

How To Train A Deadly Scuttleclaw



By
Kaizar The Sneak

***This book is dedicated to
Danielle Juno (DJ)
The best friend anyone could ever have***

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Opener:

The high-pitched, scream-like roar from a Dreadstrider shattered the sky and broke the beautiful, morning sunrise. Its rider, Kaizar the Sneak, otherwise known as just “Kai,” gripped lightly to its sturdy, leather saddle and carefully crafted dragon armor, while scanning the bright horizon with searching eyes. It took no longer than ten seconds for him to find his target: a small fleet of War Lord ships swiftly floating by the coast of a heavily-forested island. Behind him on the saddle sat another Viking, who was not nearly as majestic or experienced in dragon-flying as his comrade; but, nonetheless, radiated the tell-tale signs of a seasoned warrior. With an almost imperceptible nudge, the Dreadstider and its two riders shot off at an even greater speed toward the small fleet of vessels. I, on the other hand, swerved in behind them and nudged my Deadly Scuttleclaw to keep up. It was, in fact, impossible, but the defense of my island depended upon it. Behind me too was a fellow Viking; actually, my dad. He was short, but strong and had the dragon maneuvering skills of one who had flown many missions. The early morning air was pure and the water beneath us was smooth and glistened like clear glass. As we bore down upon the ships, I noticed that they were well prepared. Gleaming spear launchers, bola cannons, and archers lined the ship – ready for action. This was the moment of truth. With backup confirmed but far off, it was the decision of Kai as to whether to commence the attack. It turned out that Kai did not make the decision – his comrade did. With a well-known Berserker howl, he sent himself and Kai into an almost vertical dive towards the ships. The fun was just about to begin.

Chapter 1: Appearing

Dagur wasn't the smartest Viking, but he had the courage of a hero and the shrewdness of a skril. No sooner had we landed, thanks to a perfect flight by Powder, than he was off and charging the nearby captain. Powder was now one year old and had much more experience in warfare. He knew exactly what to do. As all good Dragon Riders figure out, it's better to take down an attacking ship's steerage first. While I dealt with two nearby goons, Powder turned his back to mine and sprayed down his enemies with a powerful mist. No sooner had I finished my backslash and knockout; then Powder's enemies were frozen stiff. With the upper deck won, Dagur grabbed hold of a nearby rope hanging from the sails and swung down with a hair-raising yell while I caught a ride with Powder to the lower deck. The wonderful thing with this boat was that it was loaded down with long-range weapons – typical War Lords being underprepared for one aspect of fighting and over prepared for another - they should have tried harder to shoot us down *before* we arrived at the ship. Thus, it was a simple matter of taking down the rest of the goons. Powder thwacked one in the head with his tail and blasted a few other axe men with another cloud of mist as Dagur vaulted over a bolas cannon, dodged a hammer blow from a goon, and knocked him over board as I disabled another goon with my shield's bolas launcher and parried a second with my Odin's Storm – a weapon of my own creation.

"I'll take the wheel!" Dagur shouted as he started back up the ladder to the second deck. Powder finished off the ship's last goons, and I got a bearing of the happenings on the other two ships. Sulpher, Snotlout, and Amber (Sulpher's Deadly Scuttleclaw) were smashing and burning the way down the ship to the left while the one to the right attempted to catch up with ours. Powder had dropped us off on the lead ship, so we only had a few seconds before the third War Lord boat would be surpassing us. I knew that the backup Wing Maidens would be able to catch it eventually if we didn't step in now, but I figured that Dagur didn't want to wait that long.

"Hold on!" Dagur shouted, spinning the wheel sharply to the left. Our boat careened to the left and promptly ran into the other ship. There was a sickening crunch; then the air filled with arrows. It turns out that all of the goons on the third ship were the bowmen. Powder hung back as several arrows clanged off his armor.

During the winter, Sulpher, Mom, Dad, and I had worked together to make some armor for Sulpher's and mine dragons. Now, they were much more formidable. However, arrows were more than capable of piercing armor, so Powder became unsure of whether to charge. Dagur didn't. He fairly flew off our ship, landed expertly on the neighboring boat, and ran towards the archers who had erected a small crate barricade. I positioned my shield to the side of my Bewilderbeast helmet and followed suit. It was a dangerous move, but my suit of armor was strong, and I figured it would hold. Dagur and I had just about arrived at the stack of crates when Dagur suddenly fell down, and I felt a piercing pain in my left armpit. Unfortunately, every seasoned warrior, most notably the War Lord goons, knows that the armpits of armor are the most vulnerable. I gritted my teeth and vaulted over the stack of crates – launching myself at the nearest archer. The impact and surprising move sent the soldier reeling over the edge of the

boat, and I felt another pain as the arrow in my armpit was yanked out during the confusion. Thankfully, I was at the far right of all the other archers so I could face them without worrying about more goons creeping up behind me. I ran forward, swiping at as many of the goons as I could while endeavoring to hold up my now-weak, left arm.

One of the goons hit me over the head with his crossbow, while two others grabbed me by the arms as I flashed by. I knocked the guy to my right out with a well-aimed backslash; then drove my left elbow as best I could into the other goon's stomach; he keeled over. Suddenly, I felt intense heat and a massive wave of fire blazed down from the sky and consumed many of the other goons: Amber. Before I could shout my thanks, Amber was already whizzing by the end of the boat. The three archers, who were left, leveled their crossbows at me, but froze on the spot as Powder blasted them from behind.

My arm was still hurting and was becoming limp, but I managed to run back around and check on Dagur. He was leaning up against the crates and holding his chest/stomach area where an arrow was embedded in his armor.

"You okay, Uncle?" I asked.

"Yeah, just need to take this arrow out."

"Wait! Don't!" I replied hastily, "That'll just cause you to bleed more. It didn't puncture any of your organs it looks like, so just keep it in. We'll get you to the doctor."

"Hey, what's wrong with *you*?!" he said, pointing to my now, almost completely limp, arm.

"I need to see the doc too," I grunted.

I whistled to Powder who was investigating the ship's hold, quickly boarded him with Dagur, and nudged Powder into the air. As we set off at a rapid pace, a quick glance behind me informed me that Snotlout and Sulpher had also been victorious, and I could see the Wing Maiden ships (our backup) rapidly approaching from the east. Powder made great time back to the island, and he knew just where to go. With skillful maneuvering, Powder zipped between the thick trees higher up on Wing Maiden Island and landed in a small clearing beside a series of tree houses. Sulpher had made a tree house up here all by herself a summer or two ago. When the rest of the village found out about it, they decided to expand it and turned it into their "hospital" of sorts. They figured that keeping the hospital up here, away from the main village, would make it more secure.

No sooner had we landed then two Defenders of the Wing ran up. Defenders of the Wing were the most skilled tribesmen when it came to medical-related emergencies. They were always on call whenever War Lord ships were seen on the horizon.

"Anyone else hurt?" the older Defender of the Wing asked while briefly scanning Dagur.

"Not that I know of," I replied, "But my arm got shot."

I lifted my left arm with my right and showed where blood was starting to ooze from my armpit.

"Eh, that's nothing. These are only minor," the second replied after a quick glance and as he led us toward one of the on-ground buildings.

"Yeah, no casualties, and it was just us four against all of them," Dagur added.

The older Defender of the Wing shook his head, "You guys are *way* too impetuous."

"You have to remember," the second Defender of the Wing said, "that Berserkers have *always* been that way."

"That doesn't mean they can keep on doing that, though!"

The older medic led Dagur into one of the buildings while the other one sat me down in the bigger cabin and carefully removed my chest armor. The wound in my arm turned out to not be nearly as deep as I had originally thought, but he quickly wrapped it up with some of his medicines and a clean cloth. My arm almost immediately felt much better.

"Can I go?" I asked quickly, when he had finished.

"As long as you do NOT use your left arm!" he insisted, "It's going to take at least a week before it is almost completely healed."

"Sure, sure," I said getting up a little too hastily and racing for the door. The doctor shook his head but didn't restrain me. Outside, Powder was waiting for me and munching on an extremely large salmon that one of the other Defenders of the Wing must have given him.

"C'mon boy," I told him, "Let's go check on Sulpher and Snotlout."

Powder snorted and made a swift flight back to the site of our small battle, the Wing Maiden vessels had reached the battle by that time and were subduing any live War Lord goons.

Powder swooped in for a landing on the lead Wing Maiden ship where Sulpher and Snotlout were talking.

"Ouch! What happened to *you*," Snotlout said, noticing my bandaged arm.

"Just an arrow wound," I replied nonchalantly, "At least Powder is fine. That armor is sweet!"

"Amber got injured in the head by an arrow," Sulpher informed me, "But she'll be fine. She's with the Defenders of the Wing on that ship." (As it turned out, we had medic staff *everywhere*)

"The second ship is sinking, Master Snotlout," the head Wing Maiden informed him, "But the first and third appear to still be in usable condition. Would you like us to bring them back with us?"

"Absolutely, we'll have a full-on armada soon enough!" Snotlout declared – probably thinking of the other War Lord boats we had captured in the past six months. Ever since a terrific clash of warriors and War Lord goons on Berserker Island, my tribes of the Berserkers and Defenders of the Wing had temporarily moved in with the Wing Maidens led by Atali, Minden, and Snotlout. Unfortunately, our island's volcano had been awakened by the fighting of two groups of warring Dragon riders using hybrids and the War Lord goons after our mass exodus. Thus, it looked like our stay was going to be longer than just "temporarily." At first I was not excited about this move, but eventually I realized it allowed me to spend more time with my girlfriend, Sulpher, who was a Wing Maiden herself and daughter of Minden and Snotlout Jorgenson. I happened to be the son of Fishlegs and Heather Ingerman, and nephew to Dagur and Mala.

"Have you questioned our prisoners about what they were doing here?" Sulpher asked the head Wing Maiden.

"We have," she replied, "but they just said they were doing reconnaissance."

"Makes sense," I shrugged, "they don't have a lot of reasons to want to attack us except for our dragons and prisoners, but with so many of us warriors – they'd be crazy to do so."

"Well, they've done it before," Snotlout reminded me, "so we can't rule that out."

Snotlout turned to the Wing Maiden general and added, "Put up a double watch for the next two weeks. We can't be too careful."

"Yes, Master Snotlout," she conceded.

"Well, I want to change out of this heavy armor," Sulpher told me, "Let's go back to my house."

Snotlout was already off to investigate the “booty” from our captured ships, so Sulpher and I decided to take Powder back to Wing Maiden Island. After all the coming and going, I was thinking that Powder did not need any exercise today.

“Sure,” I replied, “Then I need to go grab my armor from the medic center and fortify up the arm areas more.”

“Oh, and Mom said she wanted us to referee some of the senior duels today,” Sulpher informed me.

“Oh Thor!” I exclaimed as I helped Sulpher onto Powder’s back, “It’s already that time of year?! It seems like just yesterday that I graduated from Warrior Training Camp!”

Sulpher chuckled, “Yep!”

Warrior Training Camp was where all the young warriors of our newly combined tribes trained to be in our forces. My two tribes used to send their graduating “seniors” through Bewilderbeast Mountain as a final challenge. Those that failed could still graduate but would enter our forces as average soldiers. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately), Wing Maiden Island did not have a Bewilderbeast Mountain with hundreds of small caves and tunnels, so Snotlout and Dagur had come up with a new idea. Using our ever growing number of War Lord goon prisoners, they decided to create duels involving a senior versus a War Lord goon. The tougher the War Lord goon they defeated, the higher the rank they would graduate to. On our days off, various members of our more elite forces would battle each War Lord goon and determine their difficulty rating. Unfortunately for some of the War Lord goons, the seniors proved to be too...er...strong. However, there were other times when the War Lord goon would be too strong for the senior – hence why seasoned warriors like Sulpher and I (though we were by far the youngest seasoned warriors) were helpful to have in the fight dome. Our main foot army was always out practicing maneuvers and the like while other sections of our forces did their own practicing. Sulpher and I were exceptions. We were allowed to pretty much roam the island. As the only people on our island to have dragons, it was our job to keep an eye out for War Lord goons beyond the vision of the island scouts and keep ourselves and our dragons in shape in case of an attack. Meanwhile, Powder had reached Wing Maiden Island for the second time in just a few hours – amazingly, he wasn’t even really breathing heavy; what with him being an exceptionally tough dragon – as hybrids had to be.

We alighted in the village near the main hall.

“How was it?” Dad called out to me as he and Mom exited the main hall.

“Dagur got shot in the chest, Amber got shot in the head, and Kai was nailed in the arm, but they are all fairly minor,” Sulpher spoke out.

Dad looked disapprovingly at the cloth wrapped tightly around my left arm but did not say anything.

“You can bet that my brother is going to turn his injury into some over-blown story about his bravery!” Mom chuckled.

I laughed too. “Yeah, but Powder and Amber were *beasts* out there!”

“I bet!” Dad replied, “They’re turning out to be really amazing dragons!”

“We’ll see you both later!” Sulpher said to my parents as she pulled me along, “We have to get to the Senior Duels!”

“Already?” Dad said to Mom.

I didn't get to hear the answer because Sulpher was already dragging me down the street. She was always more impetuous than I and excited to go head first into danger. I preferred exploring new lands and learning about dragons, but I also happened to have the abilities of my mom, uncle, and aunt, which meant I was a favorite, go-to warrior.

Sulpher's parents, Snotlout and Minden, were active leaders of the Wing Maidens as I said before, and were normally always gone, but, for some reason, the door of Sulpher's house was still open.

"That's a little strange," Sulpher admitted as we peeked inside.

"I'll go in first," I told her.

"NO! I'll go first – you're wounded," she insisted – pushing me out of the way. Powder hung outside; he had found something interesting to sniff in the bushes.

I let Sulpher go in first; then followed. No sooner had we done this, than the door slammed shut behind us and revealed a stranger. Sulpher and I immediately went into defensive postures and yanked out our weapons (Sulpher always used a large metal hammer, and I used an Odin's Storm) from our backs.

"I'm not here to fight," the man said, holding up his hands, "We just need you Kaizar."

It just so happened to be the mystery man from a few months prior. He had shown up on Wing Maiden Island, asked for my help, and then disappeared again (after I refused).

"You told me that last time," I answered, remembering my last meeting with him. The stranger was dressed completely in black and had a deep voice.

"We've waited long enough. If you don't help, something bad *will* happen," he replied.

"What? Stop being cryptic," Sulpher commanded.

The man sighed and asked, "Have you ever heard of a Bewilderbeast?"

"Yeah..." I answered.

"And have you heard of the Red Death?"

"Well yeah..." Sulpher answered, "Who hasn't heard of those stories?!"

"Well, what would happen if you had a hybrid of those two?" the man questioned.

"Oh," Sulpher and I both replied at once.

"We need your dragon-training skills," he told me.

"I'm not the best guy for *that* job," I told him, "Hiccup and his crew are MUCH better."

"I know, but it's also a dangerous job, and you're a lot more resourceful than the others."

"How do I know you're not lying?" I asked, eyes narrowing.

"See for yourself," the man shrugged, "Go to Auction Island and to Vander's Tavern. Ask the bartender for 'something crunchy on the outside and chewy in the middle.'"

"Okay?" I answered; then pointed at Sulpher, "But I'm at least bringing her and our dragons."

"Sure," the guy answered, "But no more, we don't want to spook the lizard."

"Where did you guys even get it?" I asked suspiciously.

"Argh! Stop asking questions!" the guy spoke, "We need action, not questions."

I thought about this, but kept quiet.

"You guys can take your dragons, but I'll have to use my boat, so it'll be awhile before I can get back. My contact on Auction Island will be able to help."

"Fine," I finally replied, "But you're going to have to wait at least two days for us to prepare."

"Have it your way," the man replied, "But make it snappy."

With that, the guy exited the house.

"What is he up to?" Sulpher asked

"I have no idea, but I don't think it's going to be good either way," I answered.

Suddenly, from outside, there was a loud shout and a pounding of feet.

"Uh oh," Sulpher groaned, throwing open the door. We both rushed out and promptly ran into a group of Berserkers sprinting at full speed past the house.

"Out of the way!" the closest Berserker shouted in my face, "We're on the chase of a spy!"

They quickly tore down the street after our mysterious man who was trying to evade an ever-expanding team of pursuers.

"POWDER!" I yelled out to my Dreadstrider. Powder quickly ran out from among the nearby brush and stood at attention. I hopped on his back and offered my hand to Sulpher.

"Let's go watch the action!" I suggested to her.

Powder darted down the street, easily flashing by the majority of the pursuers and reaching the mysterious stranger just as he ducked under a dozen blades but was tackled by a few other Wing Maidens.

"Let me go, idiots!" he screamed at his assailants, struggling wildly and almost succeeding in slipping away again.

"Hold it!" Sulpher told the others, hopping off Powder, "Let him go, he's not a spy."

"How do you know that," a Berserker captain challenged her, "He looks the type!"

"Well-," I began, but was cut off as the stranger yanked free of his captors and b-lined for the forest nearby.

"Oof!" Almost instantaneously, he was squashed beneath the most massive body of all – Dad.

"Looks like I was just in time!" Dad declared as the stranger wheezed beneath him.

"Dad," I whined, "He's *not* a spy. He wants my help with some dragon training."

Dad's eyes narrowed, "What kind of training?"

"Let's find out!" Mom declared emerging from the crowd of Berserkers and Wing Maidens.

Before I could say, "Stop!" Mom had walked over to the stranger and whipped off his mask.

Unfortunately, the face was not familiar to me – neither was it to anyone else.

"Are you happy now?" the man grunted as Dad got off him, "None of you recognize me! I'm not a threat!"

"Who's to say you're not a War Lord goon?" a Wing Maiden challenged.

"Because War Lord goons don't go on solo missions!" the man insisted.

"What's your name?" I asked him, squeezing my way through the crowd to my parents.

"You still wouldn't recognize it," the man replied.

"Spit it out!" Mom replied intensely – I guess she wasn't happy about this guy creeping around our village. To be fair, I was oftentimes more trusting than I should be.

"Liggo," he answered, "Liggo Grimborn."

"I thought I recognized the voice," Mom declared shoving her axe nearer Liggo's throat, "You're a son of Viggo!"

"Oooohhhh," the crowd of warriors murmured. They all knew who *Viggo* was.

"What are you doing here?" Mom wanted to know next.

"Let him explain," Liggo shrugged, pointing to me.

“YOU?” Mom bellowed, looking me straight in the eyes, “What *have* you been doing with this guy?!”

“We’ve been *talking*,” I mumbled, “Supposedly there’s something that he needs my help with?”

“What?” the Berserker captain replied sarcastically, “Tell us!”

“I’m sorry,” I answered, “I can’t – for fear of causing widespread panic.”

“What?!” the captain spat, “Panic?! We eat panic for breakfast here!”

“Not this kind,” Sulpher replied snarkily.

The captain’s face turned purple, and he started to say something else, but Mom cut him off.

“We’ll talk about this later,” she commanded, “Right now, I want you guys (she pointed at the ever increasing crowd of on-looking warriors and villagers), to take Liggo to a cell. And you two (she said pointing at Sulpher and I) are late for the Warrior Training Camp duels!”

Sulpher mumbled something under her breath, and I rolled my eyes.

“On my way Mom,” I groaned. It didn’t take us long to run back down the street and reach the three warrior training domes (so called this because they were large, round concrete arenas with a chain mesh over the top). I randomly chose to monitor the second arena, and Sulpher decided to take the third (the first being full of weight training equipment at the moment). My arm was obviously out of commission, so I brought Powder along to help me. Klagur (the main instructor) was already there with two assistants and waiting impatiently.

“Finally!” Klagur bellowed, “Took you long enough! I have half a mind to put you back in our program!”

“Sorry,” I answered, “I hurt my arm while battling a dozen War Lord goons and got waylaid by Viggo Grimborn’s son.”

Klagur’s assistants’ eyes got wide, but Klagur just grunted, “Get down there – a little wound won’t stop you, huh?”

I ignored his comment and entered through the wide concrete gateway into the dome. On either side of the arena were opposite-facing doors in which a War Lord goon and trainee would enter.

“Cchhhing!” the heavy metal gate closed behind Powder and I, and the other, two, smaller doors opened. To my right, emerged the trainee. I recognized him, but I didn’t know his name or anything. He appeared to be a fairly experienced fighter. To my left then emerged a War Lord goon armed with a club, who, though bigger than his opponent, appeared a little too old. The duel wasn’t quick though. The trainee did not seem to realize his strength of speed as opposed to the goon and went for a typical attack style which the goon met easily. There was some initial clashing; then they withdrew to catch their breaths. Powder yawned and plopped onto the ground.

With a sudden, hair-raising yell, the goon whipped his club through the air and towards...

Powder! This sudden move surprised me greatly. It was obvious that we were *not* his opponents, and we were standing much farther away than the trainee. Fortunately for him, I was not prepared to deal with an attack. Unfortunately for him, Powder was *always* ready. Powder deftly caught the club in his mouth and swung it back - eliciting a gasp or two from observers in the stands up above the dome. The goon was obviously more surprised by this than I had been initially and dove out of the way - barely. Unfortunately, he was so distracted that he completely missed another flying weapon – an axe. It clocked him in the helmet and laid him out cold before he had even reached the ground.

“Well done!” Klagur announced from up above, “Using distractions to get the advantage. Also, nice aim with your axe.”

The trainee smiled proudly and nodded to me. He quickly picked up his axe and swaggered out of the ring while Klagur’s assistants dragged out the unconscious War Lord goon.

“Good work!” I told Powder, patting him on the head. Powder yawned again and flopped on the ground.

The next contestant was an older girl who was up against a tougher looking goon. This goon was younger and more muscular than the previous goon. Thus, he used his advantage of strength to hack at the girl with heavier strokes. The girl dodged them and ran about trying to get cuts in. Unfortunately, she was unable to really get any devastating attacks in, and the goon was relentless with his swings. Eventually, he managed to meet her sword and shove her to the ground. He quickly saw his chance and went for the kill (even though all test-goons were explicitly told NOT to finish off their opponents). Unfortunately, a pair of bolas shot through the air and trussed him up tighter than a boar used for the annual Snoggletog dinners. For extra measure and probably because he was bored, Powder blasted him with Dreadstrider mist.

“Get a hold of yourself!” Klagur bellowed from above to the girl, “You have to use your *advantages* to take him out. You can’t be scared of your opponent!”

The girl slowly got to her feet and wiped sweat off her forehead.

“Watch *this*!” Klagur yelled at the girl again, pulling on a lever next to him. The lever, as it turned out, opened the door that the goons came out of. The door swung open and six goons poured out – armed with two weapons a piece and wanting blood. I smiled – obviously Klagur wanted to watch me take out my opponents one-handed – though I figured that he might also want the girl to learn a lesson or two off me.

I slipped my shield over my injured arm and yanked my Odin’s Storm out with my right arm. I patted Powder on the head to let him know I would be okay; then I attacked.

I quickly sized up my opponents in the few seconds it took them to reach me and aimed for their weak link – a clumsier goon to the far right. I jumped into the air and smashed his head with the broadside of my Odin’s storm while bashing another goon’s helmet with my shield. Both goons were dazed, but managed to keep standing. However, I followed the initial attack up with another swipe with my Odin’s Storm and sliced right through the backs of their helmets.

“Look at that! He saw their weak point!” Klagur pointed out.

After that, I ducked beneath the next two goons and performed an exquisite Berserker blade yank on the third. The bludgeon was pulled right out of his hand and slammed right into the fourth goon’s chest – bowling him over. With a quick bob-and-weave, I then chopped at the other goons and waylaid them with shield smashes.

“Excellent form!” Klagur declared, “Note how he carried his weapon!”

The last two goons tried to hit me from my right and left, but I ducked out of the way, and the one goon totally crushed his comrade – giving me ample time to swing around and knock him out from behind. Then, Powder blasted them all for extra measure, again...

Klagur guffawed loudly and told his assistants to clean up for the next trainees – the girl dejectedly walked out of the ring.

The rest of the sessions ended more or less in the trainees’ favor, and by the time the sun set, I found myself helping Klagur close up the dome.

"Well, we're going to have a large graduating class this year," Klagur mentioned.

"Good, we can use as many new warriors as we can get. The War Lord goons are a whole lot of trouble," I answered, "We also need more warriors who are experienced with boats."

"Yeah, it's unfortunate that we're forgetting all that now," Klagur lamented, "When I was young, we practically lived on the sea!"

"What about dragons?" I asked, "Didn't you guys use dragons?"

"Oh, well, that too, but I wasn't the biggest fan of dragons," Klagur answered, "I mean, I don't have anything against them, but they're so... they're just dangerous."

"Elaborate," I told Klagur.

"Well, I don't know. They just have so much potential to cause mass chaos, you know?"

"I guess," I replied slowly, "but they're so helpful."

"Yeah, I see that," Klagur admitted, "Without Powder and Slizer and your friends' dragons, we'd have been in lots of trouble several times over, but it just so happens that dragons are too often used for bad, and that's *not* good."

"I see," I replied, "Eventually, dragons won't be around anymore. We're just dealing with a few last ones anyway. After all, hybrids can't have children."

"Good thing!" Klagur said, locking the large, iron door behind him and starting off down the dirt path..

"But Lemmrig has Deathgrippers, and they *can* have children," I reminded Klagur as I trailed behind.

"True, we need to separate those Deathgrippers from him!" Klagur grunted.

"It seems like we could just do a sting mission and nab the deathgrippers," I pondered out loud.

"Maybe... But that would require some pretty specific intel on Scout Island's workings, and we don't have that," Klagur commented.

"But we could get it," I replied.

"But who'd be willing to go undercover there!" Klagur replied indignantly, "That'd almost be suicide!"

"We'll see about that," I smirked.

Klagur looked sideways at me but didn't say anything.

By this time, we had arrived at the main hall and entered to find the place crowded with others eating dinner.

"Man is it crowded in here!" Klagur groaned – trying to squeeze past a few people walking by with heaping bowls of stew.

"Could be worse!" I asserted, "I'll see you later!"

Klagur nodded in response and veered to the right to go find his family, while I made my way to the back of the hall where *my* family was.

"It's weird why he went after Kaizar," Dagur was saying with a mouth full of food as he talked to my parents.

Across the table, Mala added her two cents, "I think he wants to get Kaizar alone to take him out!"

"I don't think that's right," I interrupted, "He had plenty of time alone with me those few months back, and he didn't seem that violent. I think he really is up to *something*, but I don't think it's taking me out. He isn't a War Lord goon."

“But his father!” Mom reminded us all, “Was a back-stabbing crook!”

“Yeah, but he also saved Hiccup too,” Dad reminded her.

Mom grumbled something and dug into her soup.

“Perhaps we should just let Kaizar go with him while the rest of us track them and provide backup,” Dagur suggested.

“He’s bound to see through that, though,” Dad argued, “After all, it took us a while to catch him. Who knows how long he has been crawling around our island!”

“So much for our guards,” Mom mumbled.

“Reminds me of you when you came to Berk,” Dad told Mom, “We had no idea you were up to anything, but you always seemed to be around – trying to pry us for information.”

“Only because my step-parents were captured!” Mom quickly replied, “And you had no clue that I was trying to find the book of dragons!”

“Sneaky Heather – that’s my sister!” Dagur declared.

“I wouldn’t have, if I hadn’t thought that was the only option!” Mom insisted.

“But we trusted you!” Dad argued.

I could see that this was not going to get anyway. It was sort of a sore spot in my parents’ memories. Just about then, Sulpher got up from her table where her family were talking and squished in beside me.

“They’re talking about Heather’s first time at Berk?” Sulpher quickly surmised.

“Yeah,” I replied, “Just when we were starting to get somewhere in our conversation about Liggo!”

“Weird stuff!” Sulpher admitted, “My parents are talking about taking a trip to Outcast Island, and they’re all fighting over how many ships to bring and how many people should go and stay and all that. BORING!”

I chuckled, “Well, we’ll have all the excitement we need if we end up going to Auction Island!”

“It’ll be a lot more fun than working on those zip lines all day!” Sulpher groaned.

“I hope that we’ll be able to see the rest of MDR too this summer,” I told Sulpher, “We always have a blast!”

“Puff and Nuff are a hoot!” Sulpher exclaimed.

“Yeah, I think we should go to Auction Island anyway. Something tells me that Liggo isn’t lying, and if there really is a hybrid Red Death and Bewilderbeast, we need to be there to provide damage control!”

“Yeah, makes sense, but it just seems unlikely. I mean those dragons were rare in the prime of dragon civilization. The chance that Liggo would have a hybrid egg in this day and age seems way too improbable!”

I shrugged, “Who knows.”

“By the way,” Sulpher told me, “Powder’s over with Amber in the dragon infirmary.”

I nodded my head, “Okay.”

“Those two almost get along as well as you and I!” Sulpher said, batting her eyes just a little.

I elbowed her and said, “Yeah, but I’m way more handsome than Powder!”

“The same could be said about me according to Amber!” Sulpher laughed.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that!” I smirked.

Sulpher groaned and punched me in the side; then leaned her head on my shoulder.

I quickly glanced over at my parents who were still deep in an argument with Dagur and Mala. Sulpher had only officially become my girlfriend about six months ago, but we had known each other for just a little longer than Powder was alive. Sulpher had fairly long brain hair and beautiful green eyes as well as a very athletic body and quick battle-sense. Actually, it was her that first showed interest in me, but, due to some unforeseen circumstances in which we spent a lot of time together, I had grown to like her too. Now, we spent most of our daylight hours together. A lot of which was maintaining the zip lines wires that led from the hospital to a clearing of forest near the village. Neither of our parents had been terribly excited to learn about our budding relationship, but, upon seeing how “awesome” Sulpher was (or at least I hope that was what they thought...), they had gotten accustomed to it.

“You think we should start packing a few things for our trip in a few days?” I asked Sulpher, “Assuming our parents let us?”

“Yeah, probably,” Sulpher murmured.

“In which case, we should just let Liggo go and track him!” Dagur announced loudly, “As I had said *before*!”

“Fine,” Mom conceded, “We’ll let Kaizar and Sulpher go the day after tomorrow. Hopefully, Amber and Kaizar will be healed by that time, and they can beat him to Auction Island.”

“In that case,” Mala added, “You had better get to bed, Kaizar.”

“Sure,” I replied, “Make sure to keep an eye on Powder.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll be fine,” Mala assured me.

By this time, about half of the hall had emptied out as everyone disbursed to get home and some sleep. All of our tribes were very rigid about our sleep schedules – as Snotlout said, “A rested body makes a fierce body.”

“Well, time to get up,” I said, pushing Sulpher off the wooden bench and standing up. Sulpher was surprised and pitched off the bench and onto the floor.

“Hey!” Sulpher announced, she grabbed me by the arm and swung me around and into a support pillar. I narrowly dodged the beam, and yanked back on Sulpher – pulling her through the air. However, she caught a nearby, ornate shield on the wall and swung her feet out at me. She smacked me right in the stomach – bowling me over, but I managed to grip her feet and start dragging her away from the table.

“Hey!” she laughed again, “Let me go!”

“I don’t know about that,” I reasoned, “You’ve been a very naughty girl!”

“Oh come on!” Sulpher giggled.

Suddenly, I was grabbed from behind with an iron grasp and my breath was practically squeezed out of me.

“Is this guy bothering you?” Snotlout asked Sulpher as I lost my grip on her feet. Sulpher jumped back up.

“Just a little!” Sulpher smirked.

“Well, what should I do with him?” Snotlout wanted to know.

“Seems like there’s really only one thing to do,” Sulpher replied, grinning.

“What would that be?” Snotlout teased back.

“This,” Sulpher said. She then proceeded to lean in and kiss me.

“Oooh,” Snotlout said, “Uh...”

At this, Mom's face reddened, and Dagur slapped her on the back – laughing.
“Do you do this to all your captives?” I asked Sulpher.
“Nope, just you,” Sulpher giggled as Snotlout let me go in a hurry.

Chapter 2: Showing

The next morning I woke up to a warning horn.

“HEEEEEOOOOOORRRRRRRR!”

The pure blast of it made my brain rattle. I wasn’t used to waking up to that particular noise, but every now and then it sounded – rather *they* sounded. Playing off what we had on Berserker Island, all of our tribes had banded together and constructed about six of the largest horns I’d ever seen. They were all positioned strategically around the island near the larger watchtowers. Each horn would sound when enemies were directly attacking the island (thus, although we spied War Lord warships in the horizon every month or so, they were always just floating by, so the horns were never sounded). The watchmen (and women) were instructed to only blow their horn should they specifically see the enemies. Thus, depending on what horns were sounding, the general population could tell which direction the enemies were coming from. Unfortunately in this situation, all six of them were sounding – which really meant just one thing – we were being attacked by dragon riders. I could also tell this, because Powder, next to me, was sniffing the air, and I could hear the tell-tale signs of dragon fireballs booming through the air (barely though, over the sound of the horns).

