idea he'd had when working out, it would also have to wait until after work on Monday.

Jessup also had an idea. "Zee and Jessup should try forging blue and yellow together. Save time that way."

“You big smart kraken, you.”

Jessup chuckled, then they put themselves into their meditative state. They visualized the Empyrean Plain first, then holding onto it, focused on the Mariseal Plain. To their surprise, it didn't resist. The great river of blue ore appeared in the same endless blackness of the Aether, below the narrower vein of Empyrean. They'd each been beautiful separately, but together they were breathtaking. For a while they just gazed at them, taking in the splendor of the Aether.

Trying to mine both at once felt like they're minds were being split in two. Exerting more will and effort only made it worse, so they focused on the more difficult ore first, Empyrean. Once they got the hot yellow coals to break free of the vein and began forcing it through Zee's channels into their crucible, they tried their technique of expanding their crucible to draw in Marisean – and it worked. It came right along with the Empyrean, only as a dribble at first, but by actively mining the Empyrean, opening Zee's channels, and slowly expanding their core, it flowed in greater quantity than the Empyrean.

They realized that mining Marisean with Empyrean tempered the scorching heat and stubborn nature of the yellow ore, making it easier to draw into their crucible. Once they began refining, they also discovered that Empyrean made the Marisean less sluggish. It was not only easier to refine, but to form as well. That night they forged not just two more times, but three, before they fell fast asleep as if they'd gluttoned on a feast, feeling full, even more powerful than before, and entirely satisfied.

Chapter 33

Outside a hardware shop and lumberyard near the docks with Androo Cobbling and a carpenter who also worked for Meik Tabacci, Zee and Jessup piled building materials into a wagon.

Once it was loaded, Zee said, “There’s one more thing. Do you know anyone in town who plays the sackpipes?”

Jessup challenged Zee to pull the wagon himself. Zee decided against it. He didn’t want to look stronger than he should for a bonded but unforged pair, and they didn’t dare spark their core. Zee took a coil of rope out of the wagon to tie Jessup to it, but Jessup just picked it up and carried it, leaving Androo and the carpenter shaking their heads.

Dame Toomsil and Tem sat on their dragons on the harbor wall, watching Zee and Jessup leave the village.

Tem handed Toomsil his spyglass. “What are they doing now?”

She peered through the glass. “Looks to me like the makings of training equipment. Lumber, dowels, posts for pells, rope, sacks and leather, anchor bolts...”

“Seriously?”

She handed the glass back to him. “You know him, Tem. Are you really that surprised?” Tem didn’t answer.

Instead of just following their whims of enthusiasm, flitting from one thing to another in excitement to see what they could do next, Zee and Jessup developed a regimen and routine. Zee had never slept much on ship and found that the extra stamina he gained from having a forged core meant just a few bells of sleep a night was all he needed.

Each morning before work he was up at zero five hundred bells to run on the beach and in the hills, then go back for Jessup and swim five miles in the sea. He also did calisthenics, crunchers, pushers, squatters, and pullers of various types on the bar he set up in the cavern, as well as rotating between sword forms and working the pell and other equipment he built with the supplies he'd purchased. Anything he learned from the various academy manuals and observed

the BCT recruits doing, he would do – though he pushed himself to do more. If they would do fifty pushers, he did a hundred. If they were running three miles a day, he did five, and more often if he could.

In the evenings he'd alternate between more running, swimming, and exercises, but he spent most of his time with Jessup, working on their forging, and studying together. Many of the books the commandant and Wanchoo had given them were textbooks used in academy classes. There were books on the history of the Dragon Corps and the nation of Tosh, military history and strategy, world geography, nautical terminologies, procedures and vessel identification, signaling with flag, bell and horn, codes of discipline, honor and leadership, military hierarchy and structure, weather forecasting, dragon types and anatomy, combat training, and more. Some of it was review of what Zee had learned from his studies with Dr. Aenig or from Dame Toomsil while on ship, but he found it all fascinating. He'd thought it might bore Jessup, but his friend's attention never wandered. Jessup was making great strides with his reading and maths as well.

Zee ran on a rocky path at the foot of the mountains. Dark clouds rolled in from the west, blocking out the stars and twin moons of Zhera. The air was heavy with moisture, and the wind was picking up. From the looks of the sky, rain would be coming down soon. Zee considered heading back to the cave, then heard horns and bells from the BCT field in the distance below, followed by shouting. Zee jogged to an outcropping to look down at the field, worried something might have happened.

Instead, cadet MTI's had roused the Minnows from their long white tent and were marching them out to gather on the muddy field. The Ducks they let sleep where they lay in groups on the open ground.

The first drops hit Zee, fat and warm, and he watched as the rain spread further over the island to drench the fields. It was pouring hard, drastically diminishing visibility, but Zee raised the protective lenses over his eyes, something he found he could do even when not in murman form. His night sight had also been getting steadily better as he and Jessup continued to forge.

The recruits set out at a controlled run toward the foothills. An exercise to build stamina and grit, Zee guessed. And if they could do it, so would he. With renewed drive, he set off, but not on the flatter course. He steered upward to higher paths, running through the rain and over rocks, pushing himself as hard as he could.

A joyous “Whoop!” from the sky caught his attention.

The white Ice Diver recruit with the club foot was soaring, swooping and diving through the rain, and obviously thoroughly enjoying it. He twisted and flipped in the air in a truly acrobatic display unlike any Zee had seen a dragon do before. He flew straight up, folded his wings and dove, then pulled out of the fall just above the tree tops below.

Zee nearly forgot what he was supposed to be doing, so enrapt he'd become with the sight. The dragon perched on a ledge, took a deep satisfied breath, and looked out over the training fields in the pouring rain. Zee grinned. The dragon was a kindred spirit, training on his own to compensate for being different. At that moment the dragon caught sight of Zee standing below on the side of the mountain, watching him. Zee wasn't sure how he'd feel about being spotted, but the dragon nodded to him, then leapt from the ledge and soared off into the rainy night sky.

Inspired further, Zee set off at a greater pace. The path he'd taken came to a steep rock wall where he could either climb to another path or turn around and go back. He decided to climb.

He was over a hundred feet up when water began pouring down the side of the mountain. Fearing he'd made a terrible mistake, he made his way laterally toward a lip in the cliff face where he hoped to wait out the rain. A rock he was using for a handhold came loose and he nearly fell. He watched the rock tumble down the nearly vertical slant and crash into the rocks and trees below. He couldn't help but wonder how badly he'd be hurt if he fell. The only comfort was knowing that Jessup would come if he called and take him to get treated – if Jessup could find him when he was unconscious, what was. And if Zee survived the fall in the first place. This far away from Jessup, he couldn't spark their core to enhance his strength or count on his aura to protect him.

Lightning streaked through the sky as the storm worsened, and the wind blew harder. Cursing himself for being an idiot, he continued toward the ledge, his arms burning and his grip beginning to fail. Jessup's voice came to him. “Zee?” Then Zee's hand slipped, then a foot, and he plummeted downward. “Zee!”