I suspected it was Kroette and her Dragon Flyers, because they were the only ones to have attacked us once before. They just did a hit-and-run mission, blasting what they could and then taking off. As I hurriedly jammed on my armor, I thought about why they would do these missions; the best that I could think of was that Kroette used these attacks as training missions for her new riders and also to keep track of our defenses on our island. Before slipping on my chest armor, I gingerly tested my left arm, which didn’t hurt at all now, so I carefully unrolled the bandage from my arm and looked at my wound. It wasn’t swelling, but was still red and scabbed. I wrapped a shorter length of cloth around it; then slipped my armor back on and ran out of my room with Powder on my heels. Mom was already gone from the house, but I could still hear Dad bumbling around, trying to find his weapons – not like they would be helpful anyway. The only effective weapons against high-flying dragons were arrows and catapults/launchers. Powder and I ran outside to find pandemonium. Warriors were everywhere with their crossbows and arrows trying to pick off dragons. I quickly jumped on Powder and took to the air. Sure enough, I immediately noticed the strange-looking Singesongs against the early morning sunrise. They were all blasting their fireballs down at the village while my people returned fire with their arrows, bolas, rock catapults, and portable spear launchers. The interesting thing with Singesong fireballs was that they were boiling-hot amber. Thus, when (or if) it hit you, you had a lot more time to get it off you before the amber hardened (as opposed to the normal Death Song’s amber – according to Dad), but it was also intensely hot – thus you were more likely to be killed from the burns than anything else.

Kroette’s group were flying in perfect formation and carefully aiming at core buildings in the village. Powder and I swooped from behind a stand of tall trees and attacked the closest riders. The Singesongs immediately sensed us and turned around to face us – but Powder got his mist in first. The closest dragon was instantly paralyzed and dropped out of sight with his

rider screaming, but the others dodged and fired back. I deflected some fireballs with my shield as Powder got in position behind the dragon group to get in some more shots. Almost directly across the Singesong group, I spotted Sulpher and Amber protecting the top of the main hall with a series of well-aimed fireball blasts.

"Fzzzhhh! Fzzh! Fsszzzzzhhh!"

"Bong!"

A chunk of boiling amber splashed against my shield, hardened, and bounced off. Powder roared angrily and sprayed mist all over the Singesongs in his range. Most of them dodged, but another was too slow and plummeted.

"Focus on the dragons!" I heard a high-pitched voice yell from a few meters away – Krogette. Immediately, the other Singesong riders turned to face me, while others attacked Sulpher. Powder dove out of the way; then climbed back up to blast a Singesong from underneath it. At that precise moment, another Singesong rider dove from behind and slammed Powder and I – sending us into a tree.

Powder veered to the left, and I shoved at the tree with my Odin's Storm to prevent Powder's body from smashing into it. Luckily, we bounced away but, unfortunately, then found ourselves underneath the falling body of the Singesong that Powder had just blasted. Before I could even understand what was fully going on, I was crushed from above and shoved downward. Wanting to avoid squishing Powder beneath me when we hit the ground, I dove off as we somersaulted through the air. My jump was anything but coordinated, but I at least blasted head-first into a thick tree canopy and scraped to a stop amid a nest of strong oak branches – wedging myself within.

"THUD!" the confusion of dragons and riders hit the forest floor from behind me. I desperately slashed at the branches with my Odin's Storm and tried to wriggle free.

"Craacckkk!" the biggest branch then split and left me hanging onto a bunch of smaller branches as my Odin's Storm slipped out of my hand and bounced down onto the grass below. With deft movements, I quickly moved my hands across the branches and to the nearest tree; then I shinnied down to the ground – picking up my Odin's Storm embedded in the grass and taking some time to catch my breath. My armor had withstood the beating, but I had some leaves in my mouth. After spitting them out, I advanced upon the downed Singesong and rider.

"Fsszzzhht!"

The Singesong's blast flew right over my head and exploded on the small maple sapling behind me. I ducked behind my shield (still on my left arm) and crouched behind a nearby bush. In the clearing in front of me was a mess of branches. Besides that, there was the Singesong rider lying motionless on the ground, and the Singesong and Powder in mortal, close-combat. They were clawing at each other and rolling over and over again - apparently oblivious to me. Every second or so, Powder would spray mist everywhere, and the Singesong would blast an amber fireball, but since the scramble was so hectic, none of their blasts hit their marks. I quickly rose above my bush, aimed my shield at the Singesong which happened to be on top of Powder at the moment and fired the bolas.

"Fling!" The bolas jumped out and, amazingly, met their mark. The Singesong – quite surprised when it's mouth was cinched shut, jumped backward in surprise. This was all Powder needed.

With a mighty Dreadstrider-like scream, the Singesong was instantly paralyzed. It instantly fell down to the ground – completely stunned.

It was only then that I realized the island's warning horns had stopped blowing. Powder whined and came up to me; licking me.

"Ewe! Powder!" I told him. I carefully looked *him* over and saw that, although he had a myriad of minor scratches all over his body (since he hadn't been wearing his armor), there was nothing terribly urgent.

"Kaizar!" Sulpher and Amber flew through a break in the foliage above and landed next to Powder and I.

"Are you okay?!"

"Yeah, a little dinged up, but nothing major. What happened to *you*?!" I asked Sulpher. She and Amber were covered with little clumps of amber, and Sulpher had quite a few more that were hopelessly stuck in her brown hair.

"When you went down, they all converged on me," Sulpher explained, hopping off Amber, "But the Berserker warriors below started hitting their dragons, so they eventually just took off."

"How many did you get?" I asked her.

"I'm not really sure," Sulpher answered, "I think I got at least one or two."

"We got three including this one," I replied.

"CRASSSSshhh!"

From the bushes next to us emerged a troop of Berserkers – armed to the teeth. They brushed right by us and converged on the inert form of the Singesong rider while the others trussed the Singesong up with ropes.

"He's alive!" the older Berserker announced, "but unconscious!"

"Yeah, this dragon's alive too, but he's frozen as hard as rock!" replied another Berserker.

Powder's little dragon face smirked at this (or at least it looked that way!), but Sulpher rolled her eyes, "You guys are lucky you didn't get hurt worse! None of those riders are amateurs!"

"Yeah, but we're always lucky!" I reminded Sulpher.

"We've got these guys," the Berserker captain told Sulpher and I, "if you wanna get back to the village."

"Sure," I replied, hopping on Powder. Sulpher and I left them behind and flew back to the village where a large crowd had already gathered in front of the main hall.

"QUIET!" Dagur yelled to the crowd, "Apparently, we got five Singesongs – three of which were dead and two of which are either paralyzed or unconscious. We were only able to recover two dead and two unconscious riders – the fifth grabbed a ride with a friend."

The crowd groaned at this.

"We have some minimal damage to a few of our buildings and a few destroyed catapults,"

Snotlout added, stepping up where Dagur was, "And about a dozen of our tribe members have critical wounds, but they're all expected to live."

"Has anyone seen my nephew?" Dagur asked next.

With that, Sulpher and I, who had been hovering over a nearby house, nodded to each other and flew straight toward the doors of the hall. Sulpher buzzed a few Wing Maidens, while Powder and I swooped to an epic landing next to Dagur and Snotlout. Then, Sulpher and I hopped off our dragons and posed epically, leaning our backs up against each other.

Magur (my cousin) was near the front of the crowd and groaned audibly.

“Ok, well they’re all right!” Snotlout announced, “Now if we don’t have any-.”

Snotlout was cut off as Mom shoved her way through the crowd and ran up the steps.

“We’ve got one other problem!” Mom told us, “Liggo escaped!”

The crowd gasped again.

“How?!” Snotlout asked, indignant, “We had him in the most secure cell!”

“One of the fireballs blasted a hole through his cell’s roof!” Mom replied, “Now he’s gone and his little boat at the beach is also gone!”

“Oh come ON!” Dagur groaned, “He could be anywhere by now.”

“We could look for him,” I offered, “Chances are that he is either still on the island or not more than a mile off the coast.”

“Why did you leave his boat there if you knew about it?” Sulpher added.

“We hadn’t decided what to do with it yet,” Mom explained.

“If he took his boat,” I continued, “Sulpher and I could probably track him over the water.”

“Well then; get GOING!” Snotlout shouted. I jumped back on Powder as Snotlout commanded all the islands’ guards to be on the lookout for Liggo.

“I’ll take the north side of the island, if you want to take the south,” I yelled to Sulpher who was riding Amber nearby.

“A-okay!” She shouted back, veering behind me.

Powder flapped his wings powerfully and in only a few minutes we reached the north shore of the island – but we couldn’t see anything but water.

“Let’s go a little farther out,” I directed Powder, “I don’t think he has a fast watercraft.”

Powder and I left the island behind and continued flying outward, but no matter how far we went, I still could see nothing.

I groaned, “Looks like either he has a very fast boat, or he’s still on the island.”

I knew it would be well-nigh impossible to find him on the island since Liggo was so sneaky, and I suspected that Liggo had not left the island yet for very few, if any, boats could already have made such good progress after leaving Wing Maiden Island.

By the time Powder and I made it back to the village, a full-on manhunt was under way. Several parties of a dozen warriors were already running over the island – trying to find the mystery man.

“He’s probably going to head for Auction Island first thing that he can,” Sulpher told me when we met back up again outside of the great hall.

“Yeah, but I didn’t see him anywhere out there,” I replied, “I’ll bet he’s still here and will remain so until he can make good his escape!”

Sulpher nodded her head, “You’re right. What I don’t understand is when he told us to go to Auction Island.”

“Yeah, I don’t quite understand the logic there,” I answered, “Surely he knows there’s a good chance we won’t - so what’s there that he thinks we should see?”

“It couldn’t be a trap either - at least in the tavern,” Sulpher pondered out loud, “Because we’re friends with Vader.”

“Well, I mean, it *could*,” I replied, “but I’d say it’s unlikely.”

“I guess I’m just curious now,” Sulpher told me, “We should leave as soon as we can!”

"Well, 'can' is a tricky word," I told her, "Because I *can* go now, but the doctor said I should rest for an entire week!"

"Doctors are overrated," Sulpher huffed, "Let's go find our parents."

With that, she latched onto my arm and dragged me into the main hall. It was empty except for Dad and Snotlout who were talking with Atali.

"Dad!" Sulpher interrupted, "Kai and I need to head over to Auction Island and follow up on Liggo's clue before he gets there."

Snotlout put his hand up, indicating for Sulpher to shut up.

"And you're saying that *none* of our guards saw *anything*?!" Dad was saying.

"Yeah, it's weird," Atali replied.

"And they don't appear to have seen anything," Snotlout added.

"Which is why we need to get to Auction Island in a hurry!" Sulpher exclaimed.

"For crying out loud, Sulpher!" Snotlout sighed, "We're talking!"

"I know, but this is important!" Sulpher retorted.

"Not as important as-", Snotlout began.

"It's okay," Dad quickly said, "We were almost done anyway."

"Are you sure that's a good idea to go now?" Atali wanted to know, "It might be a trap."

I rolled my eyes, "I know about traps, and this seems like a very odd trap if it is! Plus we know Vander quite well, and he even helped Nuffink and I once!"

"What about your arm and Amber's head!" Dad questioned us.

"Well, my arm feels awfully good," I replied, flexing it up and down and around in a windmill like fashion.

"AND Amber is doing *just* fine," Sulpher finished.

"Well, I'm not sure that-", Dad started to say.

"C'mon!" Sulpher quickly exclaimed, pulling me back outside, "We have to get ready!"

Atali nodded her head in our direction; then, I was outside and consequently running towards my house. Powder was already there and scrounging around the kitchen for some fish.

"Okay, boy," I told him, "We're going to need three days' worth of food, an extra set of clothes although we can wear our armor, and probably a sleeping mat would also be wise."

Powder ignored me because he found a salmon, but I got started.

It actually didn't take long to gather all my items and drag them outside, but the hard part was fitting them all on Powder's saddle as well as putting on Powder's armor – not that Powder liked all the extra weight either. I practically had an entire barrel of food (we always kept emergency food rations in the basement), and it was quite a job to get it strapped to the saddle. I finally decided on strapping it under Powder's belly.

"Hey Kaizar!" I heard someone yell as they ran up to me, "Where are you going?"

"Oh! Hey Magur," I replied, "Uh, just an adventure..."

Magur narrowed his eyes, "Are you trying to find Liggo?"

"What? Him? Uh... We're going to Auction Island to find – wait a minute!" I realized, "You're trying to get me to reveal what we're doing!"

"Ha! And you almost fell for it!" Magur declared.

I rolled my eyes, "If you must know, we're trying to find what he wanted us to find!"

"Huh?"

"Nevermind."

I jumped on Powder, and he started off in a very inelegant waddle down the street to Snotlout's house, with Magur laughing behind me. Sulpher was also outside and just strapping on a few extra bags to Amber's already over-stuffed saddle.

"It's a good thing *grunt* that these saddles *grunt* are really strong," Sulpher wheezed.

Amber growled and tried to shake the saddle over to a more comfortable position.

"You sure you didn't pack your entire room?" I kidded Sulpher.

She glared at me, "Of course I didn't!"

"Well it sure looks like it!" I laughed.

Sulpher rolled her eyes and jumped on Amber who immediately sagged under the weight.

"Well, let's get going!" she said, "The sooner we take off, the better!"

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"ANNNNDD here we are!" Sulpher declared as Auction Island quickly came into sight, "Should I stay at the beach with the dragons?"

"Nah," I replied, "By this time, most people around here know about our dragons anyway. I'd say we just fly straight in with them. Plus, we'll look more impressive that way."

Sulpher smirked, "So that's the real reason, huh?"

"Race you to Vander's Tavern!" I shouted as I nudged Powder to fly faster. Powder shot off towards the beach and flew about two dozen meters above the ground on our way to the tavern. Nothing had changed much since last year, and, soon enough, I easily spotted the run-down building near the outskirts of the main trading area - Vander's Tavern. Powder and I dove straight in and landed on the worn, dirt path leading up to it. Nailed right next to the heavy wooden door was a misshapen sign reading "Vander's Tavern." I heard Sulpher and Amber land behind us soon afterward.

"I can stay outside with the dragons in case this is a trap," Sulpher offered.

"Sure," I replied, "I'm asking for 'something crunchy on the outside and chewy in the middle,' right?"

"I think that's what Liggo said," Sulpher agreed.

With that I took a deep breath and opened the door... and stepped inside the tavern. It was just as I remembered it, and it felt like the same men were in the same position as I had left them nearly six months prior! Even the disgusting smell of moldy bread, stale beer, and awful body odor was the same! A few of the "characters" briefly glanced at me, but most of them remained glued to their card games. I carefully maneuvered between the massive wooden tables to the counter where a very bored, middle-aged lady was leaning back in a chair and resting her feet on the counter.

"Uh, can I have 'something crunchy on the outside and chewy in the middle'?" I asked, getting straight to the point.

The lady behind the counter looked at me quizzically for a minute, then suddenly caught herself.

"OOOH! You want *that*," she replied, "Sure, whatever."

She slowly got up and shuffled into the secluded kitchen area – leaving me to wonder what I should do.

"Hey!" a scruffy voice from the corner of the bar yelled over to me, "It's our friend, Kai!"

I turned around to see Vander talking to me from his massive chair.

“Hey Vander! How are you doing?” I replied politely.

“Old and creaky like normal,” he replied, “What *are* you ordering?”

“I don’t honestly know,” I replied, “This friend of mine recommended I order ‘something crunchy on the outside and chewy in the middle.’ I have no idea what it is.”

“That’s weird,” Vander drawled, “We don’t have anything like that on our menu.”

I shrugged, “Your employee seems to know.”

“Hmmm,” Vander mumbled, stroking his unruly beard.

“Here ya go, sir,” the lady grumbled to me as she came back – like I had just caused her the biggest inconvenience of her life, “That’ll be 3 gold coins.”

I forked some money from my pocket to her and picked up the rather dirty-looking plate. The food was some sort of fried dish, but was also rather soggy. It smelled much worse than it looked – and it looked awful!

“Hey! That actually looks good!” Vander declared as I grabbed a seat near him.

“Eh, okay?” I replied. I was still trying to figure out what was special about this food, when I realized that maybe there was some sort of message inside. The hardest part would be opening up my fried food without Vander seeing.

I slowly picked at it with my fork and cut it open. No sooner had I done this, than I caught sight of a small piece of soiled paper sticking out from one side of the fried fish.

“Is that a piece of paper?” Vander asked quizzically, indicating the paper that I was furiously trying to shove out of sight. *Too late!*

“Uh, no, no it is not,” I lied.

“Gimme that!” a gruff voice from behind me growled. I watched in horror as a beefy hand swiped my plate and yanked the paper out of the disgusting entree.

Hey!” I yelled at him, but the man held the message above his head and read in a loud voice,

“Meet me out front - Vyker.”

“Oh great,” I mumbled.

Of course, all the bored guys inside the tavern wanted to see what mysterious stranger I was meeting, so they all got up real quick and made a dash for the front door.

“That’s MY message!” I shouted after them, but to no avail.

“Ha, those busy-bodies,” Vander cackled, “They’ll never learn.”

“How am I supposed to get outside?” I groaned to Vander.

Vander forked a beefy thumb towards the back door, “Just take the back door and wrap around the building.”

“Sweet,” I told him, standing up and making a run for the back door. The tavern’s customers were still trying to all get outside, but two beefy guys had gotten themselves both wedged into the doorway and everyone was trying to push them out from behind – which only caused them to get more stuck and started getting everyone angry at each other.

I chuckled and quickly exited. Behind the restaurant stood the massive wooden, bludgeon, obstacle course that my friend, Nuffink, had conquered just a few months ago. I laughed to myself when I thought of the look on everyone’s face when he won, but I made my way through the overgrown grass surrounding Vander’s Tavern and found Sulpher talking with a man outside the front of the tavern – both of them were laughing uproariously at the two guys still stuck in the tavern’s doorway.

“Kai! Check those guys out!” Sulpher laughed, “They’re so -.”

“BAAAMMM!!!”

The two men were suddenly jettisoned out from the doorway and flew a good three meters out onto the gravel walkway in front of the tavern. Behind them emerged the rest of the tavern’s customers who shoved and pushed their way to try to get in front. They promptly trampled their comrades and spread out – looking for the mysterious person out front.

“Vyker I presume?” I said to the man who was with Sulpher.

Understanding suddenly dawned on Sulpher and him.

“Wait, I’ve been talking to your friend here for the last five minutes?!” Vyker gasped.

“Girlfriend,” Sulpher had to add.

“Well, now that you guys have met, how about showing me your dragon?” I whispered.

Vyker nodded and walked off – weaving between all the half-drunk Vikings who still thought that my mysterious person must be nearby and wasn’t the actual Vyker. Apparently, they thought that searching through the sparse bushes nearby and running farther down the path was a sure-fire way to find their target.

“Nice dragons,” Vyker commented as we followed him away from the tavern and on a lesser-used trail that was lined with what appeared to be poison oak.

“Yeah, so your brother said something about you guys having a hybrid Bewilderbeast and Red Death?” I quizzed

“Uh huh,” Vyker answered, “We found the egg a while ago, but it hatched and it’s growing at a phenomenal rate – we won’t be able to hide it forever. Eventually, it’ll outgrow its current cave and then need to get outside.”

I still remained a little skeptical, but it didn’t look like there were any traps nearby. However, Powder was sniffing the air and starting to get very nervous. Amber also appeared to be on edge as she hunkered down behind Sulpher as we walked along.

“Uh, Kaizar,” I think he’s telling the truth, “Remember the legend about the Bewilderbeast being able to control dragons? Maybe their dragon is making our dragons nervous?”

“Oh! I forgot about that!” Vyker declared, “Ouch, sorry! Maybe we can keep your dragons outside? I don’t know. Do other hybrid dragons work well together?”

“Our small types do, but I’ve never seen any dragon bigger than a Monstrous Gronckle, and that’s not saying much! At least, my dad has said there were much bigger ones,” I told Vyker.

“Yeah,” Vyker muttered, “Our dragon is HUGE, and he’s only a teenager!”

“C’mon Powder,” I told him, “It’s okay. You’ll be fine.”

Powder growled but kept up with Vyker and I as we wound down from the tavern around a narrow cliff-face and to a small ravine. The ravine was actually quite muddy and Vyker told Sulpher and I it was muddy because it was below sea level and was often flooded. Presently, we arrived at a small cave entrance which Vyker walked into. Sulpher and I cautiously followed and found ourselves in a fairly spacious cave that was filled with crates and various articles that were lying everywhere.

“You’re not the cleanest person in the archipelago, I take it,” I mentioned to Vyker.

“Not a chance, but my brother is a ton better,” Vyker added, “By the way; where is he?”

“Oh,” Sulpher interrupted, “Uh, he disappeared this morning, so he’s probably on his way over.”

“Okay,” Vyker replied cheerfully, “Let’s go check on our massive lizard. Waddya say?”

I nodded my head and followed Vyker down a side tunnel, but Sulpher decided to stay back with Powder and Amber.

"These tunnels," Vyker started to tell me, "Were discovered by my father more than a dozen years ago. He wanted to create a Dragon Hunter hideout here but was killed first."

"Do you hold any grudges against the Berkians?" I asked in response, "You know, the ones that killed him?"

"Nah, my father was a jerk," Vyker admitted, "But I always wished he would have changed."

"Those are pretty tough words coming from his son!" I noted.

"Yeah, I mean, I would love for him to be alive – but killing dragons is pretty low – in my opinion anyway," Vyker finished – stopping at the entrance to a very, very large cave hollow. I peered over the edge of a stone pathway that worked its way to the bottom of the cave space and ended at a large pool of water.

"This water comes from the ocean and keeps our friend happy," Vyker explained to me,

"Speaking of which, do you see him?"

I gasped, "Oh my goodness! He's HUGE!"

"SHHHHH," Vyker said, "Don't startle him! Trust me, don't. I got this scar for that one time!"

Vyker pulled up the sleeve of his long armored chain mail and showed a pink scar that spread around part of his right arm.

"Ouch," I replied.

"Yeah, well, let's go get a closer look," Vyker told me.

As I walked down the winding trail to reach the Bewilderdeath (as Vyker called it), I quickly made a mental image of how the dragon looked. It was, in fact, a hybrid of the Red Death and Bewilderbeast – judging from the many pictures and paintings I had seen of the two. It had the horns of a Bewilderbeast, but the rest of its head was shaped more like a Red Death. It had two eyes on each side of its head with two massive wings folded on the side of its body. Four legs spread out from under it, and I noted the thick scales that covered its entire body. The color of the scales was an alternating pattern of red and white – giving it an almost comical look.

"GrrroooooowwwwLLLLLLL!"

The dragon suddenly awoke and stared at Vyker and I as we trekked along the trail; we were not more than a hundred meters from it. It stared at us for a while; then rolled over onto its side, which caused a small earthquake.

"Yikes!" I said, trying to find my balance.

"Oh, that's nothing!" Vyker admitted, "We've had MUCH worse! Trust me, it's hard to hide this big of a dragon. When we take it out to the ocean to feed it, it's so ornery! It's a wonder we ever get it back!"

"Well, do your thing!" Vyker insisted.

"Uh...my thing?"

"Yeah, whatever you do to train dragons."

"Eh, oki," I replied quietly. Ever so quietly, and noting all the hiding places that I could take cover in, I crept towards the dragon. When I was about ten meters from its head, it opened its two massive eyes and stared at me, but made no effort to move or even growl.

"Hey there, boy," I told him, "It's me, Kaizar. I'm a friend."

The Bewilderdeath just stared at me. I slowly moved up to him and placed my hand on the front of its head. My dad always told me that was the quickest and most sure way to gain a dragon's trust, and it had worked on all my dragons and Sulpher's, but this Bewilderdeath didn't even budge. It practically went cross-eyed as it laid on its side, but it gave no recognition that I had done anything special.

"Hey there-," I began, but suddenly the Bewilderdeath stood up – shaking the ground mightily. It then opened its massive jaws and blasted a huge stream of fire into the air in combination with a large roar. I dove for cover behind a boulder, but the Bewilderdeath didn't even look in my direction; it just settled down and closed its eyes again.

"That's farther than I've ever gotten!" Vyker exclaimed excitedly from somewhere behind me, "Let's leave him alone for the afternoon and come back tomorrow."

"But I didn't *do* anything," I told Vyker.

"Still, it's better than nothing," Vyker reminded me, "And trust me, you do *not* want this dragon on your bad side!"

I chuckled nervously and quickly led the jog out of the cavern. That's when I ran into the kid. Needless to say, I was a little surprised.

"Oh, hey there," I said, "Are you Vyker's son?"

"Whu-?" He replied, "Oh, I am *not* Vyker's son. I'm Geoffrey, and I'm here to see this *SICK* dragon!"

"Oh, uh, then-," I began, but Vyker cut me off when he arrived just behind me.

"GEOFFREY! What ARE you doing here!" Vyker exploded.

"Just checking out this wicked dragon, man!" Geoffrey replied – his eyes glued on the Bewilderdeath below.

"Come here!" Vyker practically yelled, he grabbed Geoffrey by the back of his shirt and dragged him down the tunnel – away from the Bewilderdeath's cavern. I followed them and noticed that Geoffrey was probably about thirteen or fourteen with short-cut hair and unusually expensive clothes with a gleaming, golden hilt of a sword sticking out of scabbard connected to his belt.

"Ah, man! I wanted to see it!"

"I told you that you *cannot* and that it *doesn't* exist!"

"But it does!"

"I *know* that, but I can't let the stupid news get out! It's already bad enough!"

"I won't tell!" Geoffrey pleaded, struggling to pull himself out of Vyker's grip, but being completely unsuccessful.

We finally reached the main room of Vyker's cave where Powder and Amber were gulping down some fish that Sulpher was frying on a small campfire. When we burst into the room, Sulpher jumped a little.

"Where did that kid come from?" Sulpher asked us.

"You mean, he snuck by you?!" Vyker asked, incredulously.

"I bribed her," Geoffrey stated matter-of-factly.

"You WHAT?!" Vyker shouted.

"I paid her to pretend that I wasn't going by, and she didn't know me."

Sulpher smirked and went back to seasoning her salmon using some spices that were in a box nearby. Vyker grimaced and set Geoffrey down, "You STAY away from here, and you KEEP quiet or I will personally *deal* with you."

Geoffrey nodded and backed off quickly.

"Oh, and DON'T, please don't, tell your dad," Vyker added.

Geoffrey quickly nodded and tore out of the tunnel.

"Kids," Vyker grumbled.

"Sulpher, why did you accept the bribe," I scolded her.

"Seemed harmless, and I would've wanted to see it if I was a kid," Sulpher replied.

Vyker groaned, "But we can't have everyone knowing about him. If we have the whole village out here, they'll cause a ruckus and who *knows* what Blasty will do!"

"You named him?" I asked, almost laughing.

"Oh, uh, yeah – Blasty," Vyker mumbled, "Ya know. I have some business to attend to, I'll see you guys tomorrow. You can just spread out your mats here and sleep."

With that Vyker beat a hasty exit out of the cave.

"Sooo, what do you think of him?" Sulpher asked me.

"Well, he seems oddly normal – nothing like his brother," I noted, "And he seems pretty protective of his dragon, but I don't think he fully realizes what he's dealing with."

"Yeah, I mean a hybrid of the two strongest dragons in the history of dragons?!" Sulpher commented, "That's pretty scary."

"Especially since our dragons seem so scared of 'Blasty'," I added, pointing to Amber and Powder who were huddling in one part of the cave together and gobbling down their dinner.

"Maybe I can try bringing Powder down and introducing them?" I suggested.

Sulpher shrugged her shoulders, "Who knows..."

"Well, let's get some sleep," I said, standing up and taking Powder's saddle off, "Tomorrow's going to be crazy!"

"You think we're safe here?" Sulpher said, looking around at the cave's walls that were eerily reflecting the evening sun's light.

"Who knows...", I smirked.

Chapter 3: Discovering

I awoke the next morning in full battle-ready mode, but everything was super quiet. I sat up on my mat and looked around. Vyker was sleeping at the complete opposite side of the cave and wrapped in several blankets; completely knocked-out. About two meters to my left slept Sulpher with her head on Amber's foot, and Powder was sprawled out near the barrel of salted fish. I was so used to getting woken up prematurely that I really wasn't prepared for a quiet morning. Whether it was rogue dragon riders attacking, my parents wanting me to complete such and such a chore, Magur pouring ice water on my head, or Sulpher banging on the door to see if I was awake yet, it was rare to get a full-night's sleep. Thus, it must have been about five o' clock in the morning, and the sun was just rising above the horizon. I yawned, stood up, and found my armor and weapons where I had left them nearby last night and put them on. Then, I decided to go on a walk. It wasn't terribly cold outside, but it was still chilly if you weren't wearing a nice overcoat. As opposed to the afternoon sun, the early morning sun reflected beautifully off the small ravine and lit up the golden red leaves of the maples lining the canyon. I squashed through the wet ground and up onto the cliff face trail after that. Then, I followed that trail all the way to the fixit-shop and Vander's Tavern. Of course, my eye caught the eye sore of Vander's insane obstacle course. It stood there; looking ever so slightly dilapidated while also incredibly menacing.

"I've got to give it a go myself," I mumbled. I looked around to make sure no one was looking; then crept over to the course. Although Nuffink had done it the previous year with no armor, shield, or weapon; I figured that I should fare decently if I kept mine. The crank handle was considerably rusty, but a good tug got it moving and the obstacle course running. It was a doozy, with swinging bludgeons, trap doors, firing arrows, chopping axes, and various other death traps.

"Take *that!*" I cheered as I ran into the course and chopped through a spiked, wooden stick that flipped out at me. My adrenaline was still going strong after my morning had turned out to be less-than-exciting, so I took to the course with relish. I performed an excellent Defender of the Wing backflip over a particularly large mace that was pumping up and down with terrible certainty; then rolled under a series of swinging axes that were at torso-height. The next part involved inching along a thin plank that ran up alongside a massive board with hundreds of spears popping in and out.

Bend the back – raise the foot – duck – crouch – crook head – flip around – chop the spear...

"Yoo-hoo!" I yelled, vaulting over a nearby log and approaching the "death-jump" as a decrepit sign with red paint nearby attested to. It was a pit of about two to three meters long with a ton of sharp iron spikes on the bottom of it. I took a running leap (while avoiding a swinging log that was undulating nearby), used my Odin's Storm as a pole, and flew over the pit. I landed with another decimeter to spare; then approached the last, main obstacle which was a series of massive trees undulating in complete randomness.

That's when I noticed the large crowd of men who had set up rotting, wooden chairs outside the tavern and were watching me, drinking beer, and laughing their swollen skulls out. How they

knew I was outside was anyone's guess (though it may have been due to the fact that they were so bored that they were super alert to anything out of the ordinary).

That's when I had a great idea. Why not make the last few seconds extra exciting?

I took to the swinging trees carefully – making sure to time my steps and dodge. When I reached one of the last trees, I feigned surprise as it bore down upon me - using my shield to block the blow. Nearby, the crowd of men cheered and waited for my fate. I had expected to get knocked a little off balance, but the tree must have been waterlogged from the morning dew because it sent me spiraling into the air. My bearings quickly got confused, but I managed to perform a triple somersault, twisted back into a Berserker landing form, and caught the next swinging tree at the top of its undulation. I then rode it down and leapt across to the next swinging tree.

"Check that out!" roared Vander, "He is jumping the logs!"

For the last (and biggest tree trunk), I swung around the rope that was holding it up and launched myself off it for an epic finale. I stuck the landing outside the obstacle course and posed by leaning on my Odin's Storm.

"And *that's* the wrap!" I smirked, "Come back next time to see me-."

"See you do what?" a nearby voice said. Sulpher swaggered right up to me from around the corner of the tavern and pointed her massive hammer at my head.

"I could've done that ten times as fast!" she told me – on purposely talking loudly.

"Ooooh," the tavern customers nearby crowed.

"Maybe, but you couldn't look *half* as awesome while doing it!" I smirked.

"Ouch!" a guy with a massive, horned helmet nearby said.

"Prepare yourself, opponent!" Sulpher told me, marching confidently to the obstacle course's starting line.

"Is that a challenge?"

"Consider it how you like – when I beat you!"

"Well, when I beat you, and this being my second time through – you'll know who's truly the best!"

"A lil' bit of friendly competition!" Vander declared, standing up out of his chair and wobbling over to the course's crank, "Let it begin!"

"ONE!" the crowd of excited onlookers yelled.

"TWWOOOO!!!"

"See ya at the other end, cutie," Sulpher whispered to me.

"THREEEEEE!!!!"

"Wut the-?!" I said, taken by surprise by her pet name for me. Sulpher, however, took off like a shot.