Zee half-fell, half-bounced down the cliff face, scrabbling for a hold. He slammed on his side onto a jutting rock, which knocked the air out of him, and bounced into a free fall toward the

rocks and trees below. “Crabcrap,” he wheezed, ribs stinging badly, and tried to mentally prepare himself for impact. “*Jessup!*” he shouted through the bond.

Before Jessup could answer, lightning flashed on white scales and a powerful claw caught his arm. He was swung so that his legs were held by a shorter, club-footed arm. Cradled in the dragon’s embrace, he gazed up at Fennix.

The white dragon crooked his neck to look down at him. “That was a close one. Are all murfolk this careless?”

Zee winced at the pain in his ribs. It hurt to speak, but he couldn’t just stay silent. “I don’t know, Sir. Maybe. I’ve never met another.”

Fennix chuckled. “Either way, I suggest you be more careful in your training.”

“I will. Thank you, Sir.”

“You’re welcome.”

“For saving me, I mean.”

“Think nothing of it. It’s what knight beasts do, is it not? Of course, I’m not a knight beast yet, but I will be.”

“I want to be a knight.”

“So I’ve heard.” Zee felt a pang of guilt. Jessup was asking what was wrong and he hadn’t responded.

“*I’m so sorry, Jessup. I had a scare, but I’m okay. I’ll explain when I get back.*” He sensed his friend’s relief.

Zee turned to look down. His stomach did a little flip and pain stabbed through his chest, but the view was worth it. There was a brief gap in the rain and the clouds thinned above, allowing faint light from the two moons of Zhera to illuminate landscape and sea. “Oh...” he uttered in appreciation.

“It is beautiful, isn’t it?” Fennix observed.

“Yeah. Do you ever get used to it?”

“Never.” They flew for a time, taking in the sight, before Fennix said, “Do you wish me to take you to town for medical care?”

“I don’t think anything is broken, Sir. I hate to impose, but could you take me to where I’m staying?”

“Will the kraken be there?” Fennix seemed excited at the prospect.

“Well, yes.”

“I would very much like to meet him.”

Zee explained to Jessup what had happened and how he would be getting back to the cave so the kraken wouldn't be surprised when a white dragon arrived with Zee in his arms. Jessup was waiting anxiously in the water of their cavern lake when got there.

Fennix was the first to speak. “You must be Mr. Jessup. I believe this murman belongs to you.”

Jessup blinked in confusion before comprehending Fennix's joke and formal manner of speech. “Yes, that is Jessup's murman. And you are Mr. Fennix. Thank you for helping Zee.”

“My great pleasure.”

Zee chuckled, then grimaced at the pain. “You know, I'm right here, you two.”

Fennix said, “Yes, of course.” Fennix held him out as Jessup reached. Jessup swam across the lake, crawled out and laid Zee on the bed.

Zee pushed himself to sit up against the wall, grimacing as he went. “Please, Mr. Fennix, come in.”

Fennix looked around the cave, observing the ceiling was plenty high, shook himself, sending water from the rain flying, and flapped across the lake. “Thank you. I'm sorry for dripping water on your floor.”

Zee and Jessup both snorted. Water was puddling all around the kraken. “You're kidding, right?” Zee said. “You're talking to a murman and a kraken.”

“I suppose I am. Which is something I never thought would happen in my entire life. It is truly a delight to meet you both.”

Zee sensed no falseness in the young dragon's tone or features, and knew already he liked Fennix very much. He could tell that Jessup felt the same way.

Fennix gazed down the length of the cavern. Along the wall was makeshift training equipment lit by pools of light from Empyrean lamps.

With the supplies purchased in town and tools borrowed from his co-workers at the docks, Zee had built the same kind of equipment he'd seen recruits and cadets using in the training fields. There was a wooden man dummy, which was basically a post on a stand with sturdy dowels pounded into augured holes, and a fencing dummy, which was another post with a wooden sword held to it by a hefty steel spring.

He'd also made a pell, a thicker post for hitting with a sword to practice strike placement and edge alignment, and even a pendulum pell, a post with an arm from which hung a bound wad of rags on a rope, used to practice blade control and accuracy. Wooden practice swords of various weights and sizes lay on a workbench, along with an old beat-up metal sword he'd bought at a local shop for use on the pell. A rough shield and a few makeshift spears and javelins he'd fabricated leaned against the wall. He'd purchased a used bow and some arrows as well, and had targets set up at the far end of the cavern. There was also a puller bar between two more posts. It might not have looked liked much, but Zee was proud of it, and it did the job.

Fennix was duly impressed. "This is a quite well-equipped training facility. Did you make all this. Mr. Tarrow?"

"Most of it, Sir. We've been looking for some place with more room for Jessup and for target practice, but we need something that's still private. We haven't had any luck so far."

Fennix tilted his head. "I may know of a place. We wouldn't want to go at night in a storm. I will show you tomorrow, if you like, and you can decide if it's suitable."

"That would be great, thank you. Make yourself comfortable, Sir. I mean, unless you have to go."

Fennix glanced out through the cavern opening where the rain was once again coming down hard and lightning now lit the sky. "I would be glad of the respite, to be honest. Flying and lightning don't always go well together."

"Fennix helped Zee," said Jessup. "You can stay as long as you like." Zee eyed his friend. He did like the dragon, but he was also speaking differently.

Fennix bowed. "You have my sincerest gratitude. I would be honored if you would both call me Fennix. No need for the 'sir,' or 'mister' with me."

"Okay," Jessup replied, then said, "I am just Jessup."

"Did you just say 'I'?" Zee asked.

Jessup scowled briefly and gave him a side-eye. "I have been practicing my talking."

"That's great! In that case, it's 'I have been practicing my *speech*,' or 'practicing *the way I speak*.'"

"Oh. Okay."

For the first time, Zee sensed that Jessup felt ashamed. "No, Jessup, I mean it. That's truly great. You just surprised me is all."

Fennix looked on with an easy smile. "I would be happy to help in that regard," he said.

"That would be nice," Jessup replied. "You sound fancy."

Fennix grinned. "I suppose I do. I can't help it. I'm a prince of the little tribe from which I come. We're just raised that way. I don't mean that in the way you might think. It's a very small dragon tribe on a very small island of ice, and I am very much an outcast."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Zee. "If it makes you feel any better, we're pretty much outcasts too."

"The very first time I saw the two of you, I knew we were kindred spirits."

"I thought the same thing just today, when I saw you flying in the rain."

"That proves it then." He sat back and raised his good paw into the air. "Cheers to the outcasts." Jessup raised an arm.

Zee shot up his hand. "To the outcasts!" Then he groaned. "Ouch..."

Fennix moved closer and spoke to Jessup. "Now, let me instruct you on how to use the power of your bond to aid the healing of Zee's injuries."

"You knew that we're bonded?" Zee asked.

"Everyone knows. You two are a regular topic of discussion among the recruits and MTIs." Seeing the look on Zee's face, he added. "Some of the conversation is not very flattering, I will admit, but not all of it. Some are watching you with keen interest."

Zee rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not sure that's better, actually."

"Ignore them all. It's what I do."