As I dashed after her, I could tell that I was definitely more tired now, but I managed to keep close behind her as I also had the advantage of knowing the course better. Sulpher splintered a particularly menacing, wooden spike that had emerged from a hole in the ground, while I back flipped over her using a swinging axe's momentum.

"Watch out for that fiery arrow!" I shouted to her as I landed in front.

"Huh?"

I chuckled and ran on towards the poky wall.

"Why you-!" Sulpher yelled after me.

I had to take the wall a little slower, because the wall was anything but predictable. However, Sulpher inched along it at top speed and splintered some of the spears with her hammer, quickly catching up with me. Before long, we both reached the death pit at the same time.

"Bring it ON!" Sulpher yelled excitedly, running to gain speed. We leapt off the side of the pit and to the other side – except we didn't make it.

At just the last minute, something pulled backward on my right pant's leg, then let go. This caused me to lose most of my momentum. Before I knew it, I was tumbling down into the pit. From above, I could hear a gasp from the crowd of onlookers, and one cheer (I never did figure out who that person was though).

Unfortunately, plummeting to certain death was not a new experience for me, and I knew just what to do. I rammed my Odin's Storm into the side of the dirt pit. The dirt provided a great cushion to my fall, and I managed to hang on tight enough to absorb the abrupt stop. That's just when Sulpher, who had also plummeted over the edge weirdly enough, grabbed onto me. I was yanked downwards again, and my weapon cut through another chunk of dirt as we approached the lethal spikes at the bottom of the pit.

"Thanks for that," Sulpher yelled to me as she gripped to my torso like her life depended on it (which it probably did!).

"Don't you think there are other opportune times to hug me?" I managed to say after I had caught my breath.

"Hmmm. You might me right," Sulpher replied.

"Perhaps you could start climbing up now?"

"Oh, yes." Sulpher quickly started to scramble up my body, but she had barely gotten her knees on top of my shoulders when my weapon dislodged from the side of the pit, and we fell backwards. We then were impaled by a dozen spikes and died a gruesome death.

NOT! – heh. Luckily enough (luck always seemed to be on my side!), something snatched me up – it was Powder.

"Thanks boy!" I told him, as he tossed me onto his back. I glanced behind me to see that Amber had rescued Sulpher as well.

"You could have come a little sooner. You do know that right?" I told him.

Powder grunted and soared out of the pit. Meanwhile, Amber and Sulpher blasted by us towards the finish line, but I was more interested in seeing what caused Sulpher and I to plunge into the pit. Turns out, it wasn't anything. It was *someone* - Liggo, to be exact.

"That's for getting me captured!" he yelled at me as Powder and I landed in front of him.

"That's a little intense for revenge," I commented, giving him a very hard stare.

"Well, I could have been killed by your tribes!"

"We *don't* kill our prisoners."

"Yeah, but you use them as test dummies for your younger warriors!"

"Only the War Lord goons. We left Laurel alone!"

"Who cares," Liggo shrugged, "You deserved it."

"Listen, smart guy," I threatened in a low voice as I brought my head straight up to his, "I don't care about your stupid revenge. If you pull anything like this again, I'm going straight back to my island, and your dragon will just be left to eat you. Is that *perfectly* clear?"

Liggo shoved his face in mine as well, "I called you to help me, *not* get me imprisoned."

"I didn't!"

"Did too!"

"It was my tribesmen."

"Same thing!"

"You're just saying that because you don't want to admit that you weren't sneaky enough to get away!"

"Not true!"

"You know it is!" I shouted back.

Liggo's face turned red with fury, but at the same time, Amber and Sulpher flew up.

"I won!" she said, "Hey, were you the one who nearly killed us?"

"Only because-," Liggo began, but he was cut short by Vyker who ran up.

"Oh, shut up bro!" Vyker told his brother, "This doesn't matter."

Vyker then turned to me, "Sorry, guys, Liggo has some anger issues."

"Do not!" Liggo insisted.

Vyker rolled his eyes, "I'll talk to him. You guys go take the day off."

I gave Liggo another glare and marched off, back to the tavern. Vander and his customers were still there, relaxing in the early morning shade and watching the argument like it was the best entertainment of their life.

"Aw, man," one of the guys said, "that didn't end like I wanted it to!"

"Yeah, there was no blood shed!" another added.

"Well, thanks for the exercise, but we should get going," I told Vander. Sulpher and I waved goodbye and quickly left the obstacle course. I had no desire to go back *there* anytime soon!

"Wanna go grab some breakfast?" Sulpher asked me as we jogged along beside our dragons.

"Sure," I replied.

"Let's go over to that food area outside the marketplace," Sulpher suggested.

Once we were farther down the path, we slowed to a fast walk and sauntered into the food area of the marketplace.

"There's WAY too many food stalls," I commented, gazing in amazement at the odd assortment of several dozen sellers who all boasted a massive selection of exotic and tasty foods.

"Take these!"

A seller somehow snuck up behind us and shoved a massive burrito into each of our hands,

"You'll never taste a better Gurito!"

"A what?" I asked him.

"A Good bURITO!" the seller replied proudly, "I came up with the name myself!"

I nodded and lifted the giant piece of food to my mouth to taste it, but before I could sink my teeth in it, Powder sunk his teeth into it.

"Snap!" Powder bit the entire top half of the burrito off and gulped it down. He then proceeded to snatch the last portion of it right out of my hands.

"Hey!"

Powder grinned at me and licked his lips.

"Amber!"

I turned around to see Sulpher scolding Amber who had a piece of lettuce sticking out of her mouth.

"Looks like our dragons are hungrier than we are!" I commented.

"Tell me about it," Sulpher replied sarcastically.

"I'll go get two more," I offered. I walked over to the food seller's stand.

"I'd like two more of your Guritos, please," I told him.

"Wow! You must have been *really* hungry!" the seller remarked, as he reached behind his counter and started filling some large tortillas with various ingredients.

"Actually, our dragons were really hungry," I replied.

"Oh, I see," the man told me, "You know, those are the first two dragons that I've seen for at least a decade."

"I know," I told him, "They're hybrid dragons – and for some reason they don't want to go wherever all the other dragons have gone."

"Funky," the seller said, "But honestly, they're a little scary too. I'd be nervous they'd eat me or something."

"Nah," I assured him, "They're just like a pet sheep or yak."

"If you say so," the seller responded. He finished wrapping the two Guritos up and rolled them across the counter to me, "That'll be five gold coins."

I forked the money to him, and said my thanks.

"No problem, and please recommend me to others!" he yelled to me as I left.

"Well, here you go," I said to Sulpher as I plopped down at the wooden table and benches that she was now sitting at, "and keep a close eye on it!"

Sulpher laughed, "You know I will!"

We ate in silence for a bit, then I said, "Well, it was kind of weird how upset Liggo was at us. He really isn't even half as calm as his brother."

"Yeah, and he tried to kill us – even though he wants your help," Sulpher added with a mouthful of deliciousness.

"I honestly don't get those two. Maybe we'll understand them better after a few days," I commented.

"Excuse me, miss," a small voice from nearby said.

I turned around to see a young girl standing next to Sulpher.

"Can I have a ride on your dragon?"

"Oh, uh, why sure," Sulpher replied graciously.

"Great!" the girl replied excitedly, "Hey guys! She *is* giving rides!"

"Uh oh," I mumbled. In a matter of minutes, a whole collection of kids had rushed over to our table and were all clambering to get the first ride.

"Hold your yaks!" Sulpher exclaimed, "One rider at a time, and I'm charging two gold coins per ride!"

"I can take someone on my dragon!" I offered.

"No offense, sir," one of the kids responded to me, "But your dragon is disgusting."

"Hey, well I think he's cute," I replied, a little hurt.

"Whatever," another kid added while pointing at Amber, "but I would rather spend my money on something more elegant. Like *that* dragon!"

The rest of the kids cheered, and I rolled my eyes. Sulpher gave me a sympathetic smile.

"I'll be here for a while, feel free to go shopping or something," she told me.

I nodded, whistled to Powder, and took off towards the beach. I was hoping to avoid the mob of sellers and maybe see some exciting ships and wares at the docks instead. It was about a kilometer or two to the beach, but the trail was well-kept and well-worn and the temperature was still very pleasant.

At the docks, there were many ships. Some were tall, others long, others huge, and some that seemed to be built by strangers who were not native to the archipelago. One of these strange ships was a fairly open-top one that was piled with odds and ends. Naturally, I like piles of unusual things, so I made my way over there. The boat appeared to have only one trader on it, and he was rolling massive barrels down the gang-plank and onto the docks where a cart and yak were standing.

"Hey there!" I said to him, "What kinds of things do you have here?"

"Oh, heyo!" he replied, "Well, it appears I have a little of almost everything!"

"Cool! Can I walk around, onboard?"

"Absolutely, I'll just be here unloading these barrels," he told me.

Powder didn't like boats, so I left him with the yak while I climbed aboard the ship. It truly was filled with about everything! There were weapons and shields, books and toys, food and inventions, potions and lotions, and several other things that I had no idea about. Further back in the ship, I found a very fat book.

"Hmmm...", I mumbled as I read the front cover, "the Bible? I wonder what this is."

I just started to open the cover, when the trader walked over.

"Oh, you found the Bible? Nice," he told me.

"What is this? Some type of story or something?" I said, scanning a few pages in it.

"Oh no! I've been working on translating the Bible into Viking, so this is just the first few books of the New Testament."

"What's 'the New Testament'?" I asked, confused.

The man chuckled heartily, "Have you never heard about Jesus?"

"Uh, no."

"Well, let me tell you then!" he said, "Jesus is God, and God created the whole earth and everything in it."

"Oh, yeah right," I replied, "There are no gods."

"Really? You believe that?" the trader asked, surprised, "You don't believe in Thor or Loki or Valhalla?"

"Nah," I replied honestly, "I've seen no intervention of them here on earth, and everything that is chocked up to them can be explained in natural means."

"So how do you think everything came to be?" he asked.

"How should I know," I replied quickly, "I don't have time to come up with a bunch of theological hogwash."

"You should," the trader replied, "well not hogwash that is. There *is* a God, and He *did* create everything, AND he loves you very much."

"Loves me?" I questioned, skeptical.

"He loves everyone!" the trader announced, "That's why he gave us freewill."

"What's that?"

"It's the ability to choose between 'right' and 'wrong.'"

"Okay," I responded. I knew that there was right and wrong.

"So why does freewill and love have to do with each other?" I asked, confused.

"Well, if God made us love Him, then it really wouldn't be love. Thus, he had to give us the choice *not* to love him, so that when or if we did choose to love him, it would be sincere."

"Interesting."

"You're welcome to keep the Bible for free, if you promise to read it," the trader offered.

"Nah, I'm good. I don't want to worry about that religious stuff," I said.

"Okay, then," the trader said, "But if you have any other questions, I'll be here for another day or so."

"Uh, sure," I answered, "Say, what is this?"

I pulled up an awesome-looking axe.

"That's a Dreadfall axe."

"Cool!" I told him, "I love the design and craftsmanship on it!"

"Yep, the only one of its kind, too!" the trader replied, "A friend gave it to me."

"Can I buy it?"

"Sorry, no," he replied, "my friend gave it to me as a reminder of Heaven."

"Heaven?"

"Yeah, the place where those who put their faith in God go."

"Oh."

"My friend went there when he temporarily died and said it was the most awe-inspiring place ever. He gave me this axe as a reminder to hold loosely to the stuff of earth."

That was all funny-sounding stuff to me, especially the "temporarily dying" part, but I smiled and nodded my head politely.

"If you look here," the trader continued holding it up, "You'll see a small slot where you can slide in this canister." The trader then proceeded to show me how to fit a little canister into a small compartment in the axe.

"Now, this canister is supposed to be filled with flightmare mist. When you press this little lever on the handle here, the axe releases some of the mist at your opponent!"

"AWESOME!"

"Yeah."

"So, how did you get Flightmare mist into there, assuming you had a flightmare handy," I asked.

"Oh, well, over here," the trader responded as he pulled a bellows-like invention from within a pile nearby, "Is a gas compressor. The flightmare's mouth goes here; then the dragon just breathes and you compress the air into the canister by pumping these bellows. See?"

The trader showed how it worked, and although much of the novelty of the device was left to the imagination due to there being no Flightmares around, I could see how epic the Dreadfall axe could be.

"Well, thanks for the tour, but I should probably be going now," I told the trader.

"Absolutely, I'm James by the way," he responded.

"Thanks James, I'm Kaizar," I responded.

"Nice to meet you Kaizar."

We shook hands; then I carefully found my way off the ship and back to Powder. Powder was staring down the yak.

"What *are* you doing Powder!" I cried out.

Powder snorted and turned his attention to me.

"C'mon," I told him, "Let's check on Amber. After a short stroll back to the dining area, we found Sulpher and Amber still giving kids rides.

"This could take a while," I mumbled to Powder.

"Excuse me there." A few men in expensive clothes approached me.

"Uh, yeah?"

"We couldn't help see this profitable business you have set up here," the taller man told me gesturing towards Amber soaring overhead.

"Well, it wasn't exactly planned, but okay," I responded.

"We were thinking that we could help your business get an official front and area to operate in exchange for some of the profits," another spoke up.

"Well, that's nice, but we won't be here for a while," I told them.

"What about your Bewilderdeath?" the third asked me, "Won't you have to be here for a while to finish training him?"

"The what?" I lied – surprised they knew about it.

"The Bewilderdeath you have hidden in the mountain.

"Why would you think I have a Bewilderdeath hidden in there? We just arrived!" I asked.

"Oh, it's all over the place. Practically everyone knows about it!" the taller man informed me,

"You are helping Vyker train him!"

My eyes narrowed, and I knew that the secret was out, "When did the news get out?"

"About yesterday evening," he answered.

Oh, no! I thought – *Geoffrey!*

"Yeah, well, we'll see about that," I answered lamely, "I need to talk to my friends."

"Sounds good," one of the other men answered, "We're three of the jewelry sellers, so just stop by should you come to an answer."

"Absolutely. Will do!"

"Thanks, bye," the men quickly hustled away, and I was left wondering what to do.

"WHOOOSSH!" Amber and Sulpher landed for the millionth time and let down another kid.

"Next!" Sulpher replied wearily.

"Uh, just a minute!" I told the next kid, gently pushing him away from Amber.

"Uh, Sulpher," I whispered to her, "We need to get back to the Grimborns. There's been some interesting new developments."

"Oh," Sulpher replied, "Good. I'm getting tired of giving rides, and I think Amber is tired of it too." Amber growled to prove Sulpher's point.

"Can you move sir!" the little boy snapped at me, "I want to get to my ride!"

"Actually," Sulpher quickly replied, "I have to go now!"

"WHY?!" the boy whined, "Can't you just do me?!"

A chorus of "and me!" followed this remark.

Needless to say, the kids were *not* happy to see us leave, but we promised to come back should we have time.

"What happened?" Sulpher asked me as we walked back towards the cave.

"Let's just say, Geoffrey is a serious rumor-spreader!" I answered.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~
I woke up the next morning to the sound of shouting voices.

Well, I guess my peaceful, early morning was short lived I thought.

I yanked myself off my sleeping mat and peered towards the cave's entrance. There stood Vyker and Liggo who were desperately trying to ward off a mob of people – mostly people with expensive clothes and haughty glares.

"You *cannot* see it!" Liggo was saying, "We're training it. It isn't used to strangers yet."

"We'll tell you when you can see it. I promise!" Vyker added.

"You're JUST hiding IT!" one of the people shouted.

"Let us IN!" another added.

Next to me, Sulpher was also just getting up.

"There's a commotion outside," I told her.

"Thanks Viking Obvious," Sulpher replied.

"Let's go see if we can help."

I jogged on over to Vyker and Liggo.

"Can I help?" I asked them.

"Yes, actually," Liggo told me, "Could you get your dragons to scare these guys off?"

"Certainly," I replied, "Powder!"

Powder slowly woke up, pulled himself to his feet and padded over. I could see he wasn't happy about being woken up to a noisy crowd of people outside.

"Powder, growl," I told him.

"Amber, fireball!" Sulpher added.

Amber, who had been a little quicker to wake up, shot a series of three fireballs above the crowd and into the side of the ravine nearby. The fireballs exploded spectacularly and took out a dozen plants and one tree. Some of the crowd gasped and ran off, but the others just got more mad.

"Trying to threaten us, now, are you?" one challenged.

"FWWWOOOOOSSSHHH!!!"

Powder was still cranky and didn't even bother growling; he just blasted them with mist.

Instantly, the crowd was quiet – completely frozen.

"Well, uh, that wasn't exactly what I had in mind, but it works," Vyker admitted.

"Works fine for me," Liggo mumbled, "I'm going to go get some breakfast."

"And I'll get mine too," Vyker added.

"Hey," Sulpher told me, "Aren't our Wing Maiden, back-up boats supposed to be arriving soon?"

"Oh, yeah, you're right," I answered, "We should go to the docks."

"Do NOT let them come here," Liggo shouted over to us from his small, camp fire, "They won't be too happy with me after my epic escape."

"Fine," I replied, "C'mon."

I quickly fitted Powder with his saddle and, after tiptoeing around all the paralyzed figures outside, mounted Powder and took off. Besides the rather discouraging beginning of the day, I

was still working off the failures of last night. I had spent well into the night trying to get Blasty to respond to my commands – or even move at that, but he remained stubbornly inert.

It was like he knew he was big and commanding and wouldn't take commands from others. Meanwhile, Powder and Amber seemed to be getting more used to his presence, but I still hadn't taken either into the cavern with Blasty.

As we soared out of the canyon, I looked in the direction of the docks. It was still a little hard to see what boats had arrived, but after another minute, I confirmed the arrival of the Wing Maiden vessels.

"They're here!" I announced to Sulpher.

"I know, stupid," Sulpher told me, "I spotted them a whole minute ago!"

I rolled my eyes and directed Powder in the direction of the boats. Presently, we alighted on the biggest ship's deck.

"Hey there Nephew!" Dagur shouted to me. He swaggered on over to me and slapped me on the back – super hard.

"Hey there, Uncle," I groaned.

"Well, do tell. How's the dragon training going on?"

"Not too good," Sulpher replied for me, "He's really lazy."

"Sounds like a certain brother-in-law I know of," Dagur grinned.

I scowled at this, but just at that moment, Dagur suddenly tripped and face planted onto the ship's deck.

"OoF!"

"Fishlegs is *not* lazy," Sulpher insisted - obviously the one that had tripped Dagur.

Dagur pulled himself up and started to say something, but was cut off.

"Dragon riders coming from the East!"

"What?" I asked, spinning around in that direction.

"Yeah, there's definitely something flying in from that direction," Sulpher informed me, squinting,

"It's kind of hard to tell who."

"At this point, it could be any number of riders," I added.

"What kind of dragon are they riding?" Dagur yelled up to the warrior in the crow's nest.

"Uhhh. Just a minute. Looks like...looks like... Monstrous Gronckles," he finally reported, as he peered through his telescope.

"Ogard," I groaned.

"What's *he* doing here," Sulpher pondered.

"Well, judging by the speed of how the rumor is traveling," I figured, "Ogard probably is over here to get that Bewilderdeath for himself."

"I don't know if that'll actually work," Sulpher countered.

"Yeah, but he probably doesn't know that," Dagur told us, "I didn't even know!"

"Let's keep low for a minute, until we find out what he's doing," I told Sulpher, "We don't want him targeting us."

Sulpher and I hid behind some crates on the ship and Amber and Powder trotted over to the ship's cabin. We watched as the armada of flying dragons approached rapidly – flew straight over the docks and landed somewhere in the vicinity of the marketplace.

"Well, that was-," I began.

“MORE DRAGON RIDERS COMING FROM THE NORTH!”

“Darn it!” Dagur called out, “Can we hear something good for once?!”

“I can definitely recognize *those* dragons,” the warrior sang out, “It’s Krogette and her team.”

“Oh boy,” I groaned again.

“What’s *she* doing here,” Sulpher puzzled again.

“Probably the same reason Ogard’s here,” Dagur told us.

“How many of you are there?” I asked Dagur.

“Oh, about fifty,” Dagur replied, “Mala, Magur, and a few others are on the other ships.”

We watched as Krogette’s team veered before reaching the docks and headed towards the mountain. Fortunately for us, Ogard’s team noticed them and shot at them. They, in turn, shot back. Thus, they swiftly became involved in a massive dragon battle and forgot about heading towards the mountain and the Bewilderdeath.

“C’mon,” I told Sulpher, “We have to get to Liggo and Vyker and warn them!”

Sulpher nodded her head, and we quickly mounted Powder and Amber.

“We’ll be waiting here!” Dagur called after us.

“Let’s climb really far up,” I told Sulpher as we flew back towards the cave.

“A-okay.”

Powder pumped his wings, and soon we were far above the ensuing battle. Sulpher couldn’t resist taking a few pot-shots below us, but Powder and I were on a mission, and time was of the essence. In not more than three minutes, we had already crossed the island and swooped into the cave entrance, narrowly avoiding clipping the tops of all the paralyzed people who were still standing there.

“Vyker!” I cried out, “They’re here to take Blasty!”

“Who is?!” Vyker gasped.

“Ogard and Krogette,” I replied. I obviously wasn’t sure that Vyker knew who those people were, but I made an educated guess that he did. Liggo and Vyker seemed to be very well educated on the current happenings.

“Oh, Thor!” Liggo moaned, “This is just getting worse.”

“C’mon then!” Vyker said, “Let’s get Blasty out of his cave and go at least somewhere!”

“But where?” Liggo countered, “Where can we hide a massive, lazy dragon?”

“That doesn’t matter if we can’t get the darn thing out of the cave first!” Vyker countered.

We raced down the tunnel and emerged into the main cavern, just to find that Blasty wasn’t there.

“Oh, bother,” Liggo announced, “It’s Blasty’s breakfast time.”

“What should we do?” Sulpher asked Vyker.

Vyker put his hand to his head and thought for a minute in the quietness.

“Okay,” he finally said, “Kaizar, you and I need to take Powder and go find Blasty out in the ocean bordering this island. Liggo, I want you to stay here and waylay anyone who comes here looking for Blasty.”

“Of course,” Liggo replied sarcastically – it appeared he wasn’t a huge fan of that job.

“Sulpher, I’m not exactly sure what you should do,” Vyker told her.

“I know!” I blurted out, “Sulpher, you should go release the Death Song and Singetail from Krogette’s headquarters!”

“Oh, yes!” Sulpher cried out, “Of course!”

“Alright then,” Vyker announced, “It’s a plan. Let’s go!”

I helped Vyker onto the back of Powder, and we flew out of the cave network. Sulpher kept on flying towards Dragon’s Edge, but we veered towards the closest beaches.

“Let’s go over there!” Vyker said, pointing to a portion of water near the island. Powder turned in that general direction, and Vyker carefully searched the surface of the ocean to see if he could spot Blasty.

“Aha! I knew it!” Vyker declared, “He’s right there!”

“Uh, where, I don’t see anything,” I said.

“Right there where the normally calm water is a little rougher!” Vyker said, pointing to a stretch of water near a forest of palm trees.

As if on cue, Blasty...well...blasted out of the water! It would have actually been pretty majestic and awe-inspiring if I hadn’t just then noticed a small collection of Death Grippers flying nearby, and the head rider hadn’t shot a massive spear at Blasty. The spear plunged right into Blasty’s thick scales and caused him to roar in pain.

“War Lords,” I hissed, “Lemmig.”

“Can this day get any worse?!” Vyker groaned loudly.

“GET THAT DREADSTRIDER!” The command was from Lemmig (who was now only a kilometer or two away from us). That’s when the most horrifying thing happened. Blasty, who had just a minute ago been writhing in pain, suddenly went rigid, sought us out from amid the sky and opened his mouth.

“Uh oh,” I said.

“FWWOOOOOMMMM!”

A wave of fire that appeared to be a half kilometer in breadth exploded out toward us.

“GOOOO!!” Vyker screamed as Powder shot upwards and towards the center of the island.

“AHHHHHH!” Vyker screamed again in my ear.

However, no sooner had we flown out of the range of Blasty, then we found ourselves intermixed in the raging battle between Ogard and Krogette.

“Fsshhh!” Powder paralyzed a nearby Singesong rider as he dodged a fireball from a Monstrous Gronckle, and Vyker watched as the rider and dragon plummeted down below.

“Ouch,” he said.

And that’s when *everyone* heard it – the powerful beating of wings.

Despite the battle, the fires, the screaming of people from down below, and the roaring of dragons; we all turned around to see Blasty powerfully flying through the air towards us and with the most awful expression on his hybrid face.

“Let me down!” Vyker screamed again in my poor ears.

Powder dove straight away and came to a make-shift landing on the ground in a grove of trees. Vyker was pitched off the saddle and flew into a Gooseberry push, but we didn’t stay to see if he was all right. We just took off again. I looked around to see that all of the other hybrid dragons were now acting up. Blasty had a strange effect on them, and I immediately knew that some of the Bewilderbeast’s power was definitely in Blasty. However, Blasty wasn’t interested in them. He was just targeting Powder and I.

"It must have been a Deathgripper-venom-coated spear," I told Powder as he headed towards the towering mountain on Auction Island. Suddenly, Blasty shot another huge wave of fire at us. Powder, in narrowly avoiding the flames, lost control of his turn and smacked into the face of a cliff wall. We then dropped onto a thin mountain trail.

"Ouch," I whined, but quickly got off Powder and looked around. Powder also got up and stared at the quickly approaching Blasty

"RUN!!!" I yelled, taking off at full speed up the trail. Powder quickly overtook me, and Blasty, who was now way too close for comfort, roared and opened his mouth a third time.

The wall of fire swept down the cliff face straight toward Powder and I. I didn't have time to mount Powder; even if we had, the fire was just the right height to incinerate us anyway. With Powder leading the way, we raced toward a nearby pile of rocks. Just as I was approaching the rocks, the Bewilderdeath's fire reached me.

There was a burst of black before my eyes. However, I quickly realized that I was still nearby. In fact, I could still see the wall of fire continue on for a few seconds as it swept the cliff face. Behind me, I could see Powder cowering behind the pile of rocks and a dead body lying on the ground – burned badly. I couldn't quite recognize who the person was, but I figured it was a Singesong rider. I was very glad to have escaped that close call, but I was also confused at my strange hovering power that I had suddenly gained. I tried to move toward Powder and found that I could just effortlessly glide toward him. I quickly put my hand on Powder's face to calm him, but he didn't respond to it. In fact, he started whining. He crawled out from behind the pile of rocks – right under me (as I was hovering in the air) and nuzzled the dead body on the ground. This scared me slightly.

"Powder!" I yelled to him, "It's me! C'mon boy!"

But Powder couldn't hear me, or at least he didn't respond to my words. His whine started to get more high-pitched, and his eyes started to get very big. At this point, I started to get desperate.

"Powder, boy! It's me! I'm ok. You are too!" I had almost completely forgotten about the raging battle at this point, so intent was I on getting Powder to notice me; but none of my efforts seemed to make a difference. That's when I recognized the dead body. It was me.

Chapter 4: Lamenting

Now don't get the wrong idea; I had second thoughts of leaving Kaizar behind. Sure, I thought Kaizar would be fine, but leaving him with a bunch of warring dragon clans and one very large Bewilderdeath isn't something you meet on a typical day. However, I knew that Krogette's captive Singetail and Deathsong needed to be freed – especially since that would cut off their supply of dragons. As Amber and I rapidly flew away, I looked behind me briefly to catch a glimpse of Kaizar and Vyker heading off towards Auction Island's beaches. We could both easily hear the sounds of dragons and fireballs down below us, but as we kept on flying away from Auction Island, the noise eventually succumbed to the sound of air rushing by my ears.

Amber wasn't the fastest dragon out there, but she was very agile, and I loved her. As we flew onwards, I thought about the crazy turn of events. It seemed almost fanciful that there were still dragons, and more being discovered every year. Dragons were the tall-tales of the older folk, not the current reality of teenagers. Until I first saw Kaizar's speedstinger, Slizer, a few years ago, I had even briefly thought that dragons were a hoax! Now, I found myself riding a dragon!

However, as with most things, there was a downside to dragons. It made the archipelago's already violent tendencies even more so. Dragons added a whole new dimension to fighting. Thus, by harboring a Deadly Scuttleclaw and Dreadstrider, Kai and I's tribes were basically advertising themselves as targets for every bounty hunter and War Lord within the area. It was a tough predicament. In addition, I could tell that a few friends and acquaintances were jealous of Amber. Sure, it was only a minority, but it was still disturbing. I wondered how Nuffnut and Puffnut and the Outcasts dealt with their Skrilnappers. I mean, the Outcasts were only a short boat ride away from the War Lords' Scout Island – not necessarily great positioning.

My thoughts were just starting to work back to Kai, when I realized that we were approaching Dragon's Edge. Evidently, Amber knew the way better than I did!

"Let's approach the island from the South," I told Amber, nudging her far into the air. We couldn't risk being seen by Krogette's sentries, assuming she had left some behind.

Amber flew through the thick layer of clouds while I tried to mentally picture where above the island we were. After about a minute, I told Amber to take me down. With a gentle dive, we pierced the clouds again and emerged near the center of the island – not as far as I would have hoped, but good enough.

"Alright, girl," I told her, "Let's land in that small clearing there."

We landed soon enough; then, I got off Amber, stretched my limbs, and ran towards the Dragon's Edge habitations. Evidently, my dad's Dragon Riders club had built and used the iconic houses here on this island as a sort of launch port for their explorations of new dragons. However, after Hiccup was made chief of the Berkians, they never went back and the buildings had fallen into disrepair. Recently, however, Krogette's group of Singesong riders had taken it over.

We silently made our way through the forest and crept towards the many colorful and ornate houses. It took a little longer than expected, but after about ten minutes, I could see the walkways leading from the top of the island to their habitations.

"I don't see anyone," I whispered to Amber.

Amber ducked her head and sniffed the air, but did not react.

"Okay, let's go," I told her.

We left the cover of the forest trees and dashed towards the nearest hut. Amber was heavier and her footsteps were less concealed, but overall, I thought it to be successful. I skidded around the side of the building and ducked behind a few barrels nearby. Still no one. With that, I singled out the door of the building I was currently leaning against and ran inside.

Inside, I found a whole lot of stacked beds, blankets, and cots.

"Ugh," I groaned, "I found their sleeping area."

After a bit of poking around and coming up with nothing interesting except a lot of stinking shoes, I ran back to the door. That's when I heard a yell of surprise and a thud. I slung my metal hammer out and raced outside, but all there was, was Amber preening herself, and one very unconscious Singesong rider.

"Nice play," I praised Amber, "On to the next house!"

The next two houses were the kitchen/dining hall and the armory. However, the fourth hut was the largest building that I knew housed the dragons. I recognized it from the summer ago when Kaizar and I rescued Hiccup's family. The wooden door was locked with an iron lock and chain, but a whack or two with my hammer solved that problem. I stepped through the splintered door and into the building. It was very dark inside, what with their being only a few windows, but I managed to remember where the main door's opening lever was. With a yank and the creaking of gears, the roll-up door rose upwards – flooding light into the dingy (and smelly) dragon stables. As I had expected, all of the dragon stables were empty except for the two largest ones near the back of the stables. In those, were the Singetail and Deathsong. They were both lying on the ground, mournfully staring at me as I moved about. Amber, who was standing at the front, growled when she saw them.

"NO! Amber," I told her, "Go away!"

Amber growled again and stomped off. Unfortunately, and as I learned before, most hybrids didn't like pure-blood dragons and vice versa. I slowly edged my way over to the dragon cages, but neither made an effort to attack or even growl at me; their eyes just simply followed my movement. As opposed to the Dragon Stables door, the cages just had a simple slide and lock mechanism, no actual key lock. With lightning speed, I undid the Singetail cage's lock and dove behind a big, oak desk nearby. However, the Singetail didn't even budge. It didn't even appear that he knew he could fly out.

"C'mon," I whispered, half to him and half to myself, "You're free!"

But the Singetail did absolutely nothing. Ever so carefully, I edged back out of my hiding place and over to the Deathsong's cage this time. I opened it as well; then stepped back. This time, the Deathsong got up, sniffed the opened door of its cage and took a step or two out of it. It looked at me as I crouched nearby, squeaked a weak roar; then shot straight out of the stables and out into the sky. Seeing his partner leave, the Singetail also got to his feet and ran off, jumping off the edge of the walkway outside and furiously flapping his wings.

“A little harder than I thought,” I said to myself, “But successful nonetheless.”

Although this hadn’t been part of the original plan, I also decided to snoop around some more and see if I could find Krogette’s meeting hall (if she had one). It would definitely be advantageous to have any information related to her plans.