Chapter 34

The next evening after work, Fennix lead Zee and Jessup into the wooded hills at the base of the mountains to a hidden and secluded box canyon well away from the running paths, with foliage above from trees that grew along its top edges. At its center was a huge tree. Its trunk rose above the walls, a hundred feet high, its canopy spread wide to conceal the area below, providing privacy while also letting in light. Cliffs overhung much of it, the rest covered by vines and the canopy of the tree.

“No one flies low over this area of the island but me,” said Fennix, “and nothing can be seen from above, not even a fire, unless someone was looking very carefully. My first year of BCT, two years ago, there was a flight of cadets that would come here on occasion, but no one has since.”

“It’s perfect,” Zee replied.

“There is more room than in the cavern,” said Jessup. “Very good for a kraken.”

Fennix said, “I’m pleased you like it.”

While they poked around a bit, Fennix surprised them by asking, “How is your forging going?” Both Zee and Jessup reacted like startled deer.

“We haven’t been forging,” Zee blurted out much too quickly.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. I just assumed it would be the first thing a bonded pair would do. Please accept my most sincere apology.”

Jessup spoke to Zee through the bond. “*Can I tell him?*”

Zee turned it over in his mind while still trying to get used to Jessup saying “I” instead of referring to himself in third person. Jessup trusted Fennix, and the kraken seemed to be a great judge of character. Even though Fennix wasn’t bonded himself, maybe he could help, too. He nodded to his big friend.

“Zee and I have been forging, but not for long.”

“Oh...” Fennix took a breath. “I figured as much. You two are terrible at lying.”

Zee’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I always have been. I think it’s because I hate doing it. I was hoping I was getting better at it, though, since it seems to have become more of a necessity around here.”

“Only if you’re doing naughty things your not supposed to be doing.”

Zee emitted a nervous laugh. "It's not strictly illegal."

"I'm joking. And I promise not to tell anyone."

Jessup, who felt nowhere near as guilty as Zee, grinned and said, "Naughty murman."

Zee gawped "What? Naughty kraken, too!"

They all laughed, then Zee said, "I'm sorry we lied to you, Fennix. We just—"

"Say no more," Fennix cut in. "I understand, believe me. But, now that I do know, is there any chance I could see your core?" Zee and Jessup exchanged glances. "Please don't feel obligated, I'm just very curious, you see."

Jessup shrugged. "It's okay with Jessup."

"You should say, 'It's okay with me.'"

"Thank you. It's okay with *me*."

Zee ignored their little speech lesson. They'd been doing it the whole way to the canyon. "Maybe you can tell us how it compares to other classes."

"I will do my best," Fennix replied.

Zee took his position on one of Jessup's arms, they did their deep breathing and meditation, visualized their core, then revealed it.

Fennix hopped up and down on his good front foot. "Is that Marisean?"

"You know about Marisean?" Zee asked.

"We tell many stories in my clan, some of them very old. One mentions the blue power of Postune. We thought it was a fable, but it's true! And, your core! Very well shaped, strong crucible walls, and it's size! Unless I am a fool and classes don't work the same for murfolk and krakens, I'd say this could be Lead Class size."

A voice echoed in the canyon. "Perhaps even high level."

Then a dragon spoke, "Unbelievable."

Zee and Jessup's core vanished and all three of them whirled, seeking its source. They looked straight up. At the edge of the ledge high above, Temothy jal Briggs sat upon his dragon, Timandra, both peering down.

Timandra stepped off and dropped, throwing open her wings at the last minute to arrest their fall, then landed.

Jessup shot out his spines and leaned forward with a growl.

Timandra backed up. "Whoa there, big boy."

Tem held up both hands. "It's okay. We've been asked to check on you two."

"By whom?" Zee asked, his tone touched by panic and a tad defensive.

Tem hesitated. "We'd rather not say, but I think you know."

Zee thought a moment. "There are people who seem to want us here, and some people who don't seem to like us very much. Which is it?"

Timandra said, "It's the former. You can ask them when you get a chance. In secret, of course."

Zee nodded with relief. He also felt honored that the commandants and the deans would be looking after them. "So, you're here to help us?"

"With what time we can spare from our other duties, yes," Tem answered, "but it must be kept secret."

"A better secret than that you are forging," Timandra added.

Zee winced. Not only had they shown their forged core to Fennix, they'd forgotten to reveal it to him only. "Right. I'm sorry, Ma'am. We promise."

Fennix nearly flinched as her gaze fell on him. "What say you, Mr. Fennix? We know that you can't forge yet, but you're welcome to join us for training."

Fennix was so taken aback by the offer it took him a moment to answer. When he did, it was with a bow of gratitude. "I would consider it a privilege, Ma'am, if I may, and time permitting. I will say nothing to anyone. You have my word."

"The word of a prince is good enough for us."

If a dragon could blush, Fennix would have.

Having overcome his shock and worry, Zee said, "This is incredible. Thank you both." He looked up at Jessup. "So much for keeping this place a secret too, though."

"It's as private as anywhere on the island," said Tem. "Just don't practice your lightning Ability at night."

Zee slapped his forehead. "You know about that, too?"

"You do have a lightning Ability!" Timandra said with surprise. She nudged Tem with her shoulder. "You were right, Tem."

Tem held out a hand, a smug smile on his face. "You owe me a silver. Pay up."

"And where would I be keeping a silver? Pay yourself."

Jessup said, "Um, what is going on?"

“We’ve been keeping an eye on you two when you leave your cavern. Not all the time, of course, and it’s been for your own safety as much as anything.”

“We were asked to make sure you weren’t going to get yourselves into trouble,” said Tem.

Zee replied with dismay. “It sounds like we almost already did.”

“Not really,” Tem added. “We could sense very little of your core when you were in the cavern and felt nothing while you were under the sea, even when you sparked it.”

Timandra said, “We saw slight flashes in the deep, though – only because we were watching closely from the sky. Dragons have keen eyesight, even from a great distance, and Tem has a spyglass. He said it was lightning. I said it couldn’t be because I didn’t want to believe a kraken and murman could have such a devastating Ability, especially this earlier in their forging. We made a bet.”

Zee realized he still had his hand on his forehead and dropped it to his side. “Okay, first, we do have a lightning Ability. Maybe even two of them. One is a single strike. We’ve called it Lightning Bolt, and we’re terrible at it. The other one is multiple strikes. We called that one Lightning Blast. Each bolt is smaller and weaker but we could hit multiple targets at once if we weren’t even worse at that than Lightning Bolt.

“Lightning…” said Timandra softly. She looked up at Jessup. “You become more terrifying by the day, Mr. Jessup.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” Jessup replied, matter-of-fact.

Timandra chuckled and shook her head.

“We may be able to help you with those,” said Tem.

Zee said, “That would be great, thank you. But, second, you’ve been spying on us?”

Tem raised a finger. “Keeping an eye on you for your own good. There’s a difference.”

“Not much difference, admittedly” said Timandra. “But a difference nonetheless. And it wasn’t our idea.”

“Right,” Zee acquiesced. “Sorry. It makes sense.”

Jessup said, “I would spy on us too.”

Tem held a hand to Jessup. “You see?”

“We *are* terrifying,” Zee added.

“Jessup is terrifying,” the kraken added, then turned up one side of his lips in a crooked smile. “Zee is tiny.”

Zee grinned back at him. “I need to eat more vegetables.”

Fennix said, “Now I’m the one who doesn’t have the faintest idea what’s going on.”

“It’s a silly joke,” said Jessup.

“Silly kraken joke,” Zee retorted. Jessup snorted. Zee addressed Tem and Timandra more seriously. “You said you sensed our core when we were in the cavern. If you could at Silver Class—”

“Mid level Silver Class,” Tem interjected.

“Right, but that would mean Golds and above would be able to sense it even more strongly, right?”

“In general, yes,” said Timandra, “but the sensitivity to cores of other bonded pairs wanes with time, thankfully. It would become quite annoying otherwise, like everyone was shouting at you all the time. They would have to be fairly close and actively seeking out for the cores of others to sense yours. Either way, we may be able to help you with that as well.”

Tem said, “Did you wonder why you couldn’t tell that Tem and I were right up there?” He motioned to the cliff above.

“It occurred to me,” said Zee, “but I was pretty surprised.”

“There are passive Abilities used to aid in hiding the power that emanates from the core of a bonded pair, sparked or unsparked.”

“Passive Abilities?”

Tem and Timandra looked at each other and Tem said, “We do have a lot to teach them.”

Timandra nodded, then addressed Zee and Jessup, “When would you like to start?”

Zee didn’t even have to check with Jessup. “How about now?”

Chapter 35

Jessup snapped a log in half and set the pieces for Zee and Tem to sit on. Tem sat with a slight groan, then rubbed his face as he got his thoughts together. “To start, tell us about how your first time processing Empyrean went. We won’t ask how you knew how to do it. We already know.”

Timandra, who was sitting on her haunches next to Tem, spoke to Fennix without looking at him. “You’re not hearing any of this, right, Mr. Fennix?”

“Quite right, Ma’am,” Fennix answered.

Zee explained how they meditated and used their breathing technique, visualized the Empyrean Plain, then mined, refined, formed and sparked their core. “It was hard, but we were able to do it two more times that night.”

Tem and Timandra were dumbstruck. “All three phases in one night, three times?” she asked.

Jessup replied, “Yes, Ma’am.”

Zee said, “Why, did we do something wrong?”

“Apparently not,” said Timandra, still shaking her head in disbelief. “You’re still alive and well.”

Tem said, “But no one does that their first time. Most only get through mining before having to quit.”

Timandra gazed at Jessup and Zee, but spoke to Tem. “I wonder it’s because they were bonded so young.”

“But they were separated for ten years and have only seen each other for what, three weeks?”

“Maybe the core still strengthens and grows when bonded individuals are apart, even if not nearly as fast as when working on it together?”

“I suppose,” said Tem, removing his cap and scratching his head. “Maybe.”

He put his cap back on and took a breathe. “We got a glimpse of your crucible and core earlier,” he said to Zee and Jessup, “but you would mind showing us again?”

“To us only, and Mr. Fennix, if you wish,” said Timandra. “Do you know how to do that?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Zee replied. “I was just being careless earlier.”

“*We* were being careless,” Jessup interjected.

“Right.” Zee got up from the log and climbed up on one of Jessup’s arms. They went through the process of visualizing their core, then felt out for the combined aura of Tem and Timandra’s singular bonded aura, as well as Fennix’s, and revealed it.

The knight rider and dragon got to their feet, gazing at the blue and yellow glowing marble.

Timandra said, “It’s every bit as amazing as it was described to us.”

“Yeah...” said Tem.

“It’s twice the size I would have expected.”

Zee said, “We’ve been forging Marisean, too.”

“We can do both at the same time now,” Jessup added. “It goes faster that way.”

Timandra turned her head to Tem. “I think I’m going to need a lie-down.”

“You and me both.”

“Look at the size of their crucible, too, and the thickness and density of its wall.”

“I’m looking.”

Zee was getting anxious. “Is it weird?”

Timandra said, “Well, yes, but not in a bad way. I know we said you might be high level Lead Class, but this could be Copper Class.”

“Maybe even low level Bronze?” said Tem. “With Marisean, though...”

Timandra tore her eyes from the core and spoke apologetically. “We honestly just can’t tell.”

Tem hurried to speak at the sight of Zee and Jessup’s obvious disappointment. “The size of a core alone isn’t enough to know. Leveling up requires increasing mastery of your Abilities as well, and that’s especially crucial to reach a new class. And you’re a murman and kraken, not human and dragon. It could be very different. Your levels and classes might not even match ours.” He threw up his hands in defeat. “For all we know, you could progress more than one level at a time.”

“Conversely,” said Timandra, “you might need a larger core for a particular class than we do.” Off Zee’s look of further disappointment, she added, “But again, we just don’t know. From what we’ve been told, nobody does.”

Jessup was much less disheartened than Zee. "It is what it is."

Fennix said, "That is very wise, Jessup, and a healthy attitude to have."

"It is," said Zee. He turned to his friend. "You really are a wise kraken."

"I told you."

Zee grinned and the others chuckled.

Tem said, "The only way to really know would be to use the Orb of Assessment, but that is strictly off limits to all but bonded cadet and graduate pairs. I know, I already checked. Plus, there would be no way to use it without being seen."

"And we don't know if it can assess Marisean at all," Timandra added.

Tem pointed to his assessment badge, which was silver with two hashmarks, representing their mid level Silver Class threat level. "It could be the same with assessment badges. Even then, ours wouldn't work for you because it's attuned to our bond."

"As frustrating as that might be," Tem continued, "what really matters is continuing to build your core, getting stronger, and mastering your abilities as they manifest." He sighed, then he and Timandra pondered and looked to each other, obviously communicating through their bond. Tem checked his shining silver pocketclock.

"That's very pretty," Jessup said.

Tem was taken off guard. "Thank you. I should hope so, for as much as it cost."

Zee said, "Jessup likes shiny things."

"I do."

Zee patted his arm. "He always has. Sometimes he tries to eat them, though." Tem balked, holding his pocketclock closer.

Jessup said, "Only when I was little. I don't do that any more."

"I'm glad to hear that," Tem replied, though he stuffed the clock in his pocket rather quickly.

Timandra gazed up at Jessup. "It's hard to imagine you were ever little."

Zee grinned and held his hands just over a foot apart. "He was only this big when I found him."

Keeping her eyes on Jessup, she said, "You grew very fast."

"I eat my vegetables," Jessup replied with a smile.

Timandra shook her head and they all chuckled again.

“We have much to cover,” said Tem. “It’s not late yet, and being Fifthday, Timandra and I don’t have a training session until after noon tomorrow. If you have the time, we can cover some basics now.”

“We have the time,” said Jessup.

Zee said, “We’re off work tomorrow, and we don’t sleep much anyway.”

“It believe it,” said Timandra. She turned to the white Ice Diver. “You are welcome to stay, Mr. Fennix, but much of what we’re going to be talking about is only relevant to bonded pairs and taught after BCT final testing is passed and pairs are chosen for bonding.”

“I would very much like to stay, Ma’am, if that’s all right. I’m going through everything that’s taught in BCT for the third time now. It would be wonderful to hear something new.”