At this point, there was only one hut left, so it made my job easy. Amber had been obediently waiting outside, so I whistled to her and hurried to the last house. It was also locked, but Amber took care of that with a couple of fireballs before I got to it. Inside the hut, there was a main fire pit and several tables and chairs spread around. On the tables were a myriad of papers.

“Motherlode!” I exclaimed, “We’ve found it!”

I quickly went about scanning the papers. Unfortunately, most of them were training exercises and maps of islands. I found one very large, rolled-up map of Wing Maiden Island, but there was no documentation of plans or interesting stories.

“Where is their good stuff?” I wondered.

By the time that I reached the very last table, I still had not found a single thing. The final table was just more of the same, but when I stood up after shuffling the papers around, I clocked my head on something metal.

“Ouch,” I moaned, clutching my head. That’s when I saw what I had hit my head on. On the wall of the meeting hut, was a very large dagger that was embedded in the wall. Between it and the wall was a slightly-yellowed piece of paper with a picture of Kaizar on it. The dagger was square in his face.

“Oooh,” I smirked, “Someone wants him dead.”

I carefully scrutinized the hand-drawing and noticed some scrawling words along the bottom of it. The words said, “Kidnapping plan underway. Spies have been released for action. Treaty negotiations have begun.”

I stared at the words for a bit, trying to piece together exactly what they meant. I assumed they meant that Krogette was trying to kidnap Kaizar, and yet I had to think that wasn’t the meaning. Kaizar was unusually sneaky; it would make more sense for them to kidnap someone easier, but the “treaty negotiations” clause confused me. Treaty? With who? That made zero sense. Amber, who had been looking in the hut the entire time, finally roared, indicating that we should be going.

“All right, I’m coming!” I told her. I quickly yanked the dagger out of the wall, folded the paper up, and slipped it into my side satchel. Then, Amber and I were off – racing back to Auction Island to see the aftermath of Krogette and Ogard’s battle..

“I literally have no idea how Kaizar can be any more successful than us!” I told Amber as Dragon’s Edge disappeared behind us, “Our mission was so smoothly!”

Amber growled, agreeing with me.

“Let’s hope, we can figure out what this piece of paper is about!” I added.

I don’t know exactly how long it took us to get back to Auction Island, but I’m pretty sure it was a bit shorter as Amber was excited to get back. Riding for many hours in a row can exhaust both the dragon and the rider.

As we approached the island, the first thing that I noticed was the smoke, but that was reasonable; fire breathing dragons tend to cause smoke. The only other funny thing was the lack of any dragons. I mean, it’d been like six hours and now it was early afternoon, but

whatever happened must have resulted in a victor – and I really hoped it was our victory. Amber and I flew a wide circle over the main part of the Trading area, but it appeared mostly intact. When we were over Vander's Tavern, I noticed several of the customers and Vander sitting outside.

"Let's go ask them first," I told Amber, "Then we can go talk to Kai and Vyker."

Amber shook her head and swooped downwards. Sure enough, there was no sign of any dragons nearby. Of course, there were several scorched trees, burned ground, large footprints in the ground, and a few destroyed buildings, but no living warriors or dragons nearby. I think that Vander's group must have still been a bit on edge after the battle because a few of them jumped a foot or so when we landed.

Vander thought this was hilarious and laughed so hard that he lapsed into a coughing fit.

"What happened?" I asked them.

"Mmph," one of the larger men replied, "Nuffin much. Lots of fire, some deaths, a lot of yelling, and one massive dragon."

"Who won?" I asked him.

"That's easy," replied another, "The big dragon did."

This was good to know, though I was still unsure as to what "the big dragon winning" meant.

"Where did everyone else go?" I asked again.

"HACK!" Vander coughed for the tenth time, "cough, cough well, cough, the other two groups of dragon riders retreated, but the group of riders on those poison dragons and that glowing dragon flew off with the big dragon."

"Wait, the glowing dragon went *with* them?!"

"That's what I saw," one of the other customers said, leaning back in his chair – then tipping over.

"Was Kaizar on it?"

"Not that I saw," Vander said, "Which is weird because he's *always* near that dragon."

I suddenly felt very nervous.

"Uh, well, thanks guys," I told them, "I'll be going now!"

I urged Amber into a quick run towards Vyker's cave.

"Watch out for psychos!" Vander called after me, not realizing the irony in his statement.

Amber was a fairly petite dragon and was not as fast on her feet as Powder either, but she could run fast. We shot down the overgrown pathway and rushed through the ravine to the entrance to Vyker's cave. Something wasn't right if Kaizar wasn't with Powder. When I reached the cave, there was no one inside, and nothing was out of order. It was pretty much just as I had left it.

"Let's go check on Blasty," I told Amber. I dismounted her and sprinted down the tunnel, but when I emerged into the massive cavern, Blasty was indeed not there.

"That means they're probably telling the truth," I commented, "Where did everyone go?"

Amber squawked and looked around.

"Well, I guess we can talk to Dagur, if he's still here!"

Amber and I raced back outside and flew over to the docks. That's when I noticed that things were really not right. Half the docks were obliterated, and most of the boats were missing. It took no time to see the familiar Wing Maiden flag, but there was only one of them and it was not

tied to the nonexistent dock anymore. It was just anchored in place. Amber and I quickly glided in and landed on the deck. On board, there were several Wing Maidens.

"Sulpher!" one of them exclaimed upon seeing me, "I'm so glad you're safe!"

"Uh, what happened?" I asked, confused.

"You don't know?!" she replied.

"Uh no...", I replied nervously, "Where's Kaizar?"

The Wing Maiden's eyes got wide, and she quickly retreated into the boat's main cabin. I couldn't fathom what happened to Kaizar. He couldn't possibly... *die*... could he? He was always super lucky and had survived many wars and lethal incidents. I was so confused. Presently, Dagur emerged from the cabin and jogged over to me.

"Sulpher!" he said, "Glad to see you. Where were you?"

"Where is Kaizar?" I asserted, ignoring his question.

"Uh, well, that's a tricky question," Dagur replied, his eyes getting a little shifty.

"What do you mean?" I insisted, glaring at him.

"Well, uh, he, uh, isn't here," Dagur replied.

"Just spill it, Dagur," I told him, "What happened to Kaizar?"

"He died!" a voice from behind exclaimed. Magur walked up to us and leaned up against the ship's scarred mast, "Lemmirg got the giant dragon with Deathgripper venom, and somehow convinced that huge dragon to blast Kaizar and Powder. Powder survived, but Kaizar was killed. We had his funeral a bit ago."

"WHAATT?!" I screamed.

Dagur put his hand on my shoulder, "I'm sorry, Sulpher. I really am, but we have to leave now. We lost our other two ships in the fighting, and several of our other tribe members. We need to get back to our island before this ship falls apart too!"

"You're kidding!" I told Magur.

"Nope," Magur said, nonchalantly, "That kid is partying in Valhalla now."

Amber who had been standing nearby the entire time, looking around, came over and nuzzled me – that's when I broke down. I cried like a baby – completely out of my element, but the news was too much. It wasn't a full-out bawling, but it was a definite sniffing. Amber wrapped her wing around me as I sat at the front of the ship's deck.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Wing Maidens, Berserkers, and Defenders of the Wing unfurled the sails and set course back to Wing Maiden Island.

How could it be? It didn't seem real! What was going on! Thoughts and feelings and regrets flashed before my eyes. Everything that I wish I would have or not have said was right there. I couldn't believe it. I didn't even get a chance to thank him. Thanks for the adventure, the fun, the laughs, the many, many things that Kai had done for me. I had been living a boring existence on a small island, and he changed all that...

I was sitting there on the side of the ship and thinking about all this when I heard footsteps behind me and Magur plopped down right next to me.

"Sorry about Kai," Magur commented.

"Sniff."

Well, what are you going to do now?" he asked.

"I don't know," I lamented, "I feel so out of myself."

"Ah, don't worry about ol' Kai," Magur chuckled, "He's in Valhalla now. Probably having the time of his life!"

"I know," I admitted, "But I miss the future we could have had."

Magur nodded his head; then said, "Well, maybe this gives you a chance to build a future with someone else...like me?"

I processed this for a second; then realized what he meant.

"SPLOOSH!" I tossed him overboard.

It took a minute for Magur to climb back on board, and he slogged back over to me. I had to give him bonus points for tenacity on his part.

"I know you're just upset," Magur commented, "Come talk to me; when you get over him."

Whether he was honestly trying to be insensitive or not, I had no idea; but that comment made me more upset than the previous one.

"URGH!" I screamed. I charged him, preparing to toss him overboard again, but Magur saw it coming this time. He neatly side stepped me. However, he wasn't prepared for me to grab his legs hard as I flew by. Then, I used my incredible momentum to sling him around and over the side of the ship.

"Come talk to *me* when you're ready to apologize!" I shouted after him.

I turned around and sat back down next to Amber.

"Excuse me Sulpher," one of the older Wing Maidens said to me after walking over, "Perhaps you should get some sleep or something. It's never good to be making decisions when in an emotional mood. Your bed is on the lower deck in the third room. I nodded my head, understanding the wisdom in her statement. I slowly got up and trudged downstairs.

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We arrived back at Wing Maiden Island in the early morning of the second day. As the ship neared our docks, I jumped on Amber and soared off over the village. I needed to tell my parents about the news; then get some more time to myself. I wasn't ready for the general commotion that was going to be caused by the news of Kaizar's death. Amber and I raced through the sky and swooped in a gradual curve to the ground, right outside of my house. The sun was just beginning to rise, and I knew my parents would be having their breakfast about now. With a deep breath of air, I pushed open the door and stepped in. Amber, who had been moping for the last day (I'm sure she was missing Powder), refused to come in and just sat down outside.

"Why Sulpher!" Dad exclaimed, "I expected you guys to be gone for a bit longer. How was..." He stopped mid-sentence, because my face said it all.

"What happened?" Mom asked, quietly.

"Kaizar," I sniffed.

"WHY THAT SLIPPERY LIGGO FELLOW!" Dad roared, "If I could get his neck in my hands, why I'd...I'd-!"

"It wasn't him," I interrupted Dad, "It was Lemmirg."

"THAT SLIMY, BLACK-MAILING WAR LORD SPY!" Dad spat, "Why he just barreled through here yesterday with that massive dragon of his and forced us to release all of our prisoners... including Laurel.

"Wonderful," I replied sarcastically, "More *great* news."

"I'm sorry, honey," Mom said while hugging me, "Do Fishlegs and Heather know?"

"No," I told her, "I need some more time to myself. Do you mind if I pack a meal and go off by myself for a bit?"

"Not at all," Dad replied generously, "Take all the time you want. I'm guessing the rest of the Wing Maiden boats have arrived?"

"Yeah, just one," I told him, "Evidently the other two and several of our tribe members were destroyed."

"WHY THE-?!" Dad practically exploded as his face turned purple with rage. Mom quickly shoved him outside before he hurt something. Outside, I could hear him march down the street barking at all of the nearby Berserkers to get to the docks and help.

Meanwhile, Mom helped me pack a lunch.

"And here's a few salted cod for Amber," she added, handing me a large leather bag.

I nodded my head and thanked her; then headed outside. By this time, the news was already spreading that something was wrong; so an abnormally large number of people were already outside and racing towards the dock. I quickly jumped on Amber and took off before anyone saw me.

We first went to the West beach – far from the action. It was nice and calm there, and Amber calmed down a little when she got to roll in the sand.

"What are we going to do now?" I asked Amber, "What is there to do?! I feel like everyone wants me to move on, but I feel like I can't..."

Amber flung some sand on me with her foot and raced to the ocean tide.

"Hey!" I shouted after her, "You take that back!"

Amber growled and flapped her wings in the water – sending a wave of water my way which thoroughly soaked me. In response to that, I scooped up a handful of wet, beach sand and flung it at her head – catching her square in the face.

"Arghharroooo!" she said – shaking her face wildly and plunging it up and down in the surf.

We spent some more time playing in the sand; then walked in the forest and sat there eating our lunch. Presently, I heard the sound of voices and the tramp of feet. Amber sniffed the air; then crouched low behind the nearby shrubbery - I followed suit. Eventually, I was able to pick up on voices.

"And I said, 'Don't touch that! It'll do something to you!'" one of the voices said.

Everyone else then laughed.

"That's so idiotic!" another hooted, "Some people have way too big of a head!"

"Yeah," another replied. I recognized that voice; it was Magur.

"Speaking of which," Magur continued, "Kaizar had a big head."

"Pfft," another replied, "You're telling me. I mean, he didn't brag much, but he was so much of a show off!"

"Yeah," Magur agreed, "I would have gotten the top graduating honors if it wasn't for him!"

"I mean... I'm not glad he's gone, but I think things will be so much easier without him," another replied, "I won't have to worry about my parents saying, 'Be more like Kai!'"

"Hmph. Tell me about it," the first replied, "On that topic, does anyone know where Sulphur is?"

By this point, they were just passing on the other side of the thick bushes from me, and I could hear them quite clearly as they shuffled along.

"I have no idea," Magur answered, "But I tried to get her interested in me."

"Really?" answered the other, "Did she bite?"

"Nope," Magur answered, "She's got anger issues."

"Ah," one of the others answered, "That makes sense. All the most beautiful ones are that way!"

"HAHAHA!" the other person replied, "Honestly, I don't think she's that pretty anyway! She's better off with the Outcasts!"

"Ouch!" Magur guffawed, "I've got my eyes on someone else, now, anyway."

"Oooh!" Who is it?"

The voices drifted off into the distance as I crouched there – trying to process what was being said.

From what I understood, they were basically saying that I wasn't wanted. That revelation came as a shock, and I wondered if that was true of the majority of my fellow tribesmen. It occurred to me that between my usual, daily activities I didn't do a ton of socialization with my peers.

Maybe that's why I had gained an unruly reputation.

Saddened and a little discouraged, I trudged with Amber to my favorite spot on Wing Maiden's main volcano/mountain. It was beautiful weather, and I enjoyed the slight breeze. We sat there for a while; just enjoying nature. Eventually, it was getting to be early evening when I spotted someone tracing my tracks up the mountain. It was Fishlegs.

What's he doing up here? I thought.

He struggled onwards up the mountain and eventually reached me – gasping for breath.

"Can I sit here?" He breathed heavily.

"Sure," I replied, moving over a little. Amber growled a bit as I shoved her to the right, but she soon settled back down to her nap.

Fishlegs sat there with me for at least a dozen minutes, just looking at the sun disappearing behind the trees. His face was so unreadable by me that I finally had to break the silence.

"I'm sorry about your son," I told him.

"I know," he replied, "I do miss him so."

"Do you think he's watching us from Valhalla?" I asked.

"Probably," Fishlegs responded, "I bet he'd love nothing more than to come down and hug us."

There was some more silence; then I spoke up again, "Did you hear how he died?"

"Yes," Fishlegs sniffed, "That's what Kaizar always did. Whether it was fellow humans or dragons, he put others first."

Tears started to well up in my eyes again, and I tried to wipe them away with my sleeve.

"You know something?" Fishlegs asked me after some more time.

"What?"

"I think Kaizar would want us to carry on his legacy," Fishlegs told me.

"What legacy?" I asked, even though an idea was starting to form in my head.

"Protecting others and especially dragons," Fishlegs replied.

"Aren't we sort of already doing that?" I asked.

"Yes, but we're forgetting one particular dragon," Fishlegs responded, "Powder."

I nodded my head, knowing full well that he was going to mention Powder.

"We need to get Powder back from Lemmirg," Fishlegs said resolutely, "And we need to get the deathgrippers and Bewilderdeath away from him as well!"

"I agree," I told him, "But how? Supposedly Blasty defeated both Ogard *and* Krogette!"

"Yeah, but they didn't work together," Fishlegs reminded me, "We have something on our side that they don't."

"Uhhhh..." I responded, not sure where he was going.

"We have allies," Fishlegs continued, "We need to get my friends involved."

"Is that safe?"

"Friends are assets," Fishlegs insisted, "Plus, they have dragons!"

I could feel my heart start healing as I thought about getting my revenge on Lemming.

"Yes," I said, "Yes, I need to get the Mutant Dragon Riders together!"

"I think a long trip would be good for you too," Fishlegs told me, "That's what Hiccup always did when he was discouraged."

"Thanks for talking with me!" I told Fishlegs, "You've really helped."

"No problem," Fishlegs said, "You've helped me too. Now whaddya say we go get some dinner?"

I gave Fishlegs a ride on Amber back to the great hall where everyone was already gathering. The hall was definitely more full than normal, but with Fishlegs' ample frame leading the way, we eventually shoved our way to the largest table in front of the hall. Along the way, a few of the people attempted to say "Hi!" to me, but it was evident that they were trying to search my facial expressions.

"Honey!" Mom told me as I sat down next to her and gazed at the empty chair beside me, "I'm so glad you're back. How are you feeling?"

"Okay, I guess," I told her.

"Kaizar will live on," Atali said matter-of-factly - jumping straight to what was on everyone's mind, "His sacrifice and character will never be forgotten."

"He was a wonderful person," Mala added, "And an even better nephew."

"What I liked best about Kaizar," Dagur spoke up, "Was his awesome tag-lines. He always had something witty to say during duels."

"Haha!" Snotlout guffawed, "Why I remember one time when he asked me why I used twine on my stone hammer. By the time I realized that he was just kidding me, my attention had already been distracted, and he had tripped me."

"What I didn't like about Kaizar," Heather chimed in, "Was how good he was at Maces and Talons. He beat me almost every time!"

"He was good at that wasn't he?" Mom chuckled.

There was silence for a minute, that Dad started talking again, "Well, I guess we should start talking about what to do about Lemming."

"I'm going to go round up my friends from MDR," I interrupted, "We're going to get Powder back."

"Good idea!" Dagur said, "And meanwhile, we'll gather our forces and launch a full-scale assault!"

"But we don't even know where he is!" Heather said.

"Nah, we do," Atali responded, "I overheard him talking with one of his soldiers. He said they're going to Berserker Island to train the dragons first."

"Ah," Heather responded, "But a Bewilderdeath is a formidable opponent, nonetheless."

"We need to find Vyker and Liggo," I told them.

"Who knows where *they* are," Dagur responded, "They never even showed their face to me."

"Plus, we don't have time," Dad added, "We need to get there quickly before the dragons are really 'trained' or something."

"I can leave with Amber early tomorrow morning and stop by Outcast Island and New Berk," I informed everyone at the table, "And you guys can prepare the ships. Then, my friends and I can come back and let you guys know to send out the ships. Meanwhile, we'll then head over to Berserker Island and just perform renaissance until the ships arrive. Maybe we'll discover some useful information or something."

"Look to see if it's also possible to just capture Lemmirg," Mom told me, "Sometimes just picking off the leader is the easiest path to victory."

"Then, it's officially 'on,'" Atali announced, suddenly standing up and projecting her voice to the entire hall, "We prepare immediately in memory of our friend and brother, Kaizar The Sneak!" Most of the hall burst into applause and cheered, but I did notice a few that were either more reluctant to clap or didn't bother even standing up.

"Get up!" Dagur said, slapping Magur on the back.

"Uh huh," Magur mumbled, standing up and clapping very slightly.

I rolled my eyes, but immediately started work on thinking about what I would need for the trip, and how we could beat Lemmirg at his own game.

That's when I thought of something good for the first time in a few days. If we could train Blasty first - we'd truly be unstoppable!

Chapter 5: Planning

“Bcawk!” Amber squawked, “Grrrrumph!”

I woke with a start. I must have dozed off during the long trip from Wing Maiden Island to Outcast Island. Amber had an amazing mental compass, and, once I pointed her in the right direction, she was totally fine just flying for hours on end. I, on the other hand, needed a nap. I had left my island at about four o’ clock in the morning, and that, coupled with all the events of the past few days, left me utterly exhausted, both mentally and physically.

“What is it, Amber?” I asked her, as she continued to flap about to wake me up. However, I quickly spotted land coming into view from the horizon.

“Awe, never mind,” I told her, “I see it.”

Amber growled her approval, and I nudged her higher into the clouds – it was always a good idea to survey land before you landed. It turned out that I was wiser than I thought because by the time we were within decent ear-shot of the place, Amber (who definitely had better hearing) and I picked up on the sounds of warfare.

Yep, there were about a dozen War Lord ships battling it out with the Outcasts. Catapults were launching rocks, and fiery arrows were filling the air with smoke. Above this noise were the tell-tale signs of battle yells. However, even from a long way off, I could pick out two dragons and their riders who were weaving in and out among the boats – blasting electric bolts of lightning.

“Looks like your friends have been busy,” I told Amber, pointing out to her Zap and Bash.

“Let’s help them out!” I stated.

We kept above the clouds for another ten minutes; then, when we were almost directly above the War Lord Ships and Outcast Island, we dove from the sky and aimed for the nearest ship – which was already on fire and slowly sinking. At the last possible moment, Amber straightened out and let loose a stream of fire-balls into the ship’s wooden sides. With an explosion of splinters and wooden planks, the War Lord ship disappeared beneath the icy cold surface of the ocean. However, we were already zooming past other ships as Amber was gliding at a fairly fast clip.

“Take me down there!” I told Amber, pointing to a slightly less-manned ship near the outskirts of the battle. Dodging a stray boulder, Amber stuck the landing on the ship, and I jumped off.

“Dragon RIDERS!” a nearby goon cried out – charging Amber.

“BLOOOMPH!” Amber dealt with him using a high-powered fireball.

I got a jump start on some nearby archers and knocked them overboard with a well-aimed swing.

“I’ve missed this,” I smirked – dodging a goon with an axe and ramming my elbow backward into his stomach.

“FloooSSH!” another one of Amber’s fireballs tore over my head and exploded into the ship’s cabin – knocking out the ship’s captain in the process. It was as I clobbered a fourth goon on the head with my hammer, crumpling his helmet, that I noticed an archer on a nearby ship aiming at Amber who was knocking out a small group of goons with her tail and massive jaw.

“Amber!” I yelled to her, “Look-...”

“ZEERRROOOWWWW!” “BOOOMMM!”

A thunderbolt blasted out of the sky and incinerated that side of the ship – causing the boat to start sinking and roll to the left – dumping the rest of its goons overboard.

“Raurgh – oof!” I took another goon out at the waist; then ran over to Amber.

“Let’s go back up to Nuff and Puff now,” I mentioned to Amber.

With surprising agility for a dragon of her young age, Amber took to the skies – dodging a myriad of arrows and boulders and got me in line with Puffnut and Nuffnut who were riding Bash and Zap.

“Oh, cool!” Puff cried out, “I love your dragon!”

“Did you see my shot there?” Nuff wanted to make sure I saw, “It was epic!”

“I know, but- WATCH OUT!” I screamed as a boulder flew through the air towards Nuffnut.

“Wu-?” Nuffnut said, turning around to see the boulder come towards her head. Zap, however, calmly bashed it to pieces with her massive bludgeon tail.

“Zap’s got me,” Nuff smirked.

I rolled my eyes, “Was this a surprise attack?”

“Nah,” Puff interrupted as she and Bash sent lightning strike after lightning strike towards the War Lord ships, “They attack us every month or so – almost like clockwork!”

“You don’t even know what clockwork is!” Nuff argued.

“Do to!”

“Do not!”

“Oh, just stop!” I yelled over to them as Amber dodged a collection of arrows and sniped a War Lord archer down below, “Let’s take care of these guys before we argue!”

“Ah, we always do – today’s going to be no exception,” Nuff replied nonchalantly.

I rolled my eyes again and nudged Amber downwards to destroy a few of the main catapults.

Amber flew down across the bow of the ship and ripped a catapult apart with her mouth while I knocked down the War Lord goons on the ship with my hammer.

“Ding!” “Bong!” “Gong!” “Blong!”

“Burn the sails!” I told Amber as we zipped past the boat and moved onto the next. Amber understood me and shot a few fireballs at the main sails – setting them ablaze instantly. By the time I had decided on another course of action, Amber had already passed the armada of boats and turned around for another go.

“Wait,” I said to her, “I think they’re retreating.”

Sure enough, the handful of War Lord ships that were still sea-worthy were turning around and heading back towards open-water.

“Let them go,” I told Amber, “We have bigger fish to fry!”

On second thought, this probably wasn’t the best thing to say, because Amber liked fish...a lot...

“RAUgh!” Amber roared.

“Later,” I told her.

Amber growled, but I guided her amid the mass of sinking ships and pointy masts to the main shore, where a small group of War Lord goons (who had been stranded there) were being routed by the massive hoard of angry Outcasts. Nearby, Nuff and Puff on Zap and Bash were sacking out on a tall rock and watching the lop-sided fight.

"What *are* you guys doing!?" I said to them when Amber landed.

"Chillin'," Nuff drawled, leaning back on Zap, "It's been a long day."

"Really?" I asked, surprised, "How long have you been fighting for?!"

"Not long at all!" a familiar voice yelled over to us, "Good to see you again, Sulpher!"

I turned around to see Eret, with Ruffnut following behind. They were running over a nearby, old trail towards the beach.

"Eh, who cares," Puff interrupted Eret, "Life's to be enjoyed."

"What are you doing here?" Eret called out to me.

"Long story!" I shouted back.

"Lemme guess!" Eret puffed, "You brought your Deadly Nadder with you!"

"Uh, Deadly Scuttleclaw," I replied.

"Oh... I get those confused all the time," Eret said, embarrassed.

When they reached us and realized that the battle was well under control, they climbed the rock and plopped down next to us.

"It's been epic here!" Ruffnut told me, "We've been having all sorts of fights recently."

"Why?" I asked, intrigued.

"Who knows," Eret interrupted, "But we kick them every single time."

"That doesn't make sense," I replied, "If I was them, I'd just send a massive army and wipe you guys out."

"But you're not a War Lord goon," Ruffnut laughed, "They don't think like you do."

"Evidently not," I mumbled.

"What's the story?" Nuff asked me, "I *love* stories."

"Huhh, yeah, she does love stories!" Puff guffawed, "Like, this one time, this trader guy came to the island, and he had just tons of stories, and he was like boring us all with them all the time, but Nuff just sat there and listened to him and kept him occupied."

"Oh, yeah!" Ruffnut added, "I remember that. I was like trying to figure out who'd cave in first – but neither did!"

"Yeah, he's still here," Eret answered, slightly annoyed.

"Wait, he's still here?" I asked, surprised.

"Yeah, like he just came here a weak ago," Eret answered, "It wasn't a *long time ago*."

"Oh," I replied.

"Welp," Puffnut spoke up, "I'm hungry after all that dragon riding. I'm thinking about going and getting some old cabbage or something."

With that Puff got up and jumped on Bash, "So long suckers!"

"He just will NOT stop talking!" Eret continued, clearly annoyed with the long-winded trader, "He just goes on and on and on and ON!"

"Poor old man," Ruffnut commented.

"Poor young me!" Eret roared, "Do you have any idea what it's like to be kept up at night, because that stupid guy won't stop talking!?!?"

"Nah," replied Nuffnut, "I like his stories. Like he told this one story of when he met this giant sea monster, and-."

"I give up," Eret sighed, exasperated. He quickly jogged off to the beach where some of the Outcasts were tying up the remaining War Lord goons.

“Hey! Where’s Kaizar?” The voice was directly behind me, and I jumped.

“Whu?!” I cried. The only thing behind me that I could see was a dead tree.

“Eh, it’s just dad,” Puffnut replied nonchalantly, “He likes to disguise himself as trees.”

“Well, it fooled her!” Tuffnut announced proudly from within the tree.

Ruffnut shoved the tree hard, and he promptly fell over.

“Ouch!”

“Heheheheh!” Ruffnut crowed.

“Hey, that’s right!” Nuffnut cut in, “Where *is* your cute boyfriend!”

I glared at Nuffnut.

“Hey, just saying what I see!” Nuffnut defended herself, “So where is he?”

“He’s dead,” I replied.

“hahaha – wait what!?” Ruffnut exclaimed, “How?!”

“He was killed by a Bewilderdeath,” I replied sadly.

“A what?!” Tuffnut said as he struggled to get back up.

“A Red Death and Bewilderbeast hybrid.”

“I didn’t know there was even such a thing!” Ruffnut replied, confused.

“Well, there is now,” I responded, “And Lemmings has control over him and took Powder supposedly.”

“Ouch,” Puffnut commented, “That’s tough luck, man!”

“Yeah,” Nuffnut added, “He was pretty good looking.”

“Will you *please* get off that topic?” I replied drily.

Nuffnut shrugged.

“Anyways, I’m here to see if I can enlist Nuff and Puff to help me track down Powder,” I told Ruffnut who was pinning Tuffnut in his tree to the ground.

“Sure,” Ruffnut said, waving her hands at the three of us, “Go and frolic or something like that.”

“What about my opinion?!” Tuffnut’s muffled voice spoke out, “Aren’t you going to ask me?!”

“Thanks, Dad,” Puffnut replied quickly, “We’ll be back in a week or two. Alright guys, let’s go!”

“But I just got here!” I said, surprised.

“Well, then, you won’t mind heading back!” Puffnut teased me.

“But what about our annual tracking contest!” Nuffnut exclaimed, “You want to miss out on *that*?!”

“Oh,” Puffnut replied, “I forgot about that.”

“YOU FORGOT ABOUT THE BIGGEST EVENT OF THE YEAR?!” Nuffnut replied, incredulous.

“Sorry!” Puffnut apologized, “We have to wait for that!”

“What is that thing?” I asked, confused.

“HA!” Tuffnut declared, having slipped out of the tree, “It’s an event that I started a few years back where I camouflage myself and see how long it takes someone to find me. My record is thirty two hours!”

“Wow, you’re that good?” I asked, genuinely impressed.

“You bet!” Tuffnut declared proudly.

“C’mon guys, let’s go get some lunch,” Ruffnut interrupted, “Eret and the rest of the goons have already left, and I need to prepare a plan for tomorrow.

“You come up with a plan?” Tuffnut wanted to know.

“Sure I do!” Ruffnut insisted.

Nuffnut raised her eyebrows but didn’t say anything.

I always found the many paths and trails and tunnels around Outcast Island to be confusing, and I was quickly lost as I followed Nuffnut and Puffnut to the main cavern in the island.

“There’s so much inside this island!” I noted.

“Yeah, it’s like having our own fortress!” Ruffnut exclaimed.

We crouched under into a small cave took a few turns in the dark; then emerged into a dimly lit tunnel that was quite sizable. I didn’t recognize the tunnel from last time that Kaizar and I had visited Outcast Island, but I knew there were hundreds of these things.

“We need pictures framing these walls,” Tuffnut noted, raising his hands to his face in a sort of square shape.

“You’re right!” Ruffnut agreed, “These walls are way too bare. I can’t believe we didn’t notice this earlier!”

“We used to be amazing interior decorators!” Tuffnut told me proudly.

“Yeah, but your taste is not exactly everyone else’s,” Eret noted.

“Hecklers,” Tuffnut replied, waving Eret’s comment off, “I think we should have portraits of all the greatest Outcast warriors and chiefs!”

“That’d include you Eret!” Ruffnut smirked.

“On second thought, I think this would be a great idea!” Eret quickly changed his mind.

I rolled my eyes. We soon arrived in the main cavern where the dining room was. I did recognize this room! Unlike dinner when Kaizar and I were here, this was about lunch time and piles of unrecognizable food appeared to have been just dumped on the tables.

“Crab!” Nuffnut crowed, racing over to a nearby table and cramming some meat-looking stuff into her mouth.

Nearby, was a small pile of salted fish that Zap and Bash were hurrying towards. Unfortunately for them, Amberr’s sense of smell was stronger, and she hurried by them – wolfing half the fish down in a half an instant.

There were quite a few other Outcasts standing around talking as well as some sitting in a circle next to an older gentleman in exotic clothes. I surmised he was the old trader, but I hunted around for edible food first. I finally spotted a somewhat fresh bread crust and swiped it out of the greedy hands of Tuffnut standing nearby. Opposite me, a few Outcasts attempted to take a few salted salmon from the dragons. Zap sat on them.

“Come hear the trader!” Puffnut encouraged me, pulling me over to the small gathering of Outcasts.

“They couldn’t understand what I was saying, and I couldn’t understand what they were saying!” the trader was saying to his enthralled audience, “I was trying to trade them axes for their coconuts, but they thought I wanted their berries!”

I noted that the trader was about medium height for a man with very exotic clothes. He had puffy sleeves, long leather boots, an extremely long, white beard, and a slouchy hat. I had a brief thought that I had seen him somewhere before but immediately discarded it. I had more than likely seen a glimpse of him at Auction Island.

“So, I showed them my axe and reached for their coconut, but something went wrong, and those natives got really mad!” the trader continued, “one of them attacked me with his club! I ducked out of the way and grabbed the closest weapon I had – an ink pen!”

At this the crowd of Outcasts laughed loudly.

“That’s the best you had!” one of them crowed, “You should have been dead on the spot!”