She directed her next comment to Zee and Jessup. “All right, gentlemen, tell us what you know about forming your Keep.”

Zee and Jessup told them about how they formed their Keep, then were taught how they could show their Keep to others just like they could their core. And just like when Tem and Timandra had seen their core, they were wowed by their Keep. Apparently newly formed Keeps were the usually the size of a footlocker. Zee and Jessup’s had been as big as Mahfouz’s shack when they’d first formed it, and it had already doubled in size. Tem and Timandra speculated that it could be because Jessup was so large, but again, there was no way to know for sure.

Tem said, “One thing you must keep in mind. Never put anything alive in there if you want it to stay alive.”

“Right,” Zee replied. “We already tried that.”

Jessup grinned slyly. “With a fish.”

Zee chuckled and shook his head. “As you can see, it’s not in there any more, and there there never will be again.”

Jessup said, “I wouldn’t say never.”

“Argh!”

Tem and Timandra explained how Zee and Jessup could mask the power of their core with Abilities called Occlude and Camouflage. Occlude blocked other bonded pairs from feeling the power of their core, sparked or unsparked, but especially sensitive pairs, particularly higher class magickers, might sense something odd, like an invisible hole in the environment.

Camouflage was a like Occlude but also involved wrapping natural energies of the environment with their aura. Hyper-sensitive magicker pairs could still feel their core, but only if they were very close and actively seeking it out.

Jessup said, “Camouflage. Like this?” His eyes narrowed and he changed color to match the ground beneath him and the cliffs at his back. He could still be seen if you knew he was there and looked closely, but his natural camouflage worked incredibly well. Without focusing on him, and if he sat very still, only his big green eyes stood out clearly.

“Whoa,” Zee exclaimed. “That’s amazing.”

“And terrifying,” said Timandra.

Jessup chuckled.

Zee said, “Is there anything else you can do that you haven’t told me about?”

Jessup thought for a moment. “I can fit two of my arms in my mouth at once.”

Zee shook his head. “That’s not something we’ll need to do in battle.”

“Enough of that, please, Jessup,” said Tem. “You’re making me nervous.”

Jessup went back to his normal coloring.

“Thank you.”

Timandra said, “Anyway, using either Ability will deplete your core, like any other ability, but not by very much. A larger core takes more to Occlude or Camouflage, but only as a percentage of its size, so it won’t be depleted considerably faster than a smaller one. Any depletion must be considered, though, which was why pairs usually only do it for short periods, strategically, during battle. Though sometimes letting an enemy feel your power is the best thing to do right up front. It depends on the situation.”

“I would recommend Camouflage,” said Tem, “but it will take practice. You’ll want to Camouflage only enough to hide the power of your core without completely blocking out your natural auras. Only very sensitive pairs of higher classes, with few exceptions, would be able to tell the difference, but if you had no perceivable aura, they could sense you were hiding something. Luckily for you, thanks to Timandra, we’re a particularly sensitive pair for Silver Class, so we can help. It will take some time for you to learn to Camouflage properly, but that practice will help you control your other Abilities as well.”

Timandra said, “When you use any Ability you want to make the most efficient use of your core to accomplish the task. The most common error is using too much. More of your core

being fed into an Ability makes it more powerful, yes, but it also makes it more difficult to control and is wasteful. Using far too much can make an attack Ability downright dangerous, for you and for anyone near who you may not want to harm.”

“Later we’ll get into how you can actively sense your flightmates or others you don’t want to harm in your vicinity,” Tem added.

Zee said, “You said something about Passive Abilities earlier...”

“Occlude and Camouflage are considered passive Abilities, as are hiding and revealing your core, creating and using your Keep, and even you aura protection, which flares automatically when you are struck. Anything else, for offense or defense, are active Abilities.”

Zee, Jessup and Fennix all nodded. It was all a lot to take in, but they were hanging on every word.

Tem and Timandra demonstrated how to Occlude their core, then use Camouflage, and both shook their heads at how quickly Zee and Jessup were able to do them, even if they weren’t perfect. Again, they put it down to how long they’d been bonded.

The Silver Class knights then provided a review of how progression in levels and classes was achieved. Bonded pairs progress through a combination of training hard to stay in optimal physical condition, continued forging to enlarge and strengthen their core, engaging in combat, and mastering their Abilities. Zee and Jessup already excelled in training and forging, though Tem and Timandra would help them hone their skills and techniques. Combat was important because it stressed pairs to their limits. The best kind of combat was full combat, either real or virtual. That would be Zee and Jessup’s biggest challenge since they weren’t allowed to use the virtual combat fields at the academy. There were some things Tem and Timandra could help with, but it wouldn’t be the same.

Zee said, “Jessup and I have been bonded for ten years, but Jessup has also been fighting in the sea his whole life. Real combat, very often to the death.”

“To the death of my enemies, not me,” Jessup said.

Zee chuckled. “Well, yeah.”

“You have lived a hard life too, Zee, and had to fight.”

“Not like you have, though. My point is, that could be part of the reason he and I have been able to do things with forging and Abilities more quickly than newly bonded human and dragon pairs. It could also be a way to help us progress further.”

Timandra said, “Are you suggesting that you and Jessup go out into the sea and fight creatures there, but now using your core and Abilities?”

Zee looked to Jessup, who was in complete agreement, then back. “I am.”

“That sounds like good reasoning, but seriously dangerous.”

“We’ll do what we have to do. And we’ll be careful. As careful as we can be, anyway.”

Back to Jessup he said, “I don’t want to go out and just slaughter things, though. We only fight creatures that attack us. That way we’d also be helping make the nearby waters safer.”

Jessup nodded. “I agree.”

Fennix said, “I’m not sure I like this idea at all.”

“Me neither,” said Tem. “It makes sense, yes, but I don’t approve of the risk.”

To Jessup, Zee said, “You’re a lot faster now that we’ve forged our core. Is there anything faster in the sea?”

“Nothing I have seen.”

“I know it’s not in your nature to run away from a fight, but if we got into trouble, would you be willing to retreat?”

Jessup said, “I would run forever for Zee.”

A lump suddenly appeared in Zee’s throat. He swallowed it down and patted his friend on the arm.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, then Tem said. “I still don’t like it, but if your going to do it, keep a close watch on your core. If it gets below twenty five percent, I want you get out of there immediately.”

“In fact,” Timandra added. “We’re going to make that a condition of us training you. Do you swear it?”

Zee and Jessup said, “We swear it,” at the same time.

The Silver Class pair gazed at them, then nodded.

Timandra said, “And don’t let your core fall below ten percent. That’s a safe level, but much below can be dangerous. If your core gets too low, it can burn out. If that happens, you may never be able to reforge it. Your bond could be broken forever.”

Zee stiffened. “That’s good to know.”

Tem said, “It’s something we wanted to tell you today anyway, but now it’s even more crucial. It’s very unlikely something like that can happen during practice or training because the

core has a tendency to preserve itself. In combat, however, a strong-willed pair can override that tendency.

“We will remember,” said Jessup. “Don’t break core.”

“That takes care of combat, at least to some extent,” said Timandra, “which leaves the mastering of Abilities.”

As the evening went on, their new mentors told Zee he should think about channeling the power of their sparked core into six different areas: strength, speed, cognition, resilience, sufferance, and Abilities. Some pairs liked to think of those areas like repositories, similar to smaller, more specialized cores connected to their larger core, and called them “caches.” That was only a theory, and you couldn’t see caches like you could your core, but whatever helped Zee and Jessup use their core’s power most efficiently was good. Just like the rider was the channel for pulling ore into the crucible during the forging process, the directing of power out of the core was mostly their responsibility as well. Of course they couldn’t do either of those things without their beast, and the beast housed the far greater portion of their shared crucible, so it was more of a joint effort than that. The rider didn’t have total control of either activity.

The important thing was to understand that they could develop control over how much of their core they used for any of the areas mentioned. The more control they had, the more efficiently they would use their core, the more effective their Abilities would be, and the more effective they would be in combat, not to mention their core would last longer. With practice, it would become second nature and take far less conscious effort. It was critical to mastering their Abilities as they manifested with each class-up as well.

Progressing through levels within classes, low, mid or medium, and high, meant not only that their core had grown, which meant they were stronger, faster, more resilient, and could heal more quickly, but they had advanced their mastery of the Abilities available to them as well. Progressing to a new class was slightly different. In addition to what a new level represented, a new class added its own additional boost, which could be significant, and a class-up was also when new Abilities would be revealed. Each higher class was roughly two times more powerful than the class below it, but that could vary quite a bit from one pair to the next.

Most commonly, new Abilities were what were called related Abilities, which were basically stronger versions of what they could already do. For example, at lower classes, all dragons would be expected to do Gust with their wings and Wail with their roar. At a higher

class, they would become capable of doing Windstorm and Blare, and more with each new class. In order to class-up and have access to those, though, they would first have to master Gust and Wail, not just be able to do them. As Fire-breathing dragons progress, they develop further Abilities related to their fire projectile but with more control over intensity, distance, and area, but again, they have to master the previous class's Abilities before they could class up.

Mastery of an ability meant achieving proficient stages of accuracy, control, and efficient use of their core for the requisite potency of their Abilities. The only way to master an ability was through practice, on their own and in combat.

When a pair couldn't progress to the next class, it often had more to do with having reached a plateau in forging than not having mastered an Ability, but that could cause a pair to become stuck as well. Progression got harder as a pair advanced, as well, so most often a pair would eventually just settle for whatever class they were stuck in.

As it had grown darker, they'd gathered firewood and Timandra had lit it. It was nearly midnight when Fennix doused the fire with his natural ice expulsion. Tem and Timandra left, promising less talk and more work when they came back in two days. Somehow it sounded to Zee like less of a promise and more like a threat. Fennix walked with them to the cavern, he and Jessup chatting all the way, then headed back to the field where the dragon recruits were staying so he could be fresh for BCT training in the morning.

Jessup and Zee were too excited to sleep. They spent the rest of the night moving the training equipment from the cavern to the canyon under the cover of night and the trees, then the next day building new equipment for the cavern so Zee could train in both places.

Though they would be more exposed in the canyon, they both figured it was safer to practice their lightning and for Jessup to drill fighting with his long arms there than taking the chance of setting everything in the cave on fire with electricity or breaking it with flailing arms. There was also some concern that if they did something particularly dumb they might bring the cave right down on their heads.

Chapter 36

True to their word, the Silver Class knights came two days later, then kept a schedule of coming twice during each week and both days on the weekends after that. Two days a week they all worked together on Abilities and forging. Tem and Timandra forged with them regularly. Forging was always easier with others, but the first time they'd been shocked at how forging with Zee and Jessup seemed to cool the Emyrean ore enough to make every step of the forging processing faster and less painful. They'd been able to forge nearly a third more ore as a result. Zee and Jessup had noticed a difference as well, though nowhere near as dramatic as Tem and Timandra had experienced.

Tem and Timandra also gave them tips on working with their Shield, taught them how to use Deflect, which was a quick flash of Shield used to divert strikes and used less core power than Shield, and a basic ability called Push, also related to Shield, but more like an invisible pulse that could knock opponents back. Every lesson involved developing more efficient use of their core. They also tested just how much their protective aura could take, and how long their Shield would hold up against attacks from the Silver Knights.

They continued to work on their Lightning Bolt and Lightning Blast Abilities during daylight hours. They got better, but progress was slow. Using just the right amount of core power for them was proving extremely difficult to master, and they only hit their targets about one out of ten times, which could have been luck as much as anything.

The other two days each week, the beasts and riders trained separately. Timandra, Jessup, and Fennix, when he could make it, would go to the canyon, while Zee with Tem trained in the cave. Since the power of the bond waned with distance and physical condition was crucial to forging, training apart from your bondmate was just as important as training together. Also, if Zee and Jessup were to get into the academy some day, they'd have to get through BCT separately, without the aid of their bond.

Tem sparred with Zee and instructed him on sword, spear, use of his shield, and archery, as well how to properly use his sword training equipment and the proper ways to do pushers, pullers, and crunchers and how they were judged in BCT trials.

The work was grueling, but Zee threw himself into each lesson with gusto. His favorite was learning the finer points of swordplay, including strategy. Tem was much better than Zee, but away from their beasts, Zee was faster and would score hits much more often than Tem would have liked.

On the days when Tem and Timandra weren't there, Zee and Jessup focused on their conditioning, forging, and skill-building. They also went out into the sea to fight monsters. They didn't find sufficient opponents every day, but the deeper they went, the better their chances were. Jessup even lit the glowing areas on his shell and arms to attract them. Zee found it more frightening than Jessup, but they handled each beast without much real danger and incurred no significant injuries. In a way it was disappointing, but a large part of Zee was just as glad they didn't run into a Leviathanfish, Monstaray, or any number of the other truly huge and terrifying beasts Zee had heard of.

They tried their Lightning Bolt against the creatures, and missed every time. More often than not their foe would flee after seeing it, and Zee had asked Jessup not to chase a beast that had given up, so they stopped using it for combat entirely.

Overall the effort was terrific practice for them working together, and the strength of their bond and their core benefitted greatly. It also gave Zee practical experience with controlling the amount of their core power that was channeled into the areas Tem and Timandra had told them about.

In the little time they had off of work and training, Fennix continued to help Jessup with his speaking and reading. One night, Zee entered the cavern with a new purchase.

"Look what I bought!" he announced.

Jessup eyed it. "An octopoo doll?"

Zee laughed. "No!"

"It's a sackpipe." said Fennix, not looking particularly happy about it.

Zee arranged the pipes on his shoulder. "There was a sailor on the ship who had a set and I heard him teaching another sailor a technique used to play it called circular breathing. I've been thinking it might be closer to how murfolk breathe underwater with their gills. I might help with Marisean mining when we aren't in the water, and maybe even help with Emphyrean mining."

"Okay..." Jessup said.

“I’ve taken a few lessons during my lunch hour at work.” He placed the canter in his mouth, inflated the bag and began to play while keeping a steady flow of air through his lips by alternating puffing out his cheeks and compressing them as he breathed.

Jessup grit his teeth and Fennix winced at the whining screech of the instrument.