“I should have been!” the trader replied, enjoying the attention, “But I was so nervous that I squeezed the pen a little hard and some ink oozed out of it. The natives, upon seeing the black liquid screamed in fear and instantly ran off – dropping all their supplies as they fled.”

“NO WAY!” Puffnut breathed, completely captivated.

“And that’s how I got this!” the trader said, holding up a small blue, trinket with six points on it and a swirl design on the front.

“Ooooh!” Puffnut declared, “What is it?”

“I have no idea,” the trader shrugged his shoulders, “I still have no idea to this day.”

“Why would some natives have that?” I asked the trader, starting to get into the story.

“No idea. They certainly didn’t have the ability to make something so ornate!” he declared, “but... now that I think about it, I wonder if... no, that’s ridiculous.”

“WHAT!???” all of us said at the same time.

“It looks a little bit like the late Stormheart’s symbol,” the trader said thoughtfully.

“GASP”

Everyone knew about Stormheart. She had been a notorious pirate in her day – easily capturing and raiding ships that dared to sail within striking distance. Her ship, the Tempest, was the most formidable boat in the entire archipelago, and she had outfitted it with the latest of Viking technology! But, eventually, she disappeared without a trace, and her nefariousness had only grown as the days went by – or so my dad said!

“How long ago was this?!” one of the outcasts asked.

“Oh, about five years ago,” the trader answered.

“So she must be out there somewhere!” I quickly assumed.

“Exactly my point!” the trader told me, “But I have yet to find her or her stuff – and I assume that since people *are* finding her stuff, she isn’t alive anymore!”

“Weird,” another of the Outcasts stated.

“HOOORRRRRR!” a horn sounded.

Immediately, we all turned to the direction that the sound was coming from. Tuffnut was holding it.

“We’re just about ready to start the tracking competition!” Tuffnut announced, “Partly in honor of our recent victory over the War Lords!”

A chorus of clapping, whistling, yelling, and bashing together of helmets met this announcement.

“As you are all aware, I will soon be making a hasty exit, and Eret here will allow you all to leave as soon as two hours have been up!” Tuffnut continued. He then handed the large horn he was using to Eret who was standing nearby; then left via another tunnel.

“Alright Outcasts!” Eret said, “This time you all need to team up into groups of three. The first group to find Tuffnut and bring him back here wins!”

There was another burst of excitement; then people started getting together into teams. I already knew who my team was going to be...

"She's on our team!" Puffnut told everyone in general.

"We're gonna win!" Nuffnut added.

"We have to wait two whole hours," I mourned – looking over at Amber who was playing tag with Zap and Bash. For once, I almost was jealous of Amber. Spending the rest of the day tracking down Tuffnut was not necessarily my idea of fun...

"Awe, it'll be a cinch," Puffnut told us, "Tuff's my dad!"

"Yeah, but Ruffnut, Tuffnut's wife, and that other dude are all in a group too!" I noted, looking over at the other group standing nearby and talking in uncharacteristically hushed voices.

"Oh," Puffnut replied.

"Let's show Sulpher her room," Nuffnut suggested, walking off toward another one of the dozen connecting tunnels.

"Same as last time?" I asked as I followed her.

"Nah, I think the trader is staying in yours. You'll be in Kai's," Nuffnut told me.

If I had been depressed before, now I was reminded of Kai and became further depressed.

"You idiot!" Puffnut yelled from behind me, "Don't remind her of Kaizar!"

"Sorry!" Nuffnut answered, "You're okay, right?"

"Uh, sure," I replied.

"She's fine, no worries!" Nuffnut yelled back to Puffnut.

"Yeah, but she's probably just saying that so that we don't think she's sensitive," Puffnut said, catching up with us.

"Really?" Nuffnut asked me.

"Guys can we just please get to my room and get ready for the contest. I really just want to get MDR together and go find Powder!" I replied, exasperated.

"OOOH, Okay, no need to get angry," Puffnut replied – shooting a look at Nuffnut that said, "I told you so."

Nuffnut rolled her eyes and took the left fork in a crossroads. She led me down another trail and into the main living quarters. It took another few minutes before we arrived at the guest cave where a slightly dilapidated room had been set up with a welded-together cell. It looked more like a prison room than a guest room, but at this point I was just glad to even have one!

"Has this even been used since Kaizar was here?" I asked Nuffnut and Puffnut, opening the creaky door and peering into the dimly lit room.

"Not that I know of," Puffnut said, "It smelled so bad after that rotting banana, that no one has been in there for a while. Mom put some perfume in there a few days ago, so you're lucky!"

"Wonderful," I replied.

"Roar!" Amber said, running into the cave behind me.

"We'll discuss a plan, if you wanna get settled," Nuffnut told me graciously.

"Sure," I replied, slipping off Amber's saddle and heaving it into my room. I dropped it on the ground, shut Amber out, and set the torch that I was holding onto the room's torch holder.

Despite what Puffnut had said, the room smelled fairly decent, and it was quite tidy – most likely due to either Kaizar or Puff's mom. I hadn't brought a lot, but I plopped a few of my clothes in a nearby box. I then jumped on the bed and made sure it wasn't too hard. It was too hard, but I

figured it was better than the floor. I refused to check to see what the mattress was made of or how many bed bugs it had in it. Eventually, I figured I should get back outside and strategize with Puff and Nuff, because if I was going to have to do this competition, I might as well win it! However, before I left, I noticed a small, metal trash can over to the right. I peered inside to see if it had been emptied, but saw that there was something still in it. It was a yellowed piece of paper. Intrigued since Outcasts very rarely use paper, I pulled it out and unraveled it gingerly. It looked like a diary entry, which was even weirder, because I couldn't imagine Outcasts would bother with a diary. It said this, “

TODAY:

I helped Nuffink, Sulpher, and I escape from Scout Island. My arm is doing better but still hurts after having it injured. I'm starting to like Sulpher; she's funny and cute, and a little bossy – but a nice type of bossy. It'll be fun to spend some more time with her as well as Nuffink who is super nice and helpful. I feel awful about the nightmare on Scout Island, but Slizer must have mated with her because I found an egg there that looks really strange. I'll protect it and see if maybe I can find Hiccup and ask him about it. This room is a little uncomfortable, but I'll probably sleep well. Night world!”

The bottom and top of the page were ripped – sort of like it had been ripped from a book of some sort, so I figured Kaizar must have taken it out of his diary. What was news to me was that Kaizar even had a diary – let alone take a perfectly good entry out of the book.

“What's taking so long!” Nuffnut yelled from outside, “We've got a competition to win!”

“Sorry! I'll be right out!” I replied quickly, stuffing the piece of paper carefully into one of Amber's saddlebags. I hastily opened the door and slid out. Amber whined and came over for a scratch.

“Alright, here's the plan,” Nuffnut told me, “We'll all run off as fast as we can down the tunnel that I saw Tuffnut disappear down. Then, we'll follow his tracks to him and win!”

“A little simple, isn't it?” I stated.

“Nah, it's plenty complicated for us!” Puffnut insisted.

“Let's go claim our place in the dining room!” Nuffnut told us, running back the way we came. I sighed as I ran after them.

“ANNNND we've got one more hour!” Eret told us three when we arrived.

“Awe man, that's gonna be FOREVER!” Nuffnut whined.

“Tuff's gotta have something of a start!” Eret insisted.

“Rats,” Puffnut replied.

“Hey! Where's that trader guy?” Nuffnut noticed, pointing out the empty chair.

“Do you guys always just call him ‘trader’?” I asked.

“Pretty much,” Eret answered.

“He's ALWAYS there,” Nuffnut continued.

“He's probably just taking a bathroom break,” I responded.

“But he's ALWAYS there!” Puffnut added.

“Maybe he's taking a nap or getting a drink of water or something,” Eret backed me up.

“Never!” Nuffnut ignored us, “I'm gonna find him!”

“But what about the contest!”

“We have another hour. We'll be back WAAAAY before then,” Puffnut reminded me, following her sister who was tracing the trader's footsteps amid a confusion of those from other Outcasts.

“Really?” I grumbled.

“Really,” Eret told me, “Honestly, I have to deal with this every day.”

“Great,” I mumbled, “How do they even know whose footsteps are whose. There are Outcasts everywhere!”

“Guessing?” Eret suggested.

I rolled my eyes but reluctantly followed Puff and Nuff as they disappeared out of sight into a nearby tunnel. Behind me, Amber, Zap, and Bash found some more disgusting food and were wolfing it down like they were starved.

“He definitely went this way,” Nuffnut whispered to us as she held her torch high above her head and bent low to the ground.

Puffnut licked the dirt, “Definitely, I can taste it.”

“Ewe,” I said, “You can taste footsteps!”

“No,” Puffnut replied, exasperated, “But you can taste the trail of a person!”

I raised my eyebrow in disbelief, but wisely kept my words to myself, “Ooookay?”

“I think he took the right branch,” Puffnut said at the next intersection.

“Affirmative,” Nuffnut agreed, turning right.

We followed this for a few meters; then I saw some light emanating from a side chamber.

“It’s our parents’ study!” Puffnut exclaimed in surprise, while barely getting above a whisper.

“Why are we whispering?” I asked.

“Because we are on the case!” Nuffnut explained excitedly.

“What would that trader do in your study? What do *your* parents do in a study?” I asked.

“They write letters or record stuff. I don’t know honestly,” Nuffnut continued, “But the trader definitely has no need or permission to be in there.”

“Maybe he’s just recording some transactions. I mean, we don’t even know if it *is* him in there!” I reminded them.

“Ssssh!” Puffnut said, peeking around the corner. She watched for a moment, then retracted her head, “It is him!”

At this point, my curiosity finally got the better of me, and I too peeked around the corner. In the cave were several crudely made, wooden desks piled high with papers and ink bottles. In one corner, the trader was busily writing on a parchment – he obviously wasn’t stealing anything.

“How are we gonna see what it is?” Nuffnut told us, “If we barge in, he’ll just hide it and pretend he wasn’t working on anything, and if we don’t do anything he’ll just get away!”

“I’ve got an idea,” I replied slyly.

“Oh, so *now* you’re interested?” Puffnut teased me.

“Shut up,” I replied.

With that, I got up and waltzed right into the room. My footsteps startled the trader who quickly looked around.

“Oh!” I said, pretending to be surprised, “What are you doing in here?”

“Oh, uh, just working on a project,” he said quickly.

“A project?” I asked, sounding curious, “What kind of project?”

“Oh, uh, just a map of sorts,” he said, furiously putting the drawing utensils that he was using back into their places.

I hurried over and got a good look at it. The trader initially tried to roll it up, but when I did see it, he seemed to think otherwise.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Oh, uh, just where I can go to get some extra supplies for my ship," he responded.

"Cool!" I told him, "What's your name anyway?"

"Oh, uh, Jolianne," he responded, "My name is Jolianne."

"Good to meet you, Jolianne," I told him, "I'm Sulpher!"

"Nice to meet you," he said, hastily rolling up his map, "Well, I best be going now. Ta ta!"

With that, Jolianne beat a hasty retreat out of the cavern and turned to the left – completely missing Nuffnut and Puffnut. As soon as he was out of sight, Puffnut and Nuffnut ran in.

"What was it?!" Nuffnut asked excitedly.

"It was some sort of map – although it was hard to tell because it was quite detailed," I answered, "There weren't any large, red x's – mostly just dots and words. I didn't have much time to read all of them, but they were mostly just talking about islands and what was on them and what people inhabited them."

"Weird," Puffnut said.

"Not really. I'd expect traders to keep detailed maps about their trade routes and all that," I replied slowly.

"Was he looking at any papers around here?" Nuffnut questioned me.

"Not that I saw, it looked like he was just drawing on his sheet of paper – although for all we know he could have stolen that map," I responded.

"We'll keep an eye on him," Nuffnut told us.

"Not for long, because we have to go to New Berk," I reminded them.

"Rats," Puffnut responded.

"Well, if you don't wanna come, you can stay here," I offered.

"No, that's *quite* alright," Nuffnut quickly added.

"Hoooooor."

The sound of Eret's horn dimly echoed across the underground tunnels.

"Oh no! The event has begun!" Puffnut exclaimed, horrified.

"We've got to hurry!" Nuffnut added.

With that, the mystery (or supposed mystery) surrounding Jolianne was put into the backmost part of our brains as we made a mad dash back to the dining area in search of Tuffnut Thorston. By the time we reached the dining room, it was completely empty – save for a few Outcasts picking up the remaining bits of lunch, Eret sitting on a box and sharpening his sword, and our dragons mock-fighting each other.

"You're late!" Eret noted as we ran up.

"No time to explain," Puffnut wheezed, "Which way did everyone go."

"That's not my problem," Eret told us, "You should have been here."

"Daaaaaadddd," Nuffnut complained, "C'mon!"

"Rules are the rules," Eret told us.

"Don't sweat it," I told them, "Just look for the passageway with the most footprints and clouds of dirt still lingering in the air."

"Bright idea!" Puffnut responded, running to each possible tunnel and peering inside.

“This one! Over here!” Nuffnut yelled to Puffnut and I.

Nuffnut immediately disappeared down a long passageway as Puff and I gave chase. Sure enough there was a commotion of footprints down it and several large clouds of dust floating through the air. We even passed a team of Outcasts who were digging in the wall – for some reason they must have been thinking Tuffnut has disguised himself as dirt! Which, now that I think about it, isn’t as far-fetched as I may have initially thought...

Anyway, we ran down the trail for a while and emerged into the early evening sunset. Now that we were outside and having a good time, we could see a few teams of Outcasts spreading out over the rocky landscape.

“Which way?” I asked them.

“That’s your job!” Puffnut told me.

“Mine?!” I exclaimed in surprise, “He’s *your* dad!”

“So what?” Puffnut retorted.

“Let’s head to the beach,” Nuffnut suggested.

“The beach?” I asked.

“Yeah, maybe they’ll be a few dead fish or a bloated squid or something,” Nuffnut replied, “He may have gone down there since he likes the beach, and I wanna see if there’s anything worth scrounging.”

“This isn’t relaxation time!” I told her.

“Any time is time for down time!” Puffnut quoted – running off in the direction of the shore.

With me reluctantly following, Puffnut and Nuffnut ran off toward the beach. It wasn’t a nice beach by any means, because it was mostly just coarse rocks – not nice sand like I’d seen at other islands, but Puffnut and Nuffnut seemed excited. I couldn’t fathom why they would be so into heading towards the beach right in the middle of a competition, but perhaps they were a little starved for friends.

“Look!” Puffnut sung out, “A dead shark!”

I looked towards the beach and immediately wished that I hadn’t. For there was the bloated carcass of a shark – laying perfectly still on the beach.

“Gross!” I shouted, “Let’s get away from here!”

“I wanna touch it!” Puffnut told me.

“No WAY!” I told her, “Dead animals have all sorts of bad germs and bacteria on them. We are not getting anywhere near that thing!”

“But it’s disgusting,” Nuffnut whined.

“Exactly why we should stay away!” I insisted, “Plus if you want to win this contest, we’ll have to get serious!”

“Party pooper!” Puffnut accused me.

I rolled my eyes.

“Fine, but afterwards we’re coming back!” Nuffnut stated.

“Sure, by yourselves,” I told them, “Do any of you know what boots Tuff was wearing?”

“Sure,” Puffnut and Nuffnut both said.

“Great, then let’s look around here,” I told them.

“Sure lil’ miss bossy,” Nuffnut smirked, running off back to the main island. Puffnut ran off with her, but I went to the left searching the ground for if Tuffnut had come past here. Mostly likely,

he wouldn't have come by here, but it couldn't hurt to look. I scanned the rocks and mostly the gravelly ground for signs of footprints as I made my way towards a small ravine. Just as I reached the ravine, I saw one trail of footprints in the lighter sand there. The front part of the footsteps were more deeply embedded than the heel, so I assumed that whoever it was had been running.

"Hey guys!" I yelled back in the direction of where Puff and Nuff had run, "I think I may have found in his footprints! Can you come check if these are his?"

No sooner had I said this than I heard Puff yell back, "We found his footprints!"

"Oh," I mumbled to myself – these must have not been his. I hurriedly ran off towards the sound of Puff's voice, but when I reached the top of a small hill, I couldn't see them anywhere.

"Where are you guys?!" I called out. No answer.

"Great, they're gone," I told myself, and Amber wasn't nearby to track them down. I figured that I could look for *their* footprints, but that would take too much time. I decided to follow the footprints I had seen previously, even if they turned out to not be Tuffnut's.

They led through the ravine and up onto a serpentine trail that was dangerously close to the cliff face. Amazingly, they still were fairly obvious among the fine, brown dirt of Outcast island.

They ran along the cliff trail for a while; then diverged from the main trail and turned to go directly up the mountainous region of Outcast Island. Here, I had to resort to both my hands and legs to scramble up the steep cliff face, and I caught sight of the scrambling of whoever had gone before me. Finally, after a grueling climb, I collapsed onto the false summit. In front of me, I saw the footsteps finally sort themselves out and continue farther up the mountain, but on another trail. I couldn't believe how many trails there were on this island! After another few minutes of careful hiking, I finally reached the real summit. That's where I met Puffnut, Nuffnut, and a few others including Ruffnut.

"Sulpher?" Puffnut exclaimed, "Where did you come from?"

"I followed some footsteps," I told them.

"Wait, where?" Ruffnut asked excitedly.

"Uh, just down there," I said, pointing to where I had come from.

Ruffnut laughed, "Thanks for the info! See ya when we win!"

With that, she and her group sped down the trail that I had just come from.

A few others hanging around immediately followed suit. However, when Puff and Nuff tried to catch up with them too, I grabbed them by the collar of their shirts.

"I came from that trail – he's not there," I told them.

"But we traced Tuff's footsteps up here!" Nuff informed me.

"But the footsteps I followed led up here too!" I told them.

"Wait, so we have two sets of footsteps leading up here, and none going back down?" Puffnut exclaimed, confused.

"Looks that way," I admitted.

"But that means he must be up here!" Nuffnut puzzled out.

"Yeah, but unless he's dug himself into the dirt, we've been bamboozled," I replied.

"HOW?!" Puffnut exclaimed.

Nuffnut started walking backwards and studying her tracks as she walked back.

"My footsteps don't look like uncle's," she told us, "because I was thinking of faking his footsteps and confusing everyone else in the meantime."

"Wait!" I exclaimed, understanding finally dawning upon me, "He walked backwards down the mountain!"

"Oh," Puffnut replied.

"Was your trail on fairly level ground?" I asked Puff and Nuff.

"Yeah...", Nuff told me.

"Then he must have walked backward down your trail, since mine involved some basic mountain climbing," I figured.

"So clever," Puff groaned, "but the beginning of our trail was about where yours began."

"I know, since we heard each other," I responded, "There must be something down there that we missed. Let's go look again."

"We had better hurry or we won't beat my mom," Nuff told us.

We quickly hurried back down the other path which turned out to be much easier to traverse. In about ten minutes and after running all the way back down, we reached the beginning of Puff and Nuff's path. The beginning of Tuff's footprints were clearly embedded in the ground, but when I looked around, I couldn't see any other footprints.

"It's like he just appeared here," Nuff noted.

"My brain is hurting," Puff told me.

I carefully bent to the ground and inspected the footprints.

"Are you sure these are your father's?" I asked Puffnut.

"Yep!" Puffnut groaned, "Definitely."

"What's this little swishy mark here that is in between the footprints?" I asked her.

"What?" Puffnut bent closer and noticed what I had seen. "I have no idea..."

"It's probably an important clue," I mused.

"Ya know what it looks like," Nuff laughed, "It's probably a land shark! I can almost see the dorsal fin that created that little line in the sand!"

"Don't be stupid!" Puff replied, "Land sharks don't swim on the land upside-down!"

"There's no such thing as land sharks!" I replied, disgusted.

"That's what *you* think!" Nuff snapped.

"Let's just stop fighting," Puffnut exclaimed, "We need to find Tuff soon before the others do."

"I doubt they're having any better success," I mumbled.

"If he just started here, then he's probably disguised nearby," Puffnut guessed.

"Actually, that makes some sense," I told her, "But there are hundreds of things he could disguise himself as. Look at all these large rocks!"

"It'd take us forever to turn each one over!" Nuff exclaimed.

That's when I had a huge breakthrough.

"I know where he is!" I whispered in excitement.

"Where?" Puff asked sarcastically, "How could you possibly know?"

"Well, obviously, Tuff would expect that we would think he'd disguise himself as a rock, so he probably wouldn't disguise himself as a rock," I told them.

"So then what would he use? Surely not a tree," Nuff responded.

"No, he's using something that we would never think of turning over or poking around with to see if it was him," I replied.

"Like...?" Puff asked.

"A dead shark!" I exclaimed.

Oh..., both Puff and Nuff replied as they thought about it.

"You said not to touch it!" Puff told me.

"Because it's gross – no one in their right mind would touch that thing – which makes it the perfect thing to be disguised in!" I replied excitedly.

"C'mon then!" Nuff said quickly, running off towards the beach. Puff and I followed and in a matter of seconds reached the shark.

"That is a bit gross *and* smelly!" Puff exclaimed, wrinkling her nose.

"Are you sure you're right about Tuff being in there, because I'm having second thoughts about touching that!" Nuff told me.

"Chicken?" I teased her.

"No!" Nuff replied quickly.

"Well, let me hit it real hard with my hammer!" I said very loudly. I figured that if Tuff was inside the dead shark (which meant it must have just been a real good costume), then he would react before I hit him. If he didn't, then I would know that Tuff was not inside, and I wouldn't have to bother touching the thing.

"WaIT!" the bloated shark said, "DON'T hit me!"

"DAD?!" Puff replied in astonishment, "It *is* you!"

"And I thought that I'd for sure break my record this time!" Tuffnut grumbled standing up.

Sure enough, it was Tuffnut, but he had carefully strapped a very realistic shark costume on himself that wrapped around his entire body except his head. In addition, he had laid on the ground in such a way that his face would not be visible.

"EWE!" I shrieked, "That smell is AWFUL!"

"I know!" Tuffnut replied proudly, "It's an actual dead shark!"

"I'm gonna pass out," I replied.

"Go ahead," Puff told me, "I want to pour ice-cold water on you."

I glared at her.

"C'mon," Nuff interrupted, "Let's return to the dining area!"

"Yeah, yeah," Tuff grumbled, shaking off his costume onto the rocky ground and following us.

"But take a bath right afterward!" I told him.

When we arrived at the dining area, Eret was surprised to see us all.

"Now that was *fast*!" He exclaimed, "And what is that *awful* smell?!"

"Just dad," Puffnut informed Eret, "He was dressed in a dead shark outfit."

"Ugh," Eret groaned, "Well, congrats! I'll give you your prizes later tonight!"

"Can we get a hint to what it is?" Nuff asked eagerly.

"Sorry, I want to keep you in suspense a little longer!" Eret smirked.

"That's fine!" I replied quickly, wanting to get away from Tuff as soon as possible, "I'll just be in my room with Amber!"

Puff and Nuff continued to bother Eret, and I quickly retreated to find Amber napping with Zap and Bash in a corner of the dining area. Meanwhile, a few of the outcasts appeared to be getting ready for dinner.

"Are you going to let the other searchers know I was found?" Tuff asked Eret.

"Nah," Eret replied.

They promptly all laughed, and I rolled my eyes.

"C'mon Amber!" I told her, "Let's go to my room for a bit; I'm exhausted!"

Amber growled at getting woken up, but she dutifully followed me back to my room. It was a miracle I was actually able to re-find it, but I was glad to get some time to myself after all that tracking. I just closed my eyelids when there was a knock on my room's door.

"Oh come on!" I grumbled, "Is there no rest around here?!"

I rolled out of bed and opened my door. Outside was Jolianne.

"Uh, hi there," he said to me, "Sorry to bother you!"

"That's fine," I replied, lying.

"Well, uh, I wanted to apologize for being a little secretive earlier," he told me, "I was trying to finish writing on this trade route map I had, and I was using their writing utensils without permission."

"I know," I told him, "That was all you were doing?"

"Yeah," he told me, "I promise I didn't look at or do anything else!"

"Okay," I said, not perfectly sure that he was telling the truth.

"You're not going to tell on me are you?" he asked me.

"Not unless you do it again!" I replied, "But you are okay. I can't imagine that Ruff and Tuff wouldn't let you use the room if you just asked!"

"I know, I know!" he told me, "Thank you!"

"No problem," I replied.

"Well, I'm going to get some dinner. You coming?"

"It's already?!"

"I think so!"

"Oh, alright, sure," I replied.

I followed him back to the dining area and sat down next to Puffnut and Nuffnut. Across from me around the dining area was most of the other Outcasts. Apparently, the news that Tuff had been found had made it around anyway.

"ATTENTION!" Eret screamed through his horn as we ate our supper, "I wanted to announce that Puffnut, Nuffnut, and Sulpher are the winners of the Tracking Competition! They found Tuffnut in only about two hours!"

There was some polite clapping, but I took it that Outcasts didn't like losing.

"As their prize, I'm giving them each a Gronckle-Iron Dagger!" Eret continued.

At this, there was a considerable buzz. Eret walked over to us and handed me a gleaming dagger.

"Wow! Thanks!" I told him.

"You're very welcome," Eret told me, "I got it many years ago from a dangerous dragon killer."

"Ooooh!" Nuffnut replied in awe.

"Anyway, you'll probably need it in your travels! Eret told us, "Tomorrow you're heading off. Right?"

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"You know," Puffnut told us, "I think I just felt a drop of rain."

"I've already felt at least half a dozen," I told her, "And I'm pretty sure it has to do with that very large storm cloud in front of us."

"Oh, psssh. I knew that," Puffnut said, trying to save face.

"Awesome!" Nuffnut crowed, "Zap needs an electricity recharge anyway!"

"She needs it, but we don't!" I informed them.

"Oh please," Nuffnut laughed, "We ride on them all the time in thunderstorms, and we've never been hit. Ol' Zap conducts them through her wings."

"Noob!" Puffnut called out, "SkriInappers are experts at manipulating electricity with a rider on the back."

I still wasn't quite positive about this, but I said nothing.

"Well, Amber and I are going to try to fly above the clouds, but you're free to fly through them," I said.

"Yoo hoo!" Nuffnut exclaimed, urging Zap to fly faster, "Electricity here we come!"

"CRZAAAACCHHHH!" a thunderbolt flashed in the ominous, black clouds in front of us and briefly lit up the evening air.

"Alright, Amber, let's go up," I told her.

Amber growled, but pumped her wings skyward.

"I know," I added, "My body hurts too."

Flying all day tended to make your body feel like someone hit it with a sledgehammer. By the time Amber and I had flown high enough to get above the clouds, I felt the oxygen content in the air decrease proportionally.

"Let's hope this doesn't continue for long!" I told Amber. Unfortunately, it did, but the occasional "boom" of thunder from below kept me from going back down. After what seemed like another full hour, the black clouds from below started to thin out, and I noticed the tall island of New Berk looming in the horizon. After another few minutes, Amber and I were able to dive closer to the ocean, but Nuff and Puff were nowhere to be found.

"They're just slower," I told myself, but I couldn't help looking behind myself every now and then.

"ZAAAACCH!" a thin sliver of lightning shot through the sky and flashed over my helmet.

"ANNND they're back," I announced to Amber, noticing the tell-tale lightning from Zap or Bash,

"Let's go get some supper."

At the word "supper" Amber perked up considerably and sped up towards New Berk. I directed Amber up the main part of the island and to where I knew the village was. It had changed a little since my last visit here, but it still had the tell-tale designs of dragons. Berkians had been crazy about dragons my dad had said, and they always designed their houses as such.

"Fwoosh!" Amber and I landed right in the middle of a village street, and I slowly climbed off – nursing my poor, aching back; even Amber slumped a little.

"YYIIPPEEE!" Nuff and Puff swept through the sky and skidded to a rough landing a few meters away. Both Zap and Bash were glowing with lightning and looked like they were going to explode..

“THAT WAS SO MUCH FUN!” Puff yelled.

“You realized that you’re going to disturb half the village?” I told Puff.

“Nah, there’s no one around,” Nuff announced, briefly scanning the village.

I realized that this was, in fact, true. No one was about.

“Maybe they’re having some sort of party in the main hall,” Nuff suggested, “I heard some music coming from there as Puff and I flew by.”

“It’s worth a try,” I told them.

Nuff, Puff, and I trekked down the dirt road towards the main hall. I couldn’t quite remember where it was, but Nuff looked so sure of herself that I felt it couldn’t hurt to follow them. Shortly, we arrived outside the massive hall that had two large, crude dragon heads protruding from the massive wooden struts that stuck out of the building. The huge double doors at the entrance to the hall were shut, but we could all hear the familiar sound of bagpipes and string instruments emanating from the hall.

“Okay,” Puffnut said to us, waving to us to come over to her, “We are going to make an epic entrance.”

“Ooooh! Goody,” Nuffnut answered, clearly excited, “What should we do?”

“Guys, are you sure that’s really a good -?” I tried to say.

“Shush, little one,” Puffnut said, putting her finger to my lips, “I’ve got a great idea.”

I ripped her hand off my face and spat, “I’m not a ‘little one’!”

“SSSHHH!” Nuffnut said, “Puff’s talking!”

“Anyways,” Puff replied, “I think that Nuff and I should throw open the door and stand there on Zap and Bash. Then, we’ll have them shoot a bolt of lightning across each other in an ‘x’ format and into the air. While that’s happening, Sulpher and Amber will shoot a series of fireballs straight up in the air. It’ll be unholy AWESOME!”

“I don’t know,” I replied slowly.

“Shut up and just do it,” Nuff told me.

“Hey! That’s actually a good motto,” Puff added, “Just do it!”

“Oh great,” I replied.

“Here it goes!” Puff crowed.

She and Nuff raced for the doors and bashed them open (thankfully not ruining them) with Zap and Bash’s tails. I caught a quick glimpse of a very packed hall before Zap and Bash let loose two powerful streams of lightning that flashed and sparked in the air. Amber, who got really excited, then let loose a stream of fireballs straight up into the air without me even telling her (what with me standing off the corner and hoping that I wasn’t going to get fried by the electricity).

“You called?” Nuffnut yelled, hopping off Zap epically and striking a pose right there at the doors.

“Just do it!” Puff added, also hopping off Bash and striking an epic pose with her back to Nuffnut. I cringed.

Amber squawked and ran around in a circle, completely forgetting about how tired she was.

Zap and Bash just looked around and settled down for a nap.

The music instantly stopped (actually it had stopped from the time the doors were thrown open), and there was some brief silence. I peaked my head out from behind a large, berry bush and

looked inside the building. At the very back of the hall, was Hiccup and his family. Hiccup was staring open-mouthed at the scene.

“And *that’s* how you make an entrance,” Puffnut told them all, strutting down the main aisle and high-fiving all the younger children who were clearly glad to have an interruption from the “boring” music. That’s when I noticed the five heads poking up from behind the main table where Hiccup, Astrid, Nuffink, and Zephyr were sitting. It was Toothless’ family.

“Well, what’s going on here?” Nuffnut declared, coming up beside Puffnut, flopping down in a chair near Nuffink and resting her feet on the table, “What’s the celebration for?”

There was another brief moment of silence; then Toothless snorted and dug back into his large bowl of soup – his family following suit. Immediately, the entire hall began talking again, and the musicians standing in the corner resumed their music. Astrid shoved Nuffnut’s feet off the table, while Nuffink started chatting with Nuffnut. Amber and her Skrillnapper friends appeared to have no interest in joining the party; at least they were more interested in a nice nap. I, on the other hand, decided to go inside, because the storm from earlier had nearly arrived, and rain was starting to fall. I made sure to close the doors behind me.

“Well how are you doing?” Hiccup said to me when I had slunk down the aisle and sat down next to Puffnut.

“Okay,” I replied.

“ANNND the whole horde of War Lord goons jumped RIGHT ON TOP OF ME!” Nuffnut was telling an enthralled Nuffink, “But Zap came and flattened them with just ONE swing of his tail!!!!” Hiccup tried to say something to me again, but Puffnut cut him off, “Say! This is good soup, what’s in it?”

“It’s my mom’s recipe, actually,” Hiccup told her.

“Sweet! I wish my mom made stuff this good!” Puffnut said with a mouthful full of chicken and broccoli chunks.

“Sorry about our interruption,” I began.

“It certainly made things interesting,” Zephyr spoke up for the first time.

“Don’t worry,” Astrid added, “It’s okay. We’re just celebrating Toothless’ family coming over for a visit.”

I looked over at the three nightlights who were currently fighting over two loaves of bread.

“Those dragons are just so cute,” I commented.

“They sure are!” Hiccup noted, “And they all have different personalities!”

“So,” Zephyr cut in, “Why are you guys here?”

“Well, I need some help,” I answered.

“With what?” Astrid wanted to know.

“Well, Nuff, Puff, and I are trying to track down Powder, and I thought that getting MDR back together would be a faster way to do so.”