Zee stopped after a minute. “Phew. It makes me dizzy.”

“Me too,” said Jessup.

“I was thinking nauseous, myself.”

“All right, you two, I’ll go practice somewhere else.”

Zee headed around the lake on the narrow stone ledge along the wall at this end of the cavern. “You’ll both be sorry when I find out circular breathing really does help with forging and I won’t teach it to you.”

“If that’s the case,” said Fennix, “we’ll beg for mercy.”

“I’m already begging for mercy from that sound.”

“Ha!” Zee exclaimed, and left the cavern.

Fennix said to Jessup, “Perhaps we could use it to keep our enemies away.”

“It would work on me.”

In the canyon, Zee and Jessup hung a dozen rocks wrapped in rags and rope from the lower branches of the tree. They were hung at various heights and distances, roughly in a circle. Jessup used them to practice striking with his arms, which helped with controlling his accuracy and force, and the practice became one of his favorites. It was also one of Zee’s favorite things to watch. When Jessup was in particularly good form, he would get them all swinging, then dodge and turn and strike them randomly one after the other and occasionally get them going in a pattern he’d set in his mind.

They’d rotate between training with their core sparked and without it, since if – *when* – they were accepted into the academy, they wouldn’t be able to use their bond until after BCT. It was also the most grueling, but where Zee knew he really had to concentrate his efforts.

Zee was getting stronger, building his constitution and speed, but compared to when tapping into the bond, he felt puny. He knew he was particularly strong for his size and was continuing to get stronger, he just wasn’t very big. Mostly, though Zee still had to work on his running. Even after weeks of training, he was slow compared to what he’d seen the Minnows doing. By his reckoning, he’d be close to last in a foot race.

It was all hard work, and some nights they got so caught up in training, forging, or learning something new they didn't sleep at all.

During an evening when Tem and Timandra weren't coming, Zee worked at the pell in the canyon, shirtless and with his loose pants rolled up to the knees. He struck the pell again and again with his heavy metal training sword – which was really just a blade of flat iron roughly ground sharp on both sides, with a handle. In his other arm he held a shield of the size used by knights, but weighted to be considerably heavier.

Sweat dripped into his eyes, glistened on his body, and soaked the waist of his pants. Dr. Aenig had been fascinated by the fact that he perspired, since he was a murman and made for living in the sea. The surgeon had theorized that perhaps sweat glands were latently there in Zee's dermal layer and had developed because he had been raised on the land since an infant. Then again, maybe murfolk perspired in the sea to help regulate the level of salt in their bodies. Who knew.

Zee had been at the pell for an hour straight, and his whole body ached. His arms and shoulders burned, his wrist growing weak. Each swing became slower and more inaccurate. Each tug of the blade from where it sometimes stuck in the wood was a monumental chore. Good, Zee thought, that's exactly what he wanted.

Everything he did, if there was time, he continued until he just couldn't do it any longer. Finally he dropped the sword and shield and leaned on his knees, breathing deeply with satisfaction. He stretched, grimacing, then waved his arms and rolled his wrists to clear the sting and burn. He was satisfied with his progress at the pell so far. When he'd first started, he only lasted five minutes swinging the heavy sword. Now he could go nearly an hour.

Having recovered somewhat, he picked up an old towel and wiped his face, arms and chest. Craning his head back he looked down, running his fingers over the krakenbond. In just a few weeks it had grown until it now covered his whole left pectoral, with arms stretching across his sternum and to up over his collarbone. It had become darker, thicker and harder as well, particular at the center. He could barely feel it when he ran his fingernails over it. He wondered just how big it would get, and if it would become as hard as Jessup's shell. He hoped it would still be flexible and wouldn't hinder his movement. Somehow he didn't think it would, because that wouldn't make much sense, but who knew? They were all breaking new ground here.

A grunt and a, “Ha, HA!” came from the other end of the canyon. Zee strolled to lean on the tree and watch a kraken and a small white dragon with a club foot sparring.

Jessup struck out with his arms while Fennix bobbed, weaved, and snapped at them with his teeth, occasionally blocking with a wing or his good front leg, or spinning to slap them away with his tail. Fennix used his wings to bound over Jessup and come down behind him. Jessup didn’t have to spin around, just turn a little and swivel an eye back.

Jessup’s control of his arms out of the water had advanced greatly, but Fennix avoided his strikes and swipes, leaping, tucking his wings to drop to the ground and roll, blocking and dodging away. Of course, both of them knew that if Jessup could strike Fennix easily if he really wanted to, even extend his tip claws and sucker spikes. By the same token, Fennix could use his freezing breath on Jessup, though they’d discovered it did little more than make his tentacles sting. This was more about training and discipline than winning, though, and they certainly didn’t want anyone to get hurt.

“You are doing good today, Fennix.” Said Jessup. I think you’re getting better.”

While still dodging, Fennix corrected his speech. ““You are doing *well* today.””

Jessup repeated, “You are doing *well* today.” Then he grinned with mischief. “Much gooder than yesterday.”

“Now you’re just messing with me, you rascally kraken.”

“This rascally kraken is now going to go faster. Try to keep up, rascally tiny dragon.”

“Do your worst!”

Jessup swung his arms in scissor attacks and snapped them like whips, but Fennix managed to avoid them. When he couldn’t any longer, he launched himself into the air to fly over Jessup’s shell once more. Jessup threw himself to tip over backward, shaking the ground, and thrust up with multiple arms.

“Gah!” Fennix exclaimed, unable to escape the wall of kraken arms. Jessup grabbed him, wrapped him up and held him close until he couldn’t move. “I concede!” came the dragon’s muffled voice.

Jessup let him loose. “Thank you again for helping me with training, Fennix,” Jessup said. “I enjoy it very much.”

“It’s a mutually beneficial arrangement, I assure you.”

They made quite the pair, the big sea monster and the small white dragon with a deformed front leg. It warmed Zee's heart that Jessup had another friend. A beast friend. "Are you two done playing?" he said.

"Playing?" the kraken replied. "Jessup doesn't play."

"*I don't* play," Fennix corrected.

"Fennix doesn't play either."

Fennix looked at him askance, then saw he was smiling. "Rascally kraken." To Zee, he said, "I'll have you know, this is serious training."

"I can see that," Zee replied with a smile. He could also see that Fennix had sat back and was rubbing his club foot with his other claw.

Jessup noticed too and asked with worry in his voice. "Does it hurt, Fennix?"

He realized what he was doing and quickly dropped to his good front foot. "No, no. It's fine." Then he saw the genuine concern in his knew friends' eyes. "All right, it aches at times, but it's nothing to worry about."

"It certainly doesn't effect the way you fly," Zee said. "You're amazing."

"Thank you," Fennix replied. "I've learned to compensate for the weight imbalance over the years."

"Years of hard training, from what I've seen."

"I do what I can."

Jessup said, "Is that why you don't have to stay with the dragon recruits all the time and can train on you own?"

"It's not that. You've probably heard this is my third time going through BCT." Zee and Jessup nodded. "I may fly sufficiently, but I cannot run well. I'm also small, even for my breed, which isn't very large already compared to those Royal brutes and the Greatwings, so I am not very strong. The Rocks aren't particular long or tall, but they are quite powerful for their size."

He was quiet for a moment. "I failed the final running test and the boulder roll in my first year, but stayed here on the island and trained every day. I passed my second year, just barely, but was unable to find a rider on Pairing Day." Fennix swallowed, as if pushing down the pain of his disappointment, and spoke with determination. "I stayed trained once more, planning to do even better in the BCT trials this year, but this seems to be a stronger cohort of dragon candidates than the last, so I must work even harder. Then I must find a rider willing to pair with

me. This is my last chance.” He gazed at the ground. “I pray to Zepiter every night that I may fulfill his will for humans and dragons to bond and grow stronger together.”

For the first time Zee saw Fennix allow the full weight of his burden show through. “We’ll help any way we can.”

“Anything,” said Jessup, with all sincerity.

“Thank you, my friends. I appreciate you more than you can know.”

Jessup said. “We appreciate you more.”

Fennix looked up at him with a half smile. “Are we going to make this an appreciation competition, now?”

“Yes.” Jessup tried to hide a grin, not very successfully, which made Fennix chuckle.

Zee said, “Then let’s get back to work. None of us will achieve our dreams sitting around talking about it and being morose.”

“True that, Mr. Tarrow,” said Fennix. “True that.”

While they waited for Tem and Timandra to arrive at the canyon, Zee rode Jessup with their core sparked, a training shield on his arm and wooden sword in his hand. Fennix leapt from side to side, forward and back, shooting streams of freezing ice particles for them block with their Shield or Deflect. So far they’d been doing great.

Fennix shot upward on his wings, fainted to the side, then plunged down behind them, firing at their back – but their Shield was already there. At the same time, Jessup spun and lunged forward so swiftly he was a blur, forcing Fennix to recoil back. Their Shield dropped and Zee thrust out a hand. Light pulsed forward, knocking Fennix back and to the ground.

Jessup stopped immediately and Zee shouted, “Fennix! Are you all right?”

Fennix leapt to his feet and shook off the dust, more excited than upset. “I’m fine, don’t you worry. That was wonderful! You just used your Shield blind, then Burst and Push, all in swift succession.”

Zee and Jessup considered what they’d done. Zee said, “We did, didn’t we?”

“And best of all, you didn’t have to think about it. Your Abilites are becoming second nature.”

They heard clapping from above and looked up to see Tem on Timandra on the cliff above.

Timandra said, "Bravo!"

"I guess we can go home," said Tem. "There's nothing else we can teach them."

"Hey!" Zee shouted up. "There's plenty we still don't know."

"That's true," said Timandra. "I guess we'll stay."

Fennix, Jessup, and Zee all grinned.

On a day when riders and beasts were training separately, Zee and Tem had retreated to the cavern, leaving the dragons and kraken in the canyon. Both of them pounded at a pell with their swords. Tem had brought Zee a much better training sword than the one he'd had made by a smith in town, and it helped his accuracy tremendously. He was also just as fast as Tem, if not faster, but Tem still hit harder, and his accuracy and edge placement were a marvel to watch.

Shoulders and wrist aching, Zee stepped back to watch, as he had many times, just how Tem placed his feet, held his shoulders, moved his arms, and used his wrist to control the blade.

It was still hard to believe this was the same person as that haughty squire who had snubbed him so badly for years on the ship. Now he was here training him, giving up his own time, and in some cases, sleep. Zee had even begun to think of them as friends.

Zee leaned on his sword. "Why are you here, Tem?"

Tem looked over his shoulder and stepped back, surprised at the question and breathing hard. He seemed to think for a second, then turned to lean back on the pell and wipe the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. "It's good for me. To be honest, I was starting to get complacent in my training. Just look at me. I'm sweating like a pig."

"Pigs don't sweat."

"They don't?"

Tem's eyes lit as he recalled. "Oh, right. 'The boy on a pig.' You would know."

Zee chuckled, but said, "Seriously, it has to be more than that."

The smile was still on Tem's face, but he took a breath and it faded. "I wasn't entirely forthcoming when I told you why we came that first day. We weren't ordered by the commandants or the deans. You have Dame Toomsil to thank for us being here."

"She sent you, then."

"No. Aureosa and Wanchoo had talked to her about it, and she came to me. We discussed it, but she did not ask or order me here. She didn't even suggested it. I agreed to meet with the

commandants. Being lead instructors, Zara – Dame Toomsil – and Peloquin are much more busy than Timandra and I are, but that’s not why I volunteered. I’m here because I believe it’s the right thing to do.”

Zee was taken aback. “I thought you hated me.”

A sly smile curved on Tem’s lips. “Maybe I do.”

“You can hate me all you want, as long as you keep training me.”

Tem chuckled, then it faded too. “I never hated you. Disregarded, had no respect for, maybe, but that’s all in the past. The truth is, I owe Zara, and I owe it to myself.”

“I don’t understand.”

Tem’s brow furrowed, then he gazed at the light dancing on the water of the lake. “I’m going to tell you something I don’t want you to repeat. I only learned of it after I was accepted into the academy.”

“All right.”

“Zara’s mother came from a family of name and status who fell in love with a woodcutter who did not. Their daughter was raised on the forest slopes of a mountain as Zara Drook.”

He paused a moment to let that sink in – which it did. She’d had a low-born name, just like Zee.

“One day, a Bronze Class dragon and rider of the Dragon Corps were caught in a terrible storm and crashed down on the mountain. The knight was badly hurt, and the dragon had a broken wing and leg. Young Zara Drook, only thirteen years old at the time, found them and did what she could to dress the wounds of the rider while the dragon guided her on what to do. Her family took them in, fed them, and took care of them. The rider finally regained consciousness after few days, but was still in no shape to move, and the dragon still could not fly. When other knight pairs finally found them, Zara stated that she had always wanted to be a knight. The rider, who’s family was quite influential, and the dragon, who came from a highly respected tribe, both put in a good word for her, and she was accepted into a squireship. During that time, she took her mother’s name at their recommendation, mon Toomsil. Her parents were later killed in a landslide while she was at the academy.”

Tem looked to Zee. “She’s not one of the murfolk, of course, but Dame Toomsil has seen much of herself in you since the first day we met you. I know how the higher classes think and behave toward others. It’s the way I was raised. I played the game, and watched it play out while

I was in the academy. I also watched Dame Zara mon Toomsil, a true knight of the realm. At some point along the way, I realized I wanted to be less like my father, and more like her.” His eyes met Zee’s. “Does that make sense?”

It too a moment for Zee to process the emotions that had swelled within him. “Yes, it does.”

“Timandra has also had a tremendous influence on me. I’m truly lucky to have her.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

Tem smiled genuinely. “Thank you for listening. And for not telling me to sod off when we came to you in the canyon.”

“I could tell you now, if you like.”

Tem shrugged, “I wouldn’t leave anyway. We both still have much to learn.” He went back to striking the pell.

Zee watched him for a minute, then stepped to his pell and got back to work.

Nearly a month of training with Tem and Timandra passed, Zee and Jessup’s skills and core growing with each passing week. Throughout it all, the murfolk book, as Jessup continued to call it, still hadn’t revealed anything new.