“Why isn’t Kai helping?” Zephyr asked, “Doesn’t he ride Powder.”

“Yeah, but he was killed by Lemmrig only a couple of days ago,” I told her.

“No!” Hiccup exclaimed, clearly upset, “How did that happen?”

I put my hand on my head, “It’s a *long* story.”

Astrid looked at Nuffink who was busy chatting with Nuffnut, Puffnut who was still shoving her face full of soup, and the rest of the Berkians who were listening to the music and chatting in their own conversations – few even looking at us.

"I think we have some time," Astrid told me, "Everybody else is busy anyhow."

"Well, it all started with a strange guy who showed up at my island, Wing Maiden Island," I began.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~
"And that's the whole story," I finished, several minutes later and after numerous interruptions from the others, especially Puffnut.

"That's awful!" Zephyr told me, "Kai was so nice!"

"Tell me about it," I mumbled.

"As much as I think it would be great for Zephyr and Nuffink to help you, I don't know if your trip is going to be the safest..." Hiccup commented.

"But honey," Astrid said to Hiccup, "What about Powder and that Bewilderdeath?"

"It's unlikely that that dragon will listen to Toothless since it's a hybrid," Hiccup told her, "I don't see there is much we *can* do."

"But Lemmrig is surely going to destroy all of us with it!" I exclaimed.

"That's true," Zephyr added, agreeing with me which was unusual for her, "We can't wait for Lemmrig to get to us first!"

"Alright, alright," Hiccup answered, "I just need some time. We can come up with a plan."

"It better involve Zap!" Nuffnut insisted, "Because we kick -."

She was interrupted by Dart, who barked a little and started to make her way to the main double doors.

"Where's she going?" Astrid wanted to know.

I looked at Toothless, and he was just watching, cocking his head slightly. Dart walked up to the doors, stuck her jaw on the large, iron door handles and pulled back on it. Immediately, a very wet Zap, Bash, and Amber staggered into the hall – looking *very* grumpy.

"Oooh," Hiccup said, "I was wondering when they'd show up. I want to see Amber closely, I've never seen her before!"

The poor musicians were upset at being interrupted again, and this time, *everyone* wanted to see and touch the new dragons, so the hall interrupted into chaos pretty quick. I watched as Amber's facial expression changed from one of annoyance to one of abject terror; then, she was completely swamped amid Berkian teenagers and children.

"Toothless, would you mind doing the honors?" asked Hiccup.

Toothless nodded his dark black head and roared loudly, causing a faint blue glow to appear down his back. Instantly, the room fell quiet and everyone backed off the dragons. Very thankful, Zap, Bash, and Amber made their way over to us, but Toothless and the Light fury growled and backed off into the corner.

"These are our friends!" Astrid announced loudly to the onlooking crowd, "Sulpher is the daughter of Snotlout Jorgenson and these two, Nuffnut and Puffnut are daughters of Ruffnut and Eret and Tuffnut respectively!"

"Are dragons coming back to Berk?" one man off to the left asked.

"No!" Hiccup said sharply, "They're simply coming for a visit. We'd be wise to remember their contribution to our heritage!"

Most of the older crowd nodded their head in remembrance and started to get ready to leave. Meanwhile, Pouncer, Dart, and Ruffrunner had been reunited with Zap and Bash and met Amber who gratefully accepted some of their soup dinner.

"What were we talking about?" Hiccup asked as we sat back down.

"We," Nuffnut answered (pointing at Nuffink and herself), "were talking about the time that I pranked Puffnut so that she accidentally fell into the-."

"SHUT UP!" Puffnut yelled at her, throwing a bread crust at her and smacking her right in the forehead.

Zephyr rolled her eyes, "So what exactly were you planning on?"

"Well, Dagur said that we should scope out Berserker Island, where we think Lemmirg currently is, and get an idea of how best to rescue Powder and Blasty. Then, we'd wait for the main armada to arrive," I answered.

"Still," Hiccup argued, "With a dragon of that size and under orders from Lemmirg, even an armada of epic proportions would be fairly easily destroyed!"

"But we *have* to do something!" Astrid responded, backing me up, "We can't let Powder get hurt by Lemmirg, and I have my doubts to how well he treats his dragons!"

"Crash!" Pouncer and Bash had been fighting each other and Bash had smashed into one of the large wooden posts that held the candles – the candles, in turn, toppled over and burned Pouncer on his tongue.

"GRoowwLLL!" Pouncer roared, racing around and trying to soothe his burned tongue.

"Wehhhoor!" Hiccup whistled to Pouncer. He quickly grabbed a pitcher of water and threw it on Pouncer's tongue who came running up.

Pouncer practically screamed as the cold water hit his burned tongue but soon calmed down.

"I've got it!" Zephyr said excitedly.

"Got what?" I asked.

"How we can get Powder back if he's with Lemmirg on Berserker Island!" Zephyr proudly exclaimed.

"How?" Hiccup wanted to know.

"Did Kaizar have a particular call for Powder?" Zephyr asked me.

"Uh, yeah, it was some sort of whistle," I replied.

"Great! Then, all we need to do is whistle from a long way off, and if Powder hears it, he should come!" Zephyr finished.

We contemplated this briefly, then Astrid said, "Well, it's a better idea – having Powder come to you, instead of you to him."

"It just depends on if anyone can duplicate Kai's call," Hiccup stated.

"I can probably do a weak imitation," I said hopefully.

"Worth a try!" Puffnut yelled to us as she tried to prevent Bash from knocking down another set of candles.

"Perhaps we should go with them," Hiccup pondered out loud.

"Don't worry, honey," Astrid said to Hiccup, "Remember how many close calls we had when we were teenagers? They'll be fine."

"Kaizar wasn't," Hiccup mumbled.

"Worst case is I die and go to Valhalla to see him," I said cheerfully.

"Yeah, that's a worse case for sure," Hiccup mumbled again, "Alright, well, let me show you and Puff and Nuff to your guest house, then you can be on your way tomorrow!"

"YES!" Nuffink howled, "This'll be so cool! MDR IS BACK ON!"

"You think Toothless will let us borrow his kids?" I asked Hiccup as he stood up, and we walked outside.

"Not sure, but fairly positive," Hiccup responded, "I think the nightlights are a little bored!"

Chapter 6: Reviving

Before I could fully comprehend that I was dead, I started to climb a sort of tunnel – up and up into the air. I screamed to be let back down, but found it was no use. At the top of the tunnel, I suddenly realized that all of my senses were amazingly heightened. It was like emerging from a 2D picture into a 3D reality. It was very dark where I was, and I expected at any moment to appear in Valhalla. Instead, a light appeared near me and started to grow larger. I realized somebody was coming towards me. I felt an intense amount of love radiating from the creature – which caused me to remember the words of that missionary, “Jesus loves you very much.”

“It can’t be,” I mumbled, “You’re not real. I don’t believe in you!”

Instantly, the being disappeared – much to my relief. No sooner did the being of light disappear, then I heard the voices of people nearby.

“Come with us,” one of the voices said. I recognized it as one of my friends who had been killed two years ago in the big Berserker-War Lord battle.

“What’s going on?” I asked Yasser.

“Shut up and follow us,” Yasser replied abruptly. Without waiting for me, they left, and I found that my heightened sense of hearing (or whatever amazing version of hearing it was) enabled me to easily follow him. With him, I also detected several other people. They appeared to be trekking to some unknown destination.

After what felt like a few minutes’ silence, I said, “Um, where is Valhalla?”

“Valhalla doesn’t exist, stupid,” Yasser replied.

“Ha! I knew it,” I replied to Yasser, “So what *does* exist?”

“Ur about to find out,” Yasser mumbled. Presently, Yasser and his companions stopped amid what felt like a very empty, expansive field – barren of any growing things.

“Well, we’re here,” Yasser commented.

“What is this – it’s not very beautiful,” I told Yasser.

“It’s not supposed to be,” Yasser told me, “We’re in hell.”

“Hell doesn’t exist,” I replied quickly.

Yasser shrugged, “Call it what you like, but we’re here.”

I gasped in surprise. Was it really possible that hell existed? I knew that I was *somewhere*, but I just couldn’t seem to grasp that hell or Jesus for that matter existed.

Presently, I sensed many, many more people around me. They were almost crushing me.

“Hey, let up guys!” I told them, “I can barely breathe!”

Instead of moving back, they just pressed in harder. A few grabbed my arms and legs and started pulling.

“Hey!” I snapped, pulling back my ligaments, “Back off!”

“Grrrahump!” someone replied, poking me in the side.

This did it, I crouched in a defensive stance and punched outward. Whoever was in front of me, gave way and collapsed with an “Umph!”

I followed this up, with a series of other punches, kicks, and dodges; but no matter how many bodies I took out, there seemed to be infinitely more. In addition, they all seemed to have an insatiable desire to touch me and pull me apart.

This continued for about an hour, before I tripped on something and face planted into the hard ground. Behind me, the other beings yanked on me and, with a massive jolt of pain, one person ripped my arm off. I screamed in pain (especially since my senses were heightened so the pain was even worse).

"Yasser!" I screamed, "HELP!"

But no one answered, they just started crushing in again and pulling at me again. Before long, I felt like a maimed body, and I was in the worst pain imaginable, yet I couldn't die – I was dead! This fact scared me deep down. I realized the missionary, however odd it was, was right. It was as someone was yanking on my tongue, that I had one thought, "Call Jesus."

It was weird, but I was desperate, and I was in agony.

"Jesus," I said trying to force myself to speak, "If you're out there, I believe."

Instantly, the people around me screamed.

"Shut up!" one of them said, "Don't say that!"

However, the people also let go of me at the same time.

"Jesus! Save me!" I cried desperately. With this, the people around me groaned and ran off (or at least it sounded like that!).

With my arm-less, leg-less body covered with blood and guts, I rolled over and, with a hoarse whisper said, "Jesus, I believe. I don't know why you would forgive me. But if you will now, I'll do whatever you want forever." I meant it.

That's when a spark of light appeared in my obscured vision. It was the same spark of light that had appeared when I first reached this ethereal universe. It approached rapidly and stood in front of me. Once again I felt His love and forgiveness. In addition, his light showed on my mangled body (which looked much more awful in the light). The being of light reached out to me and touched me on the shoulder. No sooner did this happen, than my body started to heal. My arms and legs grew back, my body started to clean up and I felt infinitely better. I stood up slowly and averted the being's gaze.

"I've done wrong," I said.

"It's okay, Kai," the being replied, "You have realized your failure."

I was surprised that this being of infinite power would call me by name. With that, I bowed on the ground and said, "I will do whatever you want, sir. Just get me out of here!"

"Very well," the being said, "follow me."

With his arms around me, the being of light led me towards what looked like a very beautiful portal. Then, when we walked through it, I found myself in a fantastic field of grass and trees. There were kids and animals playing nearby, and I found myself in a wonderful, tranquil place.

"Is this... is this heaven?" I asked Jesus.

"Yes it is," Jesus told me. Suddenly, I noticed someone racing towards me – it was my grandfather, Oswald the Agreeable!

"Grandfather?" I asked him.

"Kai!" Oswald exclaimed excitedly, "I'm so excited to see you!"

"How do we recognize each other?!" I said hugging him tight.

Jesus chuckled, "You're in Heaven, remember?"

It was while I was hugging my grandfather, that I suddenly thought of my mom and dad... and Sulpher.

"Sulpher!" I exclaimed, "She doesn't know about You!"

Jesus nodded, "She needs to come to know me."

"But how is she going to?" I quickly asked.

"Someone will need to tell her, or she will need to figure it out for herself," Jesus replied calmly.

I sagged my head, regretting all the times I could have told her about Jesus but didn't because I didn't believe in Him myself!

"Would you like to go back?" Jesus asked me.

"Go back where?!" I asked in surprise, not really wanting to leave this beautiful place.

"To earth," Jesus replied.

This question surprised me. Obviously, Jesus had the power to let me go back to earth, but I wanted to stay with Him forever in this perfect place. However, I also wanted to tell my friends and family about Jesus. The answer was hard, but I knew what I needed to do.

"I want to go back," I told Jesus and Oswald, "I need to tell my family."

"Very well," Jesus nodded.

"I'm so proud of you!" Grandfather exclaimed, grabbing me in a big bear hug, "See you soon!"

Then, it was black all over again.

At first, I thought that maybe I had answered Jesus' question incorrectly, and I was back in hell.

However, I quickly realized that I was suffocating, and there was an awful smell of smoke somewhere very close by. That's also when I realized that I was in terrible pain.

I trashed around a bit at whatever was causing me to suffocate; it turned out to be a heavy blanket. Every time the heavy blanket touched my arms, it felt like someone was stabbing me, but I eventually managed to shove the blanket off me and squint in the bright sun to see where I was.

Turns out that I was on a burning Wing Maiden ship. The ship was already pretty heavily demolished and there were several arrows embedded in the deck with fire raging from them and across the deck.

I tried to stand up, but found that my legs also hurt incredibly bad, and all I did was fall over and face plant into the deck. Meanwhile the deck's fire was coming nearer and nearer me. I crawled ever so slowly over to the side of the ship, and, with a massive effort, jumped overboard. The cold water was a relief to my burning skin, but also caused me more intense pain as the water hit my open burns. I breached the surface of the water and tried to doggie-paddle over to a small island of rock. I had been stripped of my armor and weapons and was just wearing my normal clothes, but these clothes were still very burnt and torn and my weak limbs did not serve me well in swimming. It literally felt like eternity by the time I reached the island. I crawled enough onto the island to get my head and torso out of the ocean; then lapsed into unconsciousness.

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I came to with a massive headache. It's one of those things where, when you awaken, you realize that human reality is pathetic compared to heaven. It took me a few minutes to register where I was, and it appeared that I was on a small cot on some sort of ship. All around me

were piled various knick-knacks and articles. It looked vaguely like the missionary's boat, but it couldn't be...

"Well, look who's up!" a familiar voice said.

"Ugh," I groaned, "I feel like a dragon rolled over my body."

"I think one did!" he teased me, "Do you feel any abnormally large pain anywhere?"

"I'm mostly just sore," I replied, "But, then again, I haven't tried moving yet."

"I used some of my lotions and bandages," he told me, "I've done some doctoring before in my life!"

"Wait, this happens frequently?"

"No, but it does happen," he told me.

"Where are we going?"

"Well, I don't remember where you're from, so we're just going to my next trade stop," he replied, "It's the Tribe of the Whispering Tree's Island."

"Oh," I replied, "I guess that works. That's where Ogard is though."

"Ogard?"

"Yeah, we kind of had a falling out, and he has one of the warring dragon rider groups," I told him.

"Well, I did see a few dragons flying away after the big commotion," James told me, "But there wasn't a lot. "

"Where did you find me?"

"You were lying on a rock island near where I was sailing out of Auction Island," James informed me.

"Did you see my dragon?"

"Uhh, you mean the glowing one?"

"Yeah."

"I think he left with the big dragon and the guys on those black dragons, but I was hiding," James admitted, "So I'm not completely positive."

"Oh," I replied, dejectedly rolling my head to the right, "Things have not been working out for me lately."

"I'm sorry, Kaizar," James told me, "We all have tough days."

"Yeah, but most don't involve getting killed by a giant dragon controlled by your arch enemy, Lemmirg; then going on a trip to hell," I commented.

"What?" James said, shaking his head a little.

"Visiting hell," I said again, "I went there temporarily."

"You're telling me you went to hell?" James said, almost in disbelief.

"Yep, it was really, really bad," I told James, "And you're right. Heaven is real and so is Jesus."

"Wow," James said, genuinely surprised, "That's crazy!"

"I know, but I now know that Jesus and Heaven is real," I insisted, "I even met my deceased grandfather that I've never seen before, and somehow I instantly knew him!"

"Well, I believe you," James replied, "I know someone who claimed to go to Heaven, and his experience sounds a bit like you. Tell me more."

And so, I did. I told him about my entire experience about being dead. How I had been ripped to shreds in hell. How I had not believed in Jesus, but then, out of desperation, I did. I told James

about meeting my grandfather, and Jesus giving me a chance to go back to earth. After all that crazy sounding stuff, James completely believed me. I was dumb-founded, because, now that I was on earth, it almost felt like a dream.

"That's incredible!" James told me, "I mean, I believe that, but it's so incredible to know someone who actually went there!"

"What should I do, James," I told him, "What does Jesus want me to do."

"That's easy," James told me, "He wants you to love others."

"Love others?"

"Not romantically," James told me, "With a brotherly love. Even Lemming who killed you – you need to treat him with love."

"That's just weird," I said.

"Well, what am I doing?" James told me, "Aren't I loving you by helping you when you were unconscious back there?"

"True," I said, "But I haven't tried to kill you!"

"Yes, but people killed Jesus, and He *still* loved them," James told me.

"Someone killed Jesus?" I told James, "then how was He in Heaven?"

"Because he resurrected. That way He overcame death," James informed me.

"So... I just need to love others?" I repeated.

"Yes, and that way you can show them just a glimpse of the love that Jesus has for them. Then, when it's time, you can let them know about Jesus so that they too can go to Heaven!"

"I want to!" I told him earnestly, "But I don't know much... or anything for that matter..."

James smiled, "That's no problem. I'd love to help you. Right now, though, I'd like to see if you can move a little."

"I don't know," I groaned, "I can tell I'm sore and hurting without even moving!"

"I'll help you. You need to at least try to move," James insisted, looping his arms around my body.

"OUCH!" I screamed as I sat up and my chest's skin rubbed against each other. The pain shot through my body, and I instantly leaned back to remove the pressure off my chest.

Unfortunately, this meant my back, instead, got bent.

"Owe!" I cried again, as my badly damaged back sent another wave of pain through my nervous system.

"It's okay, Kai," James replied calmly, "It just means you weren't burnt as bad as we may have thought. The fact that your nerves are still active is a *very* good sign!"

"It doesn't *feel* that way!" I complained as I tried to straighten my back for maximum comfort.

James laughed and helped me stand. I teetered briefly, but quickly found my balance. Although his cabin was just crammed with objects, I managed to slowly hobble around. By the time I made it back to my cot, I was exhausted.

"Oof," I breathed, "That was exhausting!"

I collapsed back on the cot – then shot back up again when I rubbed my back incorrectly.

"Just rest," James told me, "You'll be back to normal in no time."

I groaned, "The recovery time is so painful."

"Well, it's not like there's a lot of other things to do!" James reminded me, "Before we get to the Tribe of the Whispering Trees that is!"

I nodded briefly – then leaned back and fell asleep.

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Sure enough, I was feeling much better a handful of days later.

“I forgot how long traveling by boat is!” I commented to James, as I leaned against the ship’s railing, “The Tribe of the Whispering Trees is pretty far out here!”

“Yeah! No kidding,” James laughed, “I’m guessing traveling by dragon is a much faster mode of transportation.”

I chuckled until I remembered Powder.

“I hope Powder is doing okay,” I sighed – gazing up into the sky.

“I’m sure he is,” James reassured me, “You’ll find him.”

“I hope so,” I replied, “But if Powder thinks I’m dead, how will he know to look for me? And that’s assuming that he believes that I’m real *if* he sees me!”

“Ah, don’t worry so,” James chuckled, “I’m sure your pet will know you!”

“He’s not just my pet,” I replied, a little disturbed, “He’s like my all!”

James frowned at this comment.

“Kai,” James said, “What would you do if Powder died?”

“I don’t...I don’t know,” I mumbled, not liking that thought.

“Look, if you put all your hopes and dreams on a singular friend, pet, significant other, parent, et cetera, you are bound to be crushed or disappointed,” James informed me, as he finished tying the main sails to the mast and walked over.”

“But with that logic,” I argued, “Then we shouldn’t have any relationships!”

“Exactly!” James replied, much to my surprise, “but here’s the thing. If you attach your identity with One who will never fail or disappoint you, then you have a sturdy ‘foundation’ of sorts and can then have other relationships.”

“Oh, I get it,” I replied slowly, understanding dawning upon me, “Jesus. He will always love and care for me. When He is my Lord and Savior, then whenever something happens to my early relationships, I can know that He will still love me – and that’s where I can rest...per say...”

“You’re catching on!” James replied enthusiastically.

“It’s all starting to make sense,” I told James, “but I still need to keep on reading that Bible you have. Jesus’ life is so... not expected, I would say. He didn’t live like I would expect the God of the universe to live like.”

James nodded, “Jesus was truly incredible.” James then handed me a telescope.

“Look over there!”

I nodded and peered through it to the West. Sure enough, there was a small, black dot on the horizon.

“The Tribe of the Whispering Trees,” I asserted.

“Yesssirree!” James whistled, “They’ve always been good customers.”

“Welp, I guess I’ll hafta go over and see what Ogard is up to,” I replied, a little nervous.

“Ogard?”

“Yeah, another of my enemies, but maybe since Lemmrig crushed him, he’ll be willing to work with me. I don’t know... we’ll see,” I replied.

“Here’s a hint,” James said to me, “Come to the conversation with love and care. Maybe Ogard will see that you do not mean to harm him. If he doesn’t, well at least you gave an effort.”

"I know," I said, rolling my eyes, "But this whole 'love your neighbor as yourself' thing is still new to me!"

James laughed, "Well, the sooner you put it into practice the sooner it will become easier for you! Now, would you mind helping me get my wares ready?"

It turns out that James wanted all of his various wares to be arranged just so; thus it took us until we reached the island to get everything ready, but it was looking nice! James told me that he also tried to package up as many of his goods as possible whenever he set back out again, so he wouldn't lose anything in rough waters.

"What do you plan on doing?" James asked me when I reached the docks, and I helped him tie the ship up.

"Yeah, I'll probably try to find Ogard and not get killed. Who knows, maybe I'll even be able to catch a ride to Scout Island," I informed him.

"Well, good luck then! Come back if you need some help!"

I thanked James profusely, then set off into the village. James had loaned me a set of clothes that made me look more like an average trader than a Berserker Warrior, but I was lucky to be alive, and the long sleeves and pants covered up my ugly, burn scars – so, in the end, I was thankful for them. I knew exactly where Ogard lived – way up on an outcropping of rock that had a good view of the village, but I decided to scope out the village first. I had been here not more than a few months prior, but it was during a festival, so I wasn't used to the typical look of the place.

After a bit of a hike through the forest, I reached the main town. It was fairly busy as the street was lined with traders hawking their wares and shop owners displaying their wonderfully baked bread and pastries.

"Excuse me sir!" one of the card-salesmen said, grabbing me lightly by the arm, "But you look like you could use some of my miraculous face cream!"

"Great," I groaned, "And the worst part is I could!"

"Wonderful!" the salesman said, "I have a lavender or oak or peppermint or..."

I tuned him out because I had just noticed two figures that looked terribly familiar and who were leaning against the village's outer, rock wall talking.

"So which do you want?" the salesman asked me.

"Oh, uh, just a min," I quickly replied.

I took off like a shot and intermixed into the small crowd of shoppers. After steadily making my way to the figures, my hunch was confirmed – it was Vyker and Liggo.

What were they doing here?! I couldn't possibly imagine. I would have thought that they would either still be back at Auction Island or trying to track down Blasty, but not here in Ogard's territory. So, I did what all impetuous Vikings do. I walked up to them.

"What are you guys doing here?" I called out to them, as I jogged up.

Liggo caught a quick glimpse of me, jumped a foot, and took off as fast as a Speed Stinger.

Vyker instead just stood and stared – his mouth dropping open wide enough for my fist to fit into it. It appeared that I had forgotten that most people thought I was dead. I should have expected the news to travel pretty fast, especially to him.

"Nope, pretty sure I'm alive," I told him.

"But I saw you *dead!*" Vyker exclaimed, backing up ever so slightly.

"Trust me, I'm alive," I told him, "But I was dead. Don't ask."

Vyker just stared at me.

"Look, I need to find Powder," I told him, "Do you know where he went?"

Vyker stared a little longer, then shook his head.

"Sorry, Kai," He said, "I'm just a little shocked."

Vyker wiped his brow with his hand, then said, "Yeah, I'm pretty sure Lemmirg has him."

"Nuts!" I groaned, not happy to have my fears (and James' rumor) confirmed.

"I'm truly sorry!" Vyker whispered hoarsely, "I thought that my brother and I had killed you."

"It's okay," I told him, "It wasn't really your fault, but now I need to find Powder and get back to my village. Do you know of where Lemmirg went or where Krogette's team is or maybe where Ogard is?"

"Slow down my friend!" Vyker said, "I'll explain."

It appeared that Vyker was starting to warm up to the idea that I was alive.

"Krogette and what was left of her team disappeared briefly after I saw you and Powder go down," Vyker explained, "and Lemmirg left with his team of Death Gripper riders, Blasty, and Powder shortly after that."

"Where's Ogard?"

"Ah, well, we caught a ride with his gang back here."

"You caught a ride with *him*?!"

"Yeah, we had no choice. We need some powerful allies if we're going to get Blasty back!"

"Okay, but you know Ogard will try to keep Blasty, right?"

"Sure, but there's very little chance he'll be any more successful training Blasty than all of us three have been!"

Vyker and I then heard the sound of running feet and looked to our left to see a bunch of men dash out of the forest on the other side of the town and make a B-Line for us.

"Ogard," I groaned.

"My brother's with him," Vyker noticed, "You'll be fine."

"We'll see about that," I replied suspiciously.

"If it isn't my ol' boy Kai!" Ogard sang out to me, getting a few strange looks from passersby.

"What do you want?" I replied dryly.

"Why *me*?" Ogard feigned ignorance, "Nothing! Not from a ghost that is!"

"I'm not a ghost," I announced again.

Ogard punched me lightly on the shoulder, "Well, yeah, that's true!"

"Are you sure?" Liggo insisted from a few paces away.

"Yeah I'm sure!" Ogard laughed, "He's right here!"

"What are you doing here?" I pressed.

"I could ask you the same," Ogard challenged.

"I'm here, because I caught a completely coincidental ride with a trader," I answered, "And you?"

"Because this is where I live," Ogard chuckled, "And boy am I glad to be alive!"

"Tell me about it!" I replied pulling up my right arm's sleeve, "Look what I got from Lemmirg!"

The rest of Ogard's men and Vyker and Liggo cringed at my bright pink arm with its many ugly scars.

"Ouch dude!" Ogard replied, slightly disgusted, "You *are* lucky!"

"Well, let's cut to the chase," I said, changing subjects, "I need to get Powder back and get back to my village."

"And I need some help taking Blasty away from Lemmirg," Ogard said, "Who knows what kind of damage those War Lords can do with a dragon of that size!"

I nodded my head in agreement.

"Well, then, do you agree to a truce between us until Lemmirg is defeated?"

"Hold on their buddy," Ogard said, "First of all, I'm willing to be friends again – I shouldn't have tried to turn you in. Second of all, I'm not sure we *can* take Lemmirg down!"

"Well, it's worth a try," I told Ogard, "How many of your men do you have left?"

"Only about a dozen," Ogard replied, clearly upset, "But we have a few extra Monstrous Gronckles, so that's good!"

"And I know where Lemmirg is!" Vyker added, "He's at Berserker Island."

"Ah," Ogard replied, "A great place to train a wild dragon."

"If you can," Liggo mumbled.

"Let's go to a more secluded area and come up with our plan," Ogard said to me, waving us toward his dragon stables farther up the mountain.

"You actually have a plan already?" I asked, surprised.

"Not exactly," Ogard snickered, "But if you count 'kicking butt' a plan, then yes, I do!"

"Oh boy," Liggo groaned from next to me.

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"Well, that's as good a plan as any," Ogard agreed the next morning at breakfast as we sat around a small meal of chicken legs and soup, "But we're going to have to be as quick and quiet as possible."

I nodded my head, "And it also depends on where everything is. Depending on how many scouts he has, this mission could be much easier or harder."

"Well what are we waiting for!" Vyker declared, standing up, "Let's get going!"

"There's only one small issue," I quickly spoke up, "I don't have any weapons or armor."

"Drat that," Ogard replied, looking me over, "Wasn't it Lemmirg that took your stuff anyway?"

"I think so, but it was hard to tell from my vantage point!" Liggo added.

"Great..." I replied sarcastically.

"Here," Ogard said, forking some gold coins over to me from across the table, "Go to the village and buy some decent stuff. And make it snappy – we have some work to do!"

I nodded and quickly got up, "I'll be back before you know it!"

I ran back to the village as fast as my legs could and swiftly searched the many stalls for something good.

"Wait a minute!" I said to myself as a thought occurred to me, "James as some clothing/armor stuff! I'll just go to him!"

It turns out that I was right, and James was happy to see me again.

"Kaizar!" he called out to me as I approached his boat, "Good to see you again. How's it going?"

"Good," I told him, "I'm about ready to head out on a 'Powder search.'"

"Cool, well, what do you need?"

"I need a weapon, shield, and some armor."

“Cool, well, you came to the right place,” James smirked, “I have some stuff over here.”

James rummaged around in a nearby crate and pulled out a heavy set of armor. It was mostly black with some shiny metal chain mail around the torso.

“This is good quality stuff,” James told me, “I got it from some traders that came from far away.” James helped me slip it on, and it fit fairly well.

“Nice!” I told him, “I’ll take it if it doesn’t cost too much.”

“Nah,” James said, “Just 20 gold coins.”

Luckily, Ogard had given me plenty enough. I was sure glad that Ogard had had a quick change of heart after being nearly killed by Krogette and Lemmirg.

“What about weapons?” I asked him.

“Well, I’ve got this nice, metal shield here,” James said, tossing it to me from behind a pile of blankets, and I’ve got two weapons for you back in the cabin.

“I don’t think I need *two*!” I called after James.

There was a brief bit of rustling around, and then James emerged again holding something in each hand. In his right, was the Dreadfall axe that he had gotten from his friend. In his other hand, was the Bible.

“Huh?” I said when he came over to me.

“I think you need these two things – free of charge,” James told me, “putting each in my hands.”

“But these are your special things!”

“Well, I have plenty more of the Bibles,” James said, “I give them out every now and then. Plus, the Bible will be your strongest weapon against the devil and sin. Read it often and put it into action, and you’ll find your life will change for the good.”

“Wow, thank you!”

“And the Dreadfall axe is to remind you of your trip to hell and Heaven. They’re real... as you know,” James said to me, “and it’ll serve to remind you of how temporary this world really is.”

I nodded my head, completely in awe.

“Now,” James said, gently shoving me off the ship, “It’s time for you to go get your friend!”

“Thank you so much James!” I told him, impulsively hugging him, “I’ll never forget you.”

“You can forget me!” James laughed, “Just remember God’s love!”

“That I will!” I told James, “And I’m going to tell *all* my friends and family!”

Chapter 7: Fighting

"You know," Liggo said to Ogard and I as we flew our Monstrous Gronckles towards Berserker Island, "I don't know if this is the best course of action."

"Got any better ideas?" Ogard drawled.

"We've gotta do it bro," Vyker insisted, "We hatched the thing, so we need to finish taking care of it."

"But it's gonna kill us all," Liggo whined, which was very unbecoming of the guy I had met not more than a year ago.

"Or," Ogard replied, "We'll train it and become unstoppable!"

"We'll have to make some lengthy treaties if that happens," I quickly interrupted.

Ogard rolled his eyes, "Coming from scar-man."

"Well, some people care about other things *besides* power," I replied, snarkily.

Ogard growled but shut up.

"We've arrived!" one of the front riders of our pack announced as he looked into his telescope, "I can see Berserker Island on the horizon."

"See anything hanging around?" Ogard yelled over.

"Nah, too early," he replied.

"Okay," Vyker spoke up, "So we're going to slide in nice and easy like and scope things out, *first!* Then, when we figure out where Powder is held, we'll let Kaizar go retrieve him, and we'll provide the distraction."

"*If* necessary," Liggo quickly added.

"And then we take 'em out!" Ogard sang.

Nobody said anything at this.

"Yeah, I don't see any ships around or giant, flying dragons," the scout told us, "Looks pretty quiet to me!"

"Keep low and let's head for the back part of the island. I would assume Ogard isn't on that part!" I told everyone as we formed a single file line.

It took us at least another twenty minutes before we were close enough to the island to land, thanks to the Monstrous Gronckles being so stupendously slow. We arrived at the southern half of Bewilderbeast Mountain, so we couldn't really see what was on the other side, but I bet my money that Lemmirg was there; even he wouldn't be foolish enough to bring a Bewilderdeath to Scout Island.

"Alright now!" Ogard sang out quietly, "Let's walk carefully – following Kaizar!"

With me leading the way, our band of about two dozen riders trotted through the thick grass and dirt path towards my old village. When we reached the last main hill, I gestured for everyone to stop; then Vyker and I dismounted and peeked over the hill. Several hundred feet below was my old village – still looking like a Bewilderbeast had sat on it. The volcanic ash and lava had not treated it well, and the buildings were all pretty bad. However, it wasn't very hard to notice the giant, Bewilderdeath sleeping a few dozen feet away from the only standing shack.

"I can see a few guards," Vyker whispered.

“Yeah, but where’s the Deathgrippers and Powder?” I replied.

“They couldn’t be in that building,” Vyker mumbled, “It couldn’t house all the men and the dragons.”

“Then, there must be somewhere else they are,” I deduced.

“Kia, yia – YOOOWWWLLLLL!”

The loud war cry scared Vyker and I so bad that we fell backwards down the hill. I caught myself, but Vyker continued to roll down the hill.

“What is it!” Ogard hissed violently, craning his neck from where he stood.

“How should I know!” I said, “My heart is still trying to start beating again!”

From down below, the distinct whale of a horn sounded.

“What’s going ON?!” Liggo cried out, running back up the hill where I was.

From the sky was diving a few dozen Singesongs. Krogette had arrived.

“I can’t believe this!” Ogard cried out, “She’s trying to steal the Bewilderdeath first!”

“Oh great,” I mumbled.

“Onwards men! Get those Singesongs and War Lords!” Ogard cried out, breaking our cover and running pell-mell for his dragon.

Before I could say anything, there was a rapid flapping of wings and most of the Monstrous Gronckles took off with their riders.

“So much for our plan,” Vyker grumbled from beside me.

“Uh, what’s the plan now?” Liggo interrupted, being the only other person left.

“Watch and see if we can figure out Powder’s whereabouts,” I grimaced.

Ogard and his team were already covering a large amount of ground and quickly bearing down on Krogette’s group. Meanwhile, there was a flurry of activity as War Lord goons left the building and scrambled for their weapons. Blasty, looked up into the sky, but barely did anything.

“Beooooorrr!” “Boom!” “Krzzzzhow!” “Zing, zing, zam!”

The air was instantly filled with chaos.

“I can’t see anything!” Liggo cried out.

“Or hear anything!” I added.

“Where’s Lemmirg?!” Vyker said, completely undistracted.

No sooner had he spoken those words, then I heard something from behind. At the exact same time, my two friends also heard it. We spun around and saw Lemmirg and about a dozen deathgripper riders furiously flying towards the action. The good news was that they were fairly high above us and didn’t seem to notice us. The even better news was that Powder was trailing the group – rider less. On his head was a muzzle of some sort with several purplish thingies plugged into that.

“Ambush!” The cry was from one of the Deathgripper riders – our cover had been easily blown.

“Run!” Liggo cried as we all dove for whatever grassy cover we could.

I peered out of the grass and saw Lemmirg slow down, notice our Monstrous Gronckles, and flash a smug smile.

“Powder!” he cried out pointing in our general direction, “Eliminate!”

I gasped as Lemmirg and his team flew on, but Powder turned around, and with an evil glare in his eyes, swooped down towards us. From some nearby bushes, Vyker lept out and mounted

his Monstrous Gronckle quickly. He aimed and fired, but Powder dodged – turned on a dime and blasted him. I too leapt out of the grass and charged towards Vyker, to try to push him out of the way of Powder's mist, but it was too late, Vyker and his dragon were frozen solid. At this exact time, Liggo and his dragon emerged from the grass and took a few pot shots at Powder, but Powder sensed this (I told you his ears were good!) and blasted them as well. Evidently, Vyker and Liggo weren't used to my dragon's fighting abilities. Somehow Lemmirg must have hypnotized him, maybe with that weird muzzle thingy. Finally, Powder turned towards me.

"It's me!" I shouted at him, "You know me! We're -."

Powder roared and blasted me, but I saw it coming and leapt out of the way. I back flipped over a nearby rock and shouted again.

"C'mon boy!"

Powder grunted and alighted onto the grass – growling and walking slowly towards me. I did the same.

"Powder," I whispered, "Come back!"

But the slit eyes told all; Powder was not his usual self. Powder leaned back, and shot at me again, but I recognized the familiar motion and jumped into the air – above the cloud of mist. I shot forward, grasped Powder's muzzle strongly in my hands, and yanked it off as I somersaulted over his head. When I landed, I turned around quickly and prepared myself for another paralyzing mist. However, and as I had sort of expected, Powder was on the ground scratching his head.

"Powder," I whispered softly, "I'm here!"

Powder jumped a foot at my voice and quickly looked at me. His eyes then grew very large.

"ZZZHHHHOOO!" he cried, quickly running towards me and licking me all over.

"Oh, oh! Stop!" I told him, as he bowled me over, "We have to rescue my friends!"

Powder nuzzled me a bit more, then stood back. I stood up and surveyed the land. Poor Vyker and Liggo were still frozen; so I decided to leave them here and head off. I quickly mounted Powder's saddle-less body, and we flew swiftly towards the commotion. I arrived just in time to see something that would probably be in my nightmares for a while.

Right above the War Lords' building was a circle of Krogette's riders who were exchanging fire with the War Lord goons below. As Powder and I bore down to join the action, I saw Blasty suddenly rise up on his hind legs, let out a deafening roar, and literally torch the sky. Now the immense amount of fire was not new to me, but Krogette's group was not prepared and the flames swept right through the group. When Blasty fell back down on his four feet and the flames quickly disappeared, none of the riders were left – there was just some ashes floating to the ground.

I grimaced and urged Powder to the right where Ogard's group were fighting Lemmirg's deathgrippers.

"What's the status!" I shouted to Ogard as Powder and I flew by a moment later.

"They're too skilled!" Ogard shouted back as a Deathgripper spewed green acid towards me.

Powder swiftly dove and cut in behind the deathgripper. Meanwhile, I slung my new Dreadfall axe off my back and wielded it in my right hand. Climbing through the air, Powder expertly maneuvered behind the offending deathgripper and rider. Then, he flew by. I leaned over and

knocked out the rider with a mighty tap on his helmet. The rider promptly plummeted off the deathgripper – leaving the dragon to hover in the air and look around in confusion.

“FSSSHHH!” More green acid showered the air and ran into a fireball or two from some Monstrous Gronckles.

“Behind you!” A nearby Monstrous Gronckle rider called out as he swerved around me. I rolled Powder and I through the air and blasted the next Deathgripper and rider from below.

Unfortunately, as that rider and dragon fell, they slammed into Ogard and his dragon who happened to be flying beneath Powder and I.

“Aaaahh!” Ogard screamed, but Powder was already on it. We dove and Powder snatched him up in his claws while the rest of the dragons and riders plummeted to their doom down below.

“Oh, thanks!” Ogard called to us, “Hey, and there’s backup riders too!”

“What?” I asked, as we dodged a few more Deathgrippers.

“Look to the West!” Ogard told me. As Powder climbed back up in the air, I caught a quick glimpse of a few riders rapidly approaching.

“Blasty! Kill!” Lemmrig yelled from far below. My gaze then shifted to Lemmrig who was standing next to Blasty. Blasty immediately obeyed and blasted fire at the other sky-born dragon riders. Luckily, most everyone was able to dodge out of the way in time, but this turn of events induced a series of fireballs from the incoming riders. There were some electrical bolts of lightning, an ordinary fireball, and two, purple plasma blasts.

“It’s our friends!” I cried out excitedly, “Sulpher is on it!”

Powder growled happily and promptly flew right into Blasty’s path. Another wave of fire exploded towards us, but Powder met it with a massive blast of mist himself. Although the majority of the fire continued past us, the fire that was going to hit us was instantly evaporated by the mist and disappeared in a thick cloud of misty smoke.

“Nice job boy!” I told Powder, “I don’t want to die a second time!”

Powder and I emerged from the smoke and climbed to a higher vantage point near the mountain. I quickly took in the surroundings. There were just one or two deathgripper riders left, a handful of Monstrous Gronckle Riders, MDR, Blasty and Lemmrig down below, and no Singesong riders.

“I think we may win!” I said excitedly to Ogard who was still hanging onto Powder’s legs for dear life.

What happened next was... well... unexpected to say the least.

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After briefly dropping by Wing Maiden Island, MDR and I made our way towards Berserker Island. However, when we arrived, there was already mass confusion going on. It looked like Ogard and Krogette were already involved in a heated battle. In addition, I quickly noticed a mysterious rider dodging in and out on Powder.

“Someone’s riding on Powder!” Nuffink called out to us.

“Yeah, but I don’t recognize him!” Nuffnut chimed in.

“Well, it looks like he’s working with Ogard and Krogette against Lemmrig, so let’s help them out!” I decided.

It was at that moment that we all witnessed Blasty incinerate the rest of Krogette’s dragon riders (including herself).

“Concentrate firepower on the Bewilderdeath!” Sulpher quickly told us as we gaped at the floating ashes, “We won’t kill it, but we’ll distract it!”

“Your wish is my command!” Puffnut replied by sending several strong bolts of lightning at Blasty.

Zephyr knew as well as I that most fireballs wouldn’t hurt a Red Death or Bewilderbeast due to their very thick skin, but we also knew that keeping Blasty distracted would allow the rest of the gang to possibly subdue the War Lord goons and their deathgrippers. Wisely, we all split apart, so it was very hard for Blasty to fireball any one of us. We kept Blasty busy for a while; then realized that the War Lords were, indeed, being defeated. The ground forces were quickly being decimated, and there were just not enough Deathgripper riders. Plus, the person on Powder was incredibly effective; I couldn’t imagine who he was!

Just when the battle was ours, something terrible happened. It wasn’t altogether surprising, but it was terrible nonetheless. Ogard betrayed us. The mysterious rider and Powder had just rescued him, and they were far across from us – hovering near the base of the main mountain. As we watched, Ogard whistled; then grasped Powder’s legs firmly and yanked. Powder and the rider were thrown down onto the ground (with Ogard as well) and had the wind knocked out of them. Just as promptly, Ogard’s men turned on us. All the intuition in the world can’t prepare you for moments of betrayal, and this was one of them. Before Amber could dive away, a nearby Monstrous Gronckle rider smacked her hard in the side, and we plummeted.

Amber desperately tried to catch her breath and break the fall, but we were spinning and falling so fast. I didn’t blame her when we crashed into a stand of trees and slammed into some grass below. Luckily, we didn’t fall too hard, and Amber was underneath, so she took the worst of the fall. I leapt off of her and peered out of the section of forest we were in. In front was the clearing where Kaizar and his tribes had been working on rebuilding their village and where Blasty currently was. I couldn’t see Zephyr or Puffnut, but Nuffnut and Nuffink were desperately returning fire and trying to get away. Unfortunately, Blasty took to the sky after Lemmirg’s orders and swatted them to the ground with one powerful swing of his wing.

“Crackle,” the sound of nearby men alerted me, and I quickly turned around. Behind me were three War Lord goons.

“Surrender!” the older one growled, “And we may leave you alive.”

“I dare you to try!” I hissed back.

“Pssh, you’re just a little girl,” another of the goons laughed, “You can’t beat all three of us.”

I laughed in response while slinging out my hammer, “Try!”

However, before they could charge me, Amber had sneaked up behind and decked them all with her tail.

“Amber!” I whined, “You couldn’t even leave one for me?!”

Amber growled.

“Don’t try *anything* tricky!” I heard Lemmirg call from a ways behind me.

I turned around and saw him holding a sword to Puffnut’s throat.

“All of you come out of the forest and leave your weapons behind!” Lemmirg continued.

I briefly thought of hiding, but I knew Lemmirg knew that I was around, so I laid my hammer on the ground and sulkily left the cover of the forest. I wasn’t about to risk Puff’s life.

When Lemmirg saw me, he chuckled loudly.

"Your boyfriend ain't here to save you anymore!" he guffawed, "It's good to see you again."
I scowled and Amber growled.

"Now my and Ogard's men are rounding up the rest of your group just as we-," Lemmirg continued, but he was cut off from a shout above.

"ERAAAA!" the voice yelled. This was followed by a rapid flapping of wings. Blasty, who was watching Amber and I turned to look into the sky and received a massive cloud of mist in the face. Enraged, Blasty reared back and fired, but neither his mouth nor his eyes moved. All he could do was a suppressed gurgle.

"Of all the annoying things!" Lemmirg growled, "You froze his gas chambers!"

"I know," the mysterious rider answered, "I'm not an idiot!"

I recognized *that* voice; it was Kaizar.

"Kaizar!" I cried out to him, as Amber and I stood a few feet away from Lemmirg with War Lord goons all around.

"Now let my buddies go, or we'll lay waste to you all!" Kaizar said. I was shocked. How in the world was he still alive. Dagur said they had "buried" him personally!

"Not by a long shot!" Lemmirg retorted.

He briefly let go of Puffnut, swirled his sword around and bashed one of Blasty's feet with it. Blasty reared up again, angry (though it was kind of hard to tell, because he couldn't make much of a noise). Then, he did something surprising – as was starting to become the theme. Blasty shot a stream of ice out of his mouth. I heard Kaizar yell in surprise; then he and Powder were both entombed in a few meter thick icicle.

Lemmirg laughed an evil, obsessed laugh; then commanded all of us to be taken into the main building.

"You evil person!" I screamed at Lemmirg, "What's wrong with you!"

"I could say the same of you!" Lemmirg shouted after me, "You are always meddling in my business! Stay out of it!"

Once inside the building, I was tied hand and foot to a crude, wooden chair while most of the goons went back outside to deal with our dragons.

"This is not good," Zephyr told us, "maybe we should have waited for the Berserkers to arrive."

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My dad must have told me hundreds of times how Hiccup and Toothless had defeated the Red Death by shooting a plasma blast down its throat. Years later, I realized that I could do the same, but with a twist. My loud yell had attracted Blasty's attention, much to my pleasure, but had not opened his mouth quite as much as I would have liked. Thus, Powder's mist had just paralyzed Blasty's facial features and, apparently, his flame throwing ability. Unfortunately, I did not expect him to also be able to spew ice. Hybrids didn't always inherit both of their parents' abilities, so I had naturally assumed that Blasty couldn't spit ice since I had never seen him do it. Unfortunately, I was wrong. The wave of ice flashed out and around Powder and I in not more than a second. Having avalanche instincts, I quickly caved out some room around my head to breathe in, but it wasn't much. Powder, evidently, also had that instinct, so, two seconds later when we were frozen in a couple tons of ice, we could both breathe.

Unfortunately, Powder's wings and my arms had only allotted about one square meter of breathing room, and neither of us could move enough to try to break through the ice.

"I'm gonna die again!" I thought to myself, "Why had Jesus let me come back to just die again!" As I bemoaned my unluckiness, Powder was busy working on a plan, because soon, as the air started to get real stuffy, Powder's skin started to get very warm.

"Owe!" I cried, "Dude! Why are you so hot!"

Powder turned his eyes towards me, and I could see something different in his gaze. It was not one of outright anger like I had seen just an hour ago when he was attacking me. It was a gaze of immense annoyance and intense confidence. A streak of glowing green color started to work its way from the front of Powder's head to the tip of his tail.

"What the-?!" I thought – gasping for breath. I tried to move my body off his skin, but the intense heat was just radiating off of him.

"KABOOOMMMM!" ice exploded off of us – sending me cartwheeling into the air and rolling along the small, mountain ledge that we were above. I flopped there on the ground, catching my breath, as Powder roared a ferocious, high-pitched roar and soared into the air – heading straight for Blasty. On the ground, I couldn't see any of my friends or Lemmrig, just a handful of War Lord goons. They looked up in surprise at Powder and scattered. Blasty, in turn, whirled around, and it looked like he was going to try to freeze Powder again. Before that could happen, however, Powder opened his mouth. A thick beam of green light emerged and instantaneously shot out across the distance between Blasty and himself. The light cut a deep, burning gouge in the dirt around Blasty. Powder, then, closed his mouth and roared again – the thin green line of glow radiating off his back.

"Alpha Dreadstrider!" I breathed, "Powder had made the transition from a Dreadstrider to a hybrid alpha."

"Snap!" a twig behind me crackled and elicited an immediate response out of my languid body. I scrambled around and yanked my Dreadfall axe off my back. Standing over me was Ogard.

"Darn it all!" Ogard growled, "I can't kill you!"

"Ogard! We made up!" I told him, "You don't have to betray us!"

"The power does not lie within you," Ogard said, "The War Lords have the power."

"That's not-," I began, but was cut off as Ogard swung his stick at me.

I dodged, leapt to my feet, and countered with a short chop.

"Can it!" I told him, "I'm tired of your betrayals – just make up your mind!"

"I follow the next best source of power," Ogard replied, "So I'm always switching alliances!"

"And you think that's a good way to live life?!" I responded, countering his jab and catching the tip of his staff with the blade of my axe.

"It's the only way to live!" Ogard responded, yanking his stick back and attempting to whack me on the head with it.

As Ogard and I dueled on the narrow cliff face, I caught glimpses of Powder absolutely demolishing the War Lord goons. The beam of light was the ultimate weapon – slicing anything and everything in half. Blasty was so busy trying to avoid being sliced in half, that he never returned fire. I, in turn, wanted to help my friends, but fighting Ogard was all I could do. Ogard was a fantastic warrior and did not have any real weaknesses in his fighting abilities.

"Kerrrrching!" our weapons clashed and reverberated.

"Get your sorry body dead already!" Ogard said through clenched teeth as he dodged a swipe and chop by me.

“Give it up,” I replied, “You’ll never truly defeat me,” I faked.

“Hiya!” Ogard cried, grabbing the two ends of his metal stick in his two hands and pressing it against my axe. Ogard’s strength trumped mine, and I was slowly pushed backwards. Despite my effort, I couldn’t quite hold my ground, and my feet slipped ever so slowly towards the edge of the cliff that was several dozen meters above the ocean below.

“Now to finally finish you off!” Ogard cried in triumph, giving me a massive heave.

Unfortunately for him, I was not the one finished off. See, I quickly realized that I wasn’t as strong, so, instead, I used Ogard’s momentum of pushing me off the cliff to my advantage. I jerked his stick to the right – which caused him to lose his balance. Thus, as I tipped off the cliff, I was able to twist him around 180 – with me on top! Ogard screamed as I jumped back, and he plummeted to his doom. A colossal splash down below sealed his fate.

I then turned around and assessed the situation. Way down below me, Powder and Blasty were still fighting it out, but Powder still appeared to have the advantage. Unfortunately, being at the top of a tall, cliff-face meant that I had no real way of getting off of it, so I could only watch in suspense.

Blasty had already backed up quite a ways, trying to avoid Powder’s light pulses. As I watched, he suddenly paused for a minute, and his eyes’ iris started to enlarge.

“The purple toxin!” I thought to myself, “It’s worn out!”

It hadn’t really occurred to me that Lemmirg had poisoned Blasty like he had poisoned Powder, but, now that I thought about it, I should have known.

In a matter of just a few seconds, Blasty’s eyes had returned to normal, and he was left looking about – completely confused. I, on the other hand, tried to spot Lemmirg, but he was not around – at least that I could see.

“Powder!” I yelled to him, “Can I have a ride!”

Powder turned in my direction and swiftly approached me.

“Groowwwlll,” he said.

“You’ve been a very good boy,” I told him, scratching him under his head, “Let’s go get our friends!”

Powder was probably thinking of Amber, Zap, Bash, Pouncer, and Dart, but I was thinking of Puff, Nuff, Zephyr, Nuffink, and especially Sulpher. We quickly dove back down to the village and landed near the door of the house. All around us were scar marks of where Powder’s light had seared the earth.

“You stay out here and keep a lookout for anyone else and watch Blasty,” I instructed him – slowly opening the door to the building. Then, I threw it open and jumped inside, axe at the ready.

“It *is* Kai!” Nuffnut declared triumphantly, “I knew it was him!”

“How is he alive again?” Zephyr replied, staring in shock.

“Can you untie me?” Puffnut wanted to know, “These ropes are cutting off my circulation.”

“Where did everyone else go?” I asked, as I chopped the binds off my friends.

“I don’t know. They all ran outside and didn’t come back,” Zephyr informed me.

“Do you know where Lemmirg is?” I asked her.

“No, the last we saw him was when he laughed evilly at you when you were frozen in the ice,” Nuffnut informed me.

When I reach Sulpher, I said, "You don't know how good it is to see you!"

"I cried for days over you and here I come to know that you were alive that whole time!" Sulpher glared.

"Hey! I was dead for some of the time!" I defended myself.

"What? How?!" Nuffink demanded.

"Just get me out of here first!" Sulpher laughed, "You can explain later!"

"Impatience!" I scolded her as I whacked off the ropes.

However, no sooner had I done this; then she jumped out of her chair, squeezed me insanely tight and kissed me.

"It's good to have you back," she sniffed, "I'm never letting you go away again!"

"Yuck," Puffnut stated.

Chapter 8: Winning

"Did you see where our dragons are?" Sulpher anxiously asked.

"Well, what with being stuck in ice, and Powder turning into an alpha dragon, no."

"He's an alpha?!" Nuffink exclaimed, quickly exiting and finding Powder standing outside, sniffing the air.

"Oh my Thor!" Nuffnut screamed, "He's got something glowing on his back!"

"It's like Toothless' glow!" Zephyr noted.

"GRRRRR!" Powder said, his head cocked to the side.

"What is it boy?" I asked him.

Powder concentrated for a minute, then screamed his high-pitch roar. He twirled around and sliced the top off a number of trees nearby that stood amid some thick foliage. Once the foliage was out of the way, it was quite easy to see the few War Lord goons keeping watch over our dragons. Amber squirmed with excitement upon seeing Sulpher.

"GRRRRRRR!" Powder said again, approaching the goons. However, the goons needed no encouragement; they took off like there was a Bewilderdeath looking at them (which there was!). Powder ran off after them, but the rest of us hurried over and chopped off the rest of the dragons' shackles. It was a very happy reunion.

"How in the world did you get here anyway?" Sulpher wanted to know as she scratched Amber who was growling with pleasure.

"Oh, I caught a ride with Ogard and-", I began, "Oh my! We need to go back for them!"

"Who?" Zephyr said, riding up on Dart.

"Vyker and Liggo! They're still back up near the mountain!" I exclaimed.

"What are we going to do about Blasty?" Sulpher interrupted.

"Where's Lemmirg?" Puffnut added.

"I don't know!" I replied, exasperated, "I can only handle one thing at a time!"

"Alright then," Zephyr announced, "Puff and Nuff, you search the area for any other enemies. Kaizar and Sulpher, you go retrieve your friends. Nuffink and I will stay here and keep an eye on Blasty and wait for Powder to come back from his chase."

"Sayonara suckers!" Puff called out as she and Nuff flew off to the east.

Amber offered me a hand, and I climbed up behind her onto Amber. We then took off towards the mountain.

"They're a little to the right, right in that clearing over there," I pointed out.

Sulpher nodded and veered to the right.

"I'm still in shock," Sulpher said, "I thought for sure that you were dead!"

"I was," I reminded her, "But that's a long story. Basically, I revived and caught a ride here with Ogard, Vyker, and Liggo. We were going to reclaim Powder. However, Lemmirg had controlled Powder with his Deathripper venom stuff, so, in the process of getting him back, Vyker and Liggo were paralyzed."

"Ouch," Sulpher commented.

"Speaking of which, here we are!" I declared.

"I don't see anyone," Sulpher commented.

"But they were literally right here!" I said as we landed, "Look! There's the mussed up bit of ground where I fought Powder!"

"You fought Powder?!"

"Part of the long story," I quickly added.

"How are we ever going to find them?" Sulpher wanted to know.

"We won't be able to unless they want to be found," I replied wisely, "We should head back. Maybe they're back there with Blasty."

"You don't think they betrayed us too, do you?" Sulpher commented as we re-mounted Amber and headed back.

"Who knows, it's hard to trust anyone these days!"

"Well, Puff and Nuff seem to be enjoying themselves!" Sulpher pointed out. I looked in the direction she was pointing in and saw Puff and Nuff doing aerial acrobatics over the forest.

"So much for stealthy surveillance," I commented.

"You should have seen them make an entrance at New Berk!"

"You went all the way over there with them?!"

"Yeah, I wanted to get Powder back so we made a plan to counter-attack..." Sulpher told me,

"Oh my goodness! I forgot that our tribes are arriving tomorrow!"

"What for?!"

"They're our backup, but we were not expecting the chaos!" Sulpher added.

I shook my head, "I'm going to need to hear that story too!"

"Look what Powder found!" Nuffink shouted up to Sulpher and I when we got back to him and Zephyr. Nuffink pointed to two unhappy War Lord goons sitting on the ground and trussed up in ropes. Powder was standing over them and growling for all he was worth.

"Nice job Powder!" I complimented him, "Any news on where everyone else is?"

"Nope, it's been pretty quiet," Zephyr informed me, "Well, except for Puff and Nuff."

"We couldn't find Vyker or Liggo," Sulpher informed Zephyr, "They were long gone."

"But that doesn't make any sense," I stated, "They had a lot at stake with this dragon."

"What are we even going to do with it?" Nuffink asked, "We can't just leave it anywhere! It's already massive!"

"You can give it to us!" Nuff shouted to us from behind, "We need some serious firepower at our island!"

"Too risky to have it so close to Scout Island!" Zephyr replied, "Plus you can barely take care of your own dragons!"

"Can too!" Nuffnut retorted. Zap burped for effect.

"There's something else I need to tell you, Kaizar," Sulpher told me, "I found out that not everyone in our tribes is a huge fan of you, or me for that matter."

"I knew," I replied honestly, "That's why I tried to stay off in the distance as much as possible. Other people sometimes feel intimidated by me."

"Psssh! By a wimp like you?" Nuffnut kidded me, "By the way, why does your face look like you placed it in a bed of hot coals?"

"Nuff!" Sulpher exclaimed.

"Blasty," I answered.

“Oh.”

“Well, now that *that’s* over,” Zephyr said, changing the topic of conversation, “We should really start getting ready to go back!”

“We still don’t know where everyone disappeared too!” Sulpher insisted.

“Well, Vyker and Liggo can take care of themselves, and we really ought to get Blasty far away from Lemmrig.”

“What about these guys?!” Nuffink said, pointing to the War Lord goons.

“Eh, we can drop them off on the Wing Maiden ships,” I answered him.

“Alright everyone! Do you all have your weapons and things back?” Zephyr announced.

“She’s starting to take the role of leader, you know,” Sulpher whispered to me.

“And that’s probably best, the Haddocks are splendid leaders my dad said,” I replied.

“Cool! Nuffink, you take one of the goons, and I’ll take the other!” Zephyr informed us, jumping on Dart who snatched up one of the goons in her forepaws.

“Powder! Can you get Blasty read to go? I need to find my stuff!” I told him. Powder roared loudly and all the rest of the dragons, including Blasty who had just been napping for the last half hour quickly snapped to attention. Meanwhile, I ran back into the main building and searched around the crates for my Odin’s Storm and shield. I found them wrapped in a blanket in a nearby crate.

“None the worse for the wear,” I mumbled to myself. I slipped my shield on and slung the Odin’s over my shoulder; then ran back outside.

“Ready!”

“Let’s go then!” Sulpher replied cheerfully.

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Not more than an hour later, we found ourselves flying above the endless expanse of water as a massive Bewilderdeath followed us from behind. Zephyr led the procession with her brother and Nuffnut following, with Sulpher and Puffnut in the middle, and Powder and I in the back with Blasty. Blasty did follow Power, as I quickly found out, so I was careful to make sure that Powder and I were near to Blasty at all times.

“Back to flying!” Nuffnut whined.

“But there they are!” Zephyr shouted to us all pointing to the left where some dark dots were on the horizon.

“I’ll keep on flying with Blasty to Outcast Island!” I told them, “I don’t want everyone to know I’m alive yet.”

Sulpher nodded, understanding me, “But we have to leave someone with you if we are to tell them that Blasty and Powder are okay.”

“I’ll stay with him!” Puffnut volunteered.

“Well, I was actually thinking that maybe I should-,” Sulpher quickly replied, but she was cut off by Zephyr.

“You’re the only one of us that really know the Berserkers, Wing Maidens, and Defenders of the wing,” Zephyr reminded Sulpher, “You need to go with us.”

“Fine,” Sulpher replied.

She veered to the left with Zephyr and Dart while everyone else, excluding Puffnut, followed. Meanwhile, we continued on our way – trying to miss getting swatted by Blasty’s huge wings.

However, it took only another half hour before the rest of the group caught back up.

"We told him!" Sulpher told me as she flew in beside me, "Dad wasn't exactly happy to have gone through all that work for nothing, but he was glad that we had Powder back."

"And he didn't think it was weird that you guys were going to go straight back to Outcast Island?" I questioned Sulpher.

"Nah," she replied, "I think he's probably excited to have all the chaos stay away from Wing Maiden Island."

"Understandable," I chuckled, "I'd like that too, but chaos follows me like a tail follows a dragon!"

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It was late evening by the time MDR reached Outcast Island, and things looked a lot different than I remembered from a year earlier.

"Where did all of those ship masts poking out of the water come from?" I asked Puff and Nuff.

"Eh, they're War Lord ships that we sunk," Puff explained, "We've been getting attacked pretty regularly now."

"That's weird," I said, "I mean, it's not surprising, but I'd think they'd just send in a full force to wipe you guys outs!"

"That's what I said!" Sulpher exclaimed excitedly, "But when I got here a few days ago there were only about eight at the most!"

"Very strange..." I commented, thinking about the possible reasons the War Lords could have for doing that.

"Do they always attack from this direction?" I said as we flew in for a landing on the rocky, inhospitable beach.

"Nah, it's pretty random," Nuffnut answered, "One time, they must have circled around, because they attacked us from the complete opposite side of the island – from the east!"

"Wait a minute," I mumbled to myself.

"FAAAWWWWOOOOOM!" Blasty's landing shook the ground as he came to a heavy landing right near us. Most of his body sunk into the water as only his front half actually touched the beach.

"You still got guards out here?" I asked Puffnut.

"Yeah, but they probably recognize us anyway," she responded.

"Wow, it's been a while!" Zephyr commented, "I haven't been here in *years*!"

"We'll show you around then!" Puffnut said, "Nuff and I are excellent tour guides!"

Sulpher raised an eyebrow at this, but wisely kept quiet.

"Uh, where should we put this guy?" I said to no one in particular as I pointed at Blasty.

"Well, he can't follow us!" Puffnut replied as she led Nuffink and Zephyr towards the center of the island, "Our tunnels are way too small!"

I looked up at Blasty, and he looked down at me.

"Well, uh, I guess Powder and I can stay out here with Blasty if you guys want to go in," I offered.

"WE CAN!" the voice from the nearby rock startled me, but I realized it was only an Outcast. I still couldn't believe how well Outcasts could disguise themselves.

"You wanna watch this dude?!" I exclaimed, pointing way up at Blasty.

“Sure man!” the Outcast said as several of his comrades popped up around the landscape, “He’s AWESOME!”

“Are you okay with it?” I asked Powder, knowing that Powder would also have to wait outside. Powder growled softly, but trotted off to find a good place to rest. Meanwhile, I scurried off with my friends. I didn’t want to miss out on the fun!

“And as we come in here,” Puffnut was saying as we walked carefully into an Outcast tunnel, “You’ll see some portraits of famous Outcast Leaders.”

“We have Gerald the Terrible!” Nuffnut carried on, “Arguous the Awful, Alvin the Treacherous, and Tuffnut Thorston – my uncle!”

I grimaced at the crude paintings of the Outcasts, but couldn’t help wonder if that’s what they actually looked like.

“How did you know those were even going to be put up?” Sulpher asked them as we walked along the dimly-lit tunnel, “You haven’t been here since Tuff came up with that idea!”

“Eh, we have our sources,” Puffnut smirked.

We continued along the tunnel and a few side routes until we reached what I remembered as the main cave hall where they had meetings and ate. There were several Outcasts hanging around, and I instantly recognized Ruffnut and Tuffnut who were having a food war a few wooden tables away.

“Kaizar?” Eret said, walking up to me from behind, “What in the world?!”

“Well, I am alive!” I replied, smirking.

“But how?!” Eret replied, genuinely confused, “And why does your face look like you plunged it in lava?!”

“Well, that’s kind of a long story,” I replied, “It involves getting my face burnt.”

“Ouch,” Eret flinched, “Do tell. I’m tired of hearing that trader’s stories.”

“What trader?” I said, looking around. Before Eret even spoke, I spotted him a few meters away near the opposite side of the room. He was sitting in a large, wooden chair telling a story with great dramatic pause and gestures to a group of Outcasts. His clothes were so memorable, and his face struck me.

“I’ve seen him before,” I said.

“You have?!” Sulpher exclaimed, “Because I thought that I had too, but I couldn’t place it. Was it a trader at Auction Island?”

“Nooo,” I replied slowly, “I’ve only seen paintings of him I think.”

“Welp, the tour continues on this way,” Puffnut interrupted, “C’mon Zephyr and Nuffink and you dragons. Let’s continue onward!”

“Let’s go and talk with him,” I told Sulpher, “Maybe I can figure out why I have seen paintings of him before.”

The rest of MDR disappeared down another passageway, but Eret followed us over to the trader.

“-And when we landed on that Night Fury, I realized that the town was way too quiet. No one was around!” the trader was saying.

“What happened to them all?” one of the Outcasts asked.

“Speed stingers!” the trader replied.

“Wait, you know Hiccup?” I asked the man.

"I – oh, uh, yeah, I do," he replied.

"You never told me that!" Sulpher exclaimed, "That's so cool!"

"Well, Kai here has a riveting story about why everyone thought he was dead!" Eret told the group of us, so would you mind if we got to hear from him instead?!"

"Well, I kind of-," the trader began.

"Do I know you?" I said to the trader, as I narrowed my eyes. I was sure I recognized him, the facial features were so prominent.

The trader grew uncomfortable as I stared at him and quickly got up.

"Well of course," he said, "Have fun!"

With that, he hurried off.

"Sit down and tell!" Eret said, encouraging me to sit down in the big chair. That's when I finally realized who the trader was. It was Johann! But a *much* older version.

"Actually, could I-," I started, but Eret cut me off.

"For the love of Thor," Eret said, "Are you trying to hide what happened to you?"

"No, but I-," I tried to continue.

"C'mon Kaizar!" Sulpher coaxed me, "You haven't told me either!"

"Oh, fine," I told Sulpher.

I figured that I could talk to him later. My parents had told me who Johann was, and I knew that he was dangerous, but why would he take the risk to be around Outcast Island when both Ruffnut and Tuffnut knew him?! Did they recognize him as well, or had his more mature body and long beard fooled them? Something wasn't quite right.

It turned out that the story took a whole lot longer to retell than I thought, and just when I thought that I had finished it, the rest of MDR showed up and wanted to hear it. Thus, I had to tell it all over again but with more details and questions answered because everyone wanted clarification – especially about my trip to hell which I remembered all too vividly.

"I knew Valhalla was the biggest lie of the century!" Puff laughed, "Did they really think there was a viking-specific land?!"

"Uh, I did," Sulpher replied, offended.

"Psssh," I knew there was something different," Nuffnut added, "I want to get my hands on that book of yours!"

"You're welcome to it!" I told her, "I've only read a little bit of it, but it's really revolutionary. Now that I know what happens when you die, I know I need to read all I can about this 'Jesus' fellow." The large crowd of Outcasts immediately fell into an excited discussion about Heaven and hell, but Eret, Nuffink, Zephyr, and Sulpher looked at me skeptically.

"You're saying that centuries of retelling about Valhalla is all a lie?" Sulpher asked incredulously.

"Hey! I'm just telling you what I experienced. I know that wherever I went to is not Valhalla. It was a place called Heaven, and from what I read in the Bible, there are no other places."

"So, how do we go to Heaven again?" Nuffink asked, starting to warm up.

"Well, it said in this one place in the Bible that all you have to do is 'believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!'"

"Fascinating!" an Outcast said, "So I don't have to 'be good'?"

"Nope," I replied.

"But that's crazy!" Sulpher puzzled, "So all those good people that don't believe in Jesus will go to hell?"

"That's what I read," I replied.

"That's doesn't compute in my mind," Sulpher insisted.

"Yeah, that's just weird," Eret told me.

"Well, I'm not an expert on this," I told them all, "I only learned about Jesus a mere few days ago!"

"Well, I'd be willing to read the book," Sulpher admitted, "Maybe I'll learn something new."

"I know I have!" I told her, "Now if you guys don't mind, I have to go do something right now!"

"Sure," Eret said, walking off.

I quickly got up and started running towards where I knew the guest rooms were. I figured that that was where Johann had gone.

"Hey!" Sulpher called out after me, "Where are you going!"

"To find Johann!" I yelled back.

"Oh my goodness! That is him!" Sulpher exclaimed, "I knew that I recognized him. We have a few hand-drawn pictures of him in a book at our house!"

"Johann?!" Zephyr exclaimed, catching up to me, "He was that trader, story-teller guy?!"

"I think so, that's why I need to find out why he's been here for so long!" I told her.

We ran as fast as possible down the tunnels, taking the turns that I had committed to memory. I was very glad that I had taken the time to memorize some of the tunnels down here last time I had visited Outcast Island. Soon enough, I burst into the guest cave and came to a halt right outside the guest rooms.

"Which is Johann's?" I asked Puff as she came running up, breathing heavily.

"The... second... I think," she coughed.

I knocked on it promptly, but nobody answered.

"Anyone home?" I said out loud – still no answer.

I carefully turned the door knob, and it opened. It had not been locked. However, when I looked inside, I saw that Johann was long gone.

"Oh no!" Zephyr exclaimed, "He's gone!"

"Let's go find him!" Sulpher yelled, racing back the way we had come.

"Not again!" Puffnut whined, "Way too much running!"

Everyone ran off again, but I carefully searched the room first. I figured that Johann might have accidentally left something behind that would clue me into why he had been here or what he had been doing. Johann was very clever – or so my parents had said. That's why I was very surprised when I saw a small brown package right on top of his night stand (or what was intended to be so, but looked more like some wooden boards slapped haphazardly together). I gingerly poked it with my Odin's Storm, but nothing exploded or moved inside. With very careful hands, I slowly unwrapped it. The brown paper fell away and revealed two papers and a peculiar object. One was a large, yellowed map with many circles, x's, and lines drawn on it. The peculiar object was a teal, six-pointed star-like thing with a swirly insignia on it. The second piece of paper was a note. It said:

To Sulpher and the strange new kid,

Yes I'm Johann as I'm sure you by now know. I came here because I was trying to track down what happened to Stormheart. I was doing this by questioning different warriors and natives at various islands as to when they last saw Stormheart. I have noticed a sort of pattern in her last sightings, but there are still several islands she could have possibly gone to – if she didn't just sink. My hope was to go back to the island where I found Stormheart's medallion – the one that I have included, but your discovery about my true identity has shown me that I must go away again. I do not wish to be found or discovered, so please do not chase after me. You may continue my search, but please do not follow me. I promise that I am trying to reform, but others may not think so.

-Johann

I smirked.

"Well, it's nice of him to give me this, but I'm still going to find him!" I said to myself.

I hurriedly stuffed my side satchel with the two pieces of paper and medallion and raced back down the tunnels. By the time I reached the dining area, it was completely empty.

"They must have all heard the news and raced off," I thought.

I continued my run and headed straight back to where I knew Powder and Blasty were. I hoped to God that they were okay – I didn't want Blasty to get shot again by that weird purple venom.

In mere minutes, I sprinted out of the tunnels and screeched to a halt beside Powder who was leisurely sprawled out on the rock. The Outcasts were playing a game of cards, and Blasty was enjoying a weird facial by the incoming and outgoing waves.

"Did you guys see my friends?!" I asked hurriedly.

"What? Oh, uh yeah," one of them said, "I think I saw Nuff on Zap head off to the east just a minute ago or so when Ufop played his flush."

"Okay, they split up," I figured out, "Guys, be on the lookout for Johann!"

"Who?"

"The trader!" I yelled to them as I hopped on Powder.

The Outcasts looked at each other, slightly confused, while Powder and I soared into the air to get a better view. No MDR riders were in sight, but neither were any boats.

"Do you think Johann had a fast ride or is still here?" I asked Powder.

Powder growled an unsure answer.

"Let's scan the island. I bet the others are already out over the ocean," I told him.

Making sure that Blasty was still calm, Powder and I dove back to the island and raced around it – looking for any sign of life. We passed over several groups of Outcasts, but saw no sign of Johann.

"Where could he be?" I asked, "He'd either need a very fast dragon or an even faster boat – and they would have had to be waiting too!"

Powder didn't respond; he was sniffing the air.

"Smell anything?" I asked him.

Powder growled but didn't move. We were just hovering in the air.

"Gah!" I grumbled, "How did he get away. Let's hope the others were more successful!"

Powder led me back to Blasty; then I hopped off and spread my new map on top of the Outcasts' rock.

"Hey! Can't you see we're playing cards here?" the leader growled.

"This is serious," I told him, "Any of you know these islands?"

I pointed to a group of five islands that were directly in line with the line of Stormheart sightings.

The Outcasts stared for a minute, but most of them shook their heads.

"I know that one right there," the group leader said, "There's a bunch of weird natives there that can't understand our language. They attacked me once when I showed them a dragon skull!"

"Awe," I thought, recalling the story that Sulpher had told me about the trader's run-in with those natives, "fits with Johann's story of where he got the medallion."

"Do you know how far away it is?" I asked again.

"Uh, about a week's trip in a boat to the South," the leader replied, "But it's been a while."

"Thanks!" I told him, "We've got a mystery to solve!"

Chapter 9: Leaving

"I can't believe he got away!" Sulpher told us angrily, "How does an old man just disappear into thin air?!"

"It seems like the old generation was really good with making good their escapes!" I added.

"You don't think he had a dragon, do you?" Zephyr suggested.

"Who knows?!" Eret answered, "But I'd bet he's smarter than he appeared. I mean, he gave Hiccup a run for his gold quite a few times."

"Yeah, he and Krogan were a formidable bunch," Tuffnut noted.

"He's gotta show up somewhere if he wants to sell any of his wares," Sulpher pondered, "We could send out a message to all allies and islands around here."

"But it's not like he was a traitor or anything," Eret argued, "We shouldn't send out a search party for him when he hasn't really done anything to deserve it!"

"But he nearly killed us dozens of times over!" Tuffnut reasoned.

"AND he backstabbed Viggo!" Ruffnut quickly added.

"Good point," Eret conceded.

"And he said that he was going to change," I said.

"Psssh, that's what they all say!" Ruffnut challenged.

I shrugged, "Sure."

"Maybe he's after Stormheart, and if we go searching for the site of her disappearance, we'll also find him!" Sulpher suggested.

"Yeah, but then why would he give us the map and medallion? That doesn't make any sense," I puzzled.

"Perhaps he was hoping it would delay us from tracking him," Zephyr suggested.

"But it really didn't," I added.

"Yeah, but he had no way of knowing we would be delayed so long by me telling my story," I argued.

"My brain hurting," Nuffink complained.

"Well, it couldn't hurt to try to track down Stormheart's boat," Eret stated, "I myself am quite interested, because she had some pretty interesting technology!"

"If it's not all on the bottom of the sea," I mumbled.

"Worst case is that we try!" Puffnut said, excited for more adventure.

"Well, then, I guess it's decided! We leave tomorrow morning!" Sulpher informed the group.

"Hurry! Let's repack!" Nuffnut cried, jumping up from the table and racing off.

"I don't think I've been in any one place for more than two days," I chuckled.

"Trust me, that's a whole lot more fun than being stuck in the *same* place for months on end!" Eret informed me.

"Well, I guess I'll take my situation then," I laughed.

"Are you taking Blasty with you?" Tuffnut wanted to know.

"I don't think we have a lot of choice," I said, "Because Blasty only obeys Powder. Although we could *try* to leave him here without Powder, but I think the War Lords will be after us sooner or later."

"Which begs the question about if we are ready for a full-on attack!" Eret said.

"But wouldn't they not want to attack us because we have such powerful dragons?" I argued.

"Hmmm," Sulpher puzzled, "Not sure. We need to get more information on what the War Lords are up to."

"We need a spy," I said, "Someone that could infiltrate Scout Island without being noticed."

"I'm pretty sure that they'll recognize all of us," Zephyr told us, "I bet they at least keep good tabs on their enemies!"

"Well, that's a thought for another day," I finally said, "We need to get ready for tomorrow. Anyone have a compass?"

"I've got one in my room," Eret told me, "I'll drop it by your guest room tonight."

"Sounds good then," I said, getting up from the table, "I'll see you all tomorrow. Bright and early!"

I got up from the table and started off back to the guest rooms with Zephyr and Sulpher following. The rest of MDR had already left to who knows where.

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"Fwoop, Fwoop, Fwoop," the sound of Blasty's massive wings beating the air sounded out across the expansive sea as MDR flashed through the sky on our favorite dragons.

"I never get tired of being up here!" Zephyr shouted with delight, "It's like the sky is a better type of ocean!"

"And I never get tired of Powder," I said, patting him on the neck.

"I think Blasty's warming up to me!" Puffnut sung out, "He's letting me roast marshmallows over his fire breath!"

I quickly turned around to see that, in fact, Puffnut was roasting her marshmallows. She was balanced at the very end of Bash's tail and reaching her large stick over to Blasty who was letting a slow stream of fire from his mouth. As I watched, Bash faltered a bit, and the fire immediately consumed the stick.

"NOOO! My marshmallow!" Puffnut cried.

I smirked and Sulpher laughed.

"Concentrate guys!" Zephyr called from out in front of us, "We have five whole islands to search."

"Why don't we split up and cover more ground in less time?" I suggested.

"As long as you promise to all be safe!" Zephyr insisted, "Nuffink and I will take the island here on the left on this map."

"I can go with Puffnut and investigate that big island in the middle of that map," I offered. Even though Zephyr was the one that held the map, I had committed it to memory and could visualize where I needed to go.

"Not me?" Sulpher yelled over to me.

"No, someone needs to keep an eye on Puff and Nuff," I laughed.

"I know, I was just kidding you!" Sulpher chuckled, "Nuff and I will handle the rightmost island."

"Good, and we'll all meet up on the second to farthest island afterward," Zephyr continued.

“Bossy!” Sulpher whispered to me.

“I’ll let her. It’s better that someone gets the flack for being the leader than I!” I smirked.

“Good thinking!” Sulpher giggled.

“See ya later!” I told her.

With that, our three groups split up, and, following their compasses, all headed off to investigate their separate islands. I was left with Puff and Blasty. We continued on for another half hour before I spotted our island on the horizon. The captain I had spoken to on Outcast Island had said that the island with the natives that Johann had talked to was the island that we were all going to meet at later, but Zephyr and I decided it would be wise to check out all of the possible five islands. Worst case is that we saw some new sights, whereas the best case is that we got some clues as to what happened to Stormheart or even found some convincing evidence!

“Kaizar!” Puffnut said to me as she fell in beside me, “Do you have marshmallows with you? All of mine got either burnt or eaten by someone.”

“You mean yourself?” I asked her.

“Maybe,” she replied defensively.

“I have a salmon you could cook for me,” I suggested.

“Sure, but I get half of it!”

“Only if you don’t burn it!” I informed her.

“Me?” Puffnut replied, “I don’t burn *that* much!”

“Uh, huh.”

I hoped that the island wouldn’t be inhabited, because I figured that it would be increasingly hard to not see a massive Bewilderdeath approaching your island. I decided to fly over the island before landing, just in case there was something we should know about the island first. Not altogether unexpected, the island appeared to be quite normal. It had some small beaches with fine, tan sand, and a large section of forest and grassland as well as a small mountain. Other than that, neither Puffnut, who was flying much closer to the island than I was, nor I noticed any signs of life.

“Let’s land here and stretch our legs,” I yelled down to Puffnut, indicating the large swatch of clear land near the forest and which overlooked the ocean. We swooped in for a landing, and I quickly jumped off Powder because my legs were starting to cramp.

“BOOOORING!” Puffnut declared, doing a preliminary survey of the land.

“Well, let’s give it a chance,” I told her.

“We can’t go searching with a giant Bewilderdeath trampling anything in his path!” Puffnut told me.

“That’s okay,” I teased her, “You can just stay here with a giant Bewilderdeath while I go searching for anything useful.”

“Wait, you mean that?” Puffnut asked, shocked.

“Well, uh, I mean,” I began, confused that she was actually okay with my deal.

“Yeah! I’ll just take a nice nap...,” Puffnut replied.

Upon further reflection, I thought it would be a good idea to not have her hanging around.

“Sure, then, you stay here with the dragons, and I’ll go hunt around,” I told her.

“Deal,” Puffnut answered – then settled back with her head on Bash.

“You stay here with Blasty,” I told Powder, “I’ll be back soon.”

I patted Powder on the head and ran off into the forest. From above the canopy of trees, everything had looked perfectly normal, but from below, I was not sure. The beaches and top of the mountain, which was actually more like an oversized hill, were totally typical of archipelago islands. There was some random driftwood but nothing that would indicate a ship wreck of any kind. In the forest, there was not that much ivy or berry bushes. It pretty much just consisted of large trees and thick ferns. Eventually, I was forced to start hacking some of them out of the way with my Odin's Storm in order for me to make my way through. I was just about on the complete other side of the island when something jumped out of the bushes and slammed into me from behind. Surprised, I stumbled forward and plunged into a massive hole in the ground. This being the third time that I had been shoved over the side of a deep drop, I hardly even got excited; I just jammed my weapon into the side of the hole. The dirt was actually pretty wet, and my weapon took a while to catch, but made the deceleration much less intense. By the time I came to a stop, my feet hit solid ground. To my left was a twisting cavern – with small torches lighting the tunnel.

"What?" I asked, intrigued. I looked above me and saw a small amount of light from the hole's opening but couldn't make anything else out.

"I wonder what that was," I mumbled to myself as I silently crept down the main tunnel. It was actually fairly small and looked ready to collapse at any minute, but I finally found my way to a larger cavern where there were some boxes of supplies and a small fire burning. However, the cave was devoid of life. After a bit of poking around, I found some food and a few iron utensils, but nothing that indicated who lived here.

"Looks like I have company!" a croaky voice from nearby spoke out.

The voice scared me so bad that I must have jumped a half meter!

"Who are you?" I asked, looking around in the dimly lit cavern. From the other side of the cave where another tunnel led off it, a man walked into the room. He was definitely old with yellowed, blonde hair and a stately walk. His back was slightly bent, and he seemed more interested in figuring out who I was than anything else.

"They call me Forkbeard," he said after a while.

"Well, I'm Kaizar," I told him, "Something pushed me into the hole back there, and I came into here after I saw I couldn't climb back out."

"Of course," Forkbeard said, "I haven't seen many humans in the past few years. Please forgive my strange habits."

"No problem," I said politely, "Can I ask why you are here."

Forkbeard sighed and sat down on a wooden crate.

"Have you heard of Stormheart?" He said.

"Uh, yeah, though I haven't really thought of her until recently," I admitted.

"Why is that?" he asked.

"Well, uh, my friends and I are actually trying to find out what happened to her," I told him.

"What happened to Stormheart?"

"Yeah?"

"She disappeared?"

"Yeah, one day she just vanished – sorta speak," I answered.

"Huh," Forkbeard said, "Serves her right!"

“Uh, how?” I asked, completely confused.

“I was Stormheart’s right hand man,” Forkbeard continued, “I helped her with many of her conquests after I gave up my solo job which was pretty much just being a bounty hunter and scammer.”

“Okay,” I said, “So why are you here and where is Stormheart?”

“I have no idea where Stormheart is, but I know why I’m here!” Forkbeard replied, “One day we had a disagreement over how to take over a group of islands, and Stormheart decided to leave me here.”

“Hasn’t anyone come by that could help you get off the island?” I asked in surprise.

“A few,” Forkbeard said, “which allowed me to get the supplies I needed, but I only trade with one trader that stops by every few months or so.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t have a desire to go back,” Forkbeard admitted, “No one likes me.”

“But there’s a new generation of people that wouldn’t even recognize you,” I told him, “I mean I didn’t!”

“I know, but...,” Forkbeard began, “I guess I just like being here.”

“Okay then,” I said, “So you have no idea where she was even going?”

“Actually, I do,” Forkbeard told me, “She was planning on conquering an island full of these weird natives.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed, “I’ve heard of that place!”

“Yes, yes,” Forkbeard said, “But that’s really all I know.”

“Well, thank you indeed!” I told Forkbeard, “But I probably should be going now because my friends may start worrying about me.” (which probably wasn’t the case since everyone else was probably still busy searching their islands, and Puffnut could sleep for hours on end)

Forkbeard stared at me for a moment, then pointed to my Odin’s Storm.

“Where did you get this?” he asked me.

“Oh, I made it!” I said proudly.

Forkbeard nodded, “Can I have it?”

The question caught me completely off guard.

“Oh, well, uh, no, I kind of need it?”

Forkbeard stared at me for a while; then said, “Follow me. I have something to show you.”

I started to get a little uncomfortable but carefully followed him down a short tunnel, to the right, and then into a very large cavern.

“Check this out!” Forkbeard said, pulling a large rope on the side of the cavern.

Instantly, a large amount of water started flowing out of a hatch that had opened in the side of the wall farther up. It poured out of the hatch and into a small pool of water in the ground.

“Wow!” I said, “What is this for?”

“For you,” he told me, “Have fun!”

With that, he shut the iron door behind me – I was trapped in the cavern.

“HEY!” I yelled after him, “What’s the problem! What did I do?”

There was no answer. I panicked. Within minutes, the room would fill to the ceiling and I would be trapped inside. The pool in the bottom of the cavern was definitely salt water (a simple taste of the water confirmed it, so I knew it must somehow connect to the ocean, but I also knew that

it could be several meters below sea level and I would have to swim for quite a ways to get out from under the island. My other possibility was through the hatch, but it looked way too small for me to fit in. I also thought of reclosing it, but then the hatch promptly fell off its rusty hinges and into the growing pool of water.

Even though the cavern was large, the water was just pouring out of the hatch's hole and quickly filling the cavern up. In another two minutes, I was already treading water, and by the tenth, my head was almost at level with the flow of water.

"This is so not good," I thought.

I was just about to make a last ditch effort and dive for the hole in the bottom and see if I could swim out, when I heard a screeching noise. I looked under the water and saw the large, iron door start to give way. It must have been very old. Suddenly, with a small explosion, the door was ripped off its hinges and the water started flowing back out of the cavern and into the tunnels. Instantly, the water level in the cavern that was near the ceiling dropped with surprising speed. However, this quick drop of water level created a massive water funnel which sucked me right into the water and throttled me out the cavern's entrance. I found myself being uncontrollably sucked down one tunnel; then another! I sped with lightning speed while also trying to hold my breath. Just when I thought I couldn't hold my breath any longer, I was slammed up against a dirt wall and floated to the top of... - of the hole I had originally fallen down into. The water level in the hole was rising rapidly, and I quickly found myself being pushed to the surface. I briefly wondered about where Forkbeard was, but figured he had probably gone somewhere else – either that or he was still below me in the now watery tunnels. In a matter of seconds, the water reached the top of the hole and started spilling over.

"Man alive!" I said to myself as I scrambled out of the pit and started slogging my way back to Puffnut, "Where did all this water come from?!"

I thought it must have been some connection to the ocean, because the water was all salt water, and yet the ocean was not located as high as the water had gone in the hole, so either there was some sort of extra store of water somewhere, or there was some sort of weird pneumatics going on. I hoped that Puffnut and our dragons were okay, but by the time I finally made it back to them, my feet were hurting. This was probably a combination of running with soaked feet and also trying to run in the muddy ground for the first few meters. However, when I finally burst out of the forest, Puffnut was still there snoozing and Blasty and Powder were staring at each other. When Puffnut heard the sound of my running feet she cracked open one eye.

"Hey! Why are you all wet?" she asked.

"Let my guard down and got nearly drowned by a weird hermit," I gasped, "Let's get out of here!"

"Works with me," Puffnut drawled, pulling herself to her feet.

"NO ONE IS GOING ANYWHERE!" an angry, old voice yelled from the forest. Suddenly, Forkbeard emerged from the forest pushing the biggest crossbow that I had ever seen. The spear in it was so huge it was thicker than my whole body.

"That the lunatic?" Puffnut said, pointing at Forkbeard.

"Yep," I said, "WHAT DO YOU WANT?!"

Forkbeard began to say something, but Blasty scorched the entire stretch of ground where Forkbeard was standing. I caught sight of Forkbeard diving into the bushes; then Puffnut was up and flapping into the air with Powder and I and Blasty following. Blasty's wings beat the air

so hard that the fire and remains of the crossbow were immediately extinguished, but I didn't bother to look back after that.

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"Kaizar, I swear excitement follows you *everywhere!*" Sulpher exclaimed, "Nothing even half that exciting happened on *our* islands."

"I have no idea why that is, but you're welcome to take the adventure instead of me," I offered Sulpher, "I'm not a big fan of getting almost drowned."

"Well, at least we know we're right on track!" Zephyr exclaimed, "We had better talk to the natives!"

"Did you guys all search this island too?" I asked them.

"Yeah, while you were off snoozing and running," Sulpher said, pointing to Puff and I, "We were all doing the boring work!"

"Not my fault!" Puffnut said, shrugging her shoulders, "It takes a lot of sleep to keep this beautiful form!"

"Oh Thor," Zephyr mumbled.

"So you weren't accosted by the natives?" I asked, trying to get everyone back on track.

"No, but we flew far overhead, so as not to be seen," Zephyr added, "There wasn't anything of interest besides their large village and a small, crudely constructed dock on the east."

"Should we all go talk to them, or should some of us go check the other island while we're at it?" I asked.

"We can't talk to them, they'll just as much attack us as try to trade," Nuffnut reminded us, "They even attacked Johann, and he's *anything* but scary!"

"We can handle observing the natives, if you want to go check out that last island," Zephyr told me confidently.

"Eh, okay, then," I replied, "You guys are okay with being left to do the dangerous work?"

"I eat danger for breakfast!" Nuffink spoke up, "This'll be a piece of pie!"

"Alright, then!" I told them, "I'll see ya soon!"

Poor Powder growled when I forced him to get flying again, but he reluctantly obeyed.

"We're just checking on this last island," I told him kindly while patting him on the neck, "We can camp for the night soon."

Blasty, Powder, and I flew right over the little village which did turn out to be pretty small; then we headed due north for an hour. Finally, the last island came into sight.

"Wow!" I said to myself, "This island is a lot rockier than the others!"

It was indeed, mostly just mountain and rock – kind of like Outcast Island. In addition, it was fairly small. A preliminary swoop around the island confirmed that there was nothing of real interest on it, but I landed anyway in the largest flat part I could see. Blasty just splashed into the water. As it was midafternoon, it was quite hot outside and Powder immediately joined Blasty in the water. I was impressed with how well Blasty was behaving and following Powder's lead. Especially that Powder was being such a good leader.

I couldn't lie that my feet were still hurting. All this traveling was starting to wear on me. I had had the most insane couple of days, and I think all that was catching up with me. As I painfully walked over the course rock, I promised myself to spend at least a week off as soon as this search ended. Powder and Blasty were playing around in the water – splashing literal waves of

water everywhere, while I searched around for possible driftwood or signs of life here on the island. A cursory run around the base of the island showed nothing of interest, but eventually I came upon a large rock arch that curved over a significant portion of the ocean and ended in a rock column far out in the water. Deciding to look at this amazing natural phenomenon I waded a little into the water and rounded the steep mountainside to stand under the arch.

What I quickly found out was that it was not just an arch, it was the entrance to a massive, and I mean humongous, cave. It was what I thought of as a water cave – in which the entrance to the cave was in the ocean – so it was more like a sheltered port. That's when I saw Stormheart's ship.

It was almost as massive as the water cave that it was in. Although I could tell it had not fared well over the many years that it must have been anchored inside the cave, I could still make out the swirly marks and the red paint that adorned the outside of the ship. I had never really seen a picture of the ship, but I could tell it was hers because my parents had told me it was massive and had huge spikes sticking out of the front of it. That was exactly what this boat looked like. I hugged the side of the cave and waded in water up to my chest over to the rocky beach that the boat was anchored next to. After scouting around for a bit, I found a rickety old plank that stretched from the highest point of the rocky beach that was in the cave and onto the ship. I carefully walked across it and jumped on board the ship. It was only then that I realized how truly huge it was. It was about a half kilometer long and about two thirds of a kilometer wide with a large space in the front part of it that was just water. My dad told me that the front of the ship opened up so that enemy or friendly ships could sail inside Stormheart's ship. In addition, there was a very large "command deck." Besides all this, there were dilapidated crossbow launchers and catapults everywhere. Of course, the ship was in pretty bad disrepair, but nothing that I figured could not be fixed. Plus, the ship was still floating! I was just thinking about how useful a massive ship like this would be for the Outcasts when I heard the creaking of boards behind me.

I was glad for sensitive ears, and I immediately whipped around. Standing behind me was half a dozen natives all tip-toeing up to me. When I spun around, they quickly wielded angled sticks. One of them threw their stick at me. Of course, I dodged, but the stick flew past me, turned around, and flew right back! I was quite astonished at this seemingly magical feat!

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to see how they did it, because now I had to defend myself. As I watched several more natives converged on me – others carrying spears and axes.

"WHHHHEEEEE!" I put two fingers in my mouth and blasted a piercing call. Having had a dragon for the majority of my life, I had really mastered the art of whistling, and it was so piercing that a few of the natives had to put their hands to their ears. The rest kept on attacking.

The preliminary few I easily knocked out of the way with my Odin's storm. I then crouched and threw my weight against two natives that were standing too close to the side of the ship and knocked them overboard. One native jabbed his spear at me, but I took him out with a pair of bolas from my shield. I followed that up by counter-blocking a native's axe chop and twisting it out of his hands with a quick Berserker hand twist. A few more tried to get behind me, but I took them out with a series of well-aimed leg kicks and a smash on the head with the broadside of my weapon.

“Whomp!” I thrust my elbow into the stomach of another native and tossed him off the ship as well.

“Ki-ya-yee-harusa!” a heavily war-painted native said as he jumped down from the second deck onto me. However, he didn’t predict me to grab the nearest warrior and spin him around. The war-painted native landed promptly on his comrade, and they splayed out on the ground. I knocked him out with my shield. Meanwhile, another flying stick shot at me from the right, but I noticed it in time and blocked it with my shield. The stick, after hitting my shield, careened off and into the bay – it didn’t return to its thrower.

“RRRRROOOOOOAAAAARRRR!!” the thunderous growl of a Bewilderdeath and tell-tale shriek of a Dreadstrider echoed off the walls of the cave and reverberated in a deafening noise. What few natives I could still see, stood back in alarm. Upon seeing the massive Bewilderdeath trying to fly under the ceiling of the cave, they screamed in abject terror and ran off as fast as they could. I noted that they disappeared down a corridor that ran away from the rocky beach. Powder followed in fast pursuit, but poor Blasty quickly found that he could not fit.

“Over here!” I yelled at Blasty, hoping he could understand me.

Upon seeing that he could not follow Powder and hearing my voice, Blasty turned in my direction. I furiously waved my hands and pointed to the part of the ship where I knew the boiler was. My dad is also fascinated with mechanical inventions, and he had gone into specific detail about the inner workings of the ship. Stormheart’s boat used a massive boiler that, when her captured dragons spewed fire/lava into it, created a ton of steam and powered the large pistons that ultimately ran the boat. Blasty carefully maneuvered to me and stared at me with his two, colossal eyes.

“Shoot here!” I told him, pointing my Odin’s Storm towards the open fireplace. Obviously, I couldn’t be sure that the ship would still run, but I figured it was worth a chance.

“FWWWOOOOM!!!” an intense fireball flashed through the air and exploded into the boiler. Instantly, the old wood inside the boiler lit and the entire thing caught fire.. No sooner did this happen than I heard the sound of boiling water (which was due to a complex system of pipes and water fed from the ocean). After that, I ran up onto the bridge to look for the steering mechanism. It took me longer than I would have liked, but I finally found two large levers and a few crude gauges with metal handles. I had absolutely no idea how the ship’s steering mechanisms worked, and there weren’t any instructions so I tugged on one lever and listened. Nothing happened, so I pulled the second lever. That certainly did something! I heard a “hiss” of steam and the scraping of metal on metal. Then, the huge paddle wheels started to rotate.

“I can’t believe this!” I said excitedly, “How is it running after *all* these years! Surely the natives didn’t know how to run it!”

But run it did. Unfortunately, I quickly found that the paddle wheels were turning in the wrong direction, so I had to switch the first lever to go forward. I also found out that there were two large anchors that were keeping the ship in place, so I had to pull those up. However, after that, the ship started chug-chugging out of the bay.

“RAWWHHAAOAARR!” Powder flew out of the corridor and up to me just as the ship left the cave. I had been so busy trying not to smash into anything that I had completely forgotten about him!

“Got them?” I asked Powder.

Powder growled. I assumed that meant he had “gotten” them.

“Let’s hope we have enough fuel and this ship can get us back to Outcast Island,” I told Powder, “Won’t they be surprised!

It turns out that trying to steer a massive ship is a lot easier said than actually done, but once I managed to get the boat out of the narrow harbor, there was a fairly large margin of error in the ocean to figure the steering out. The self-propelling mechanism for the ship was incredibly noisy, as I suspected it hadn’t been oiled in a while, but Blasty’s massive fireballs kept the boiler burning hot, and the ship moving at a fast clip. This, in turn, caused a fairly large delay from when I turned the steering wheel to when it actually turned.

We arrived back at the natives’ island after about another two hours, and I stopped the ship near the opposite side of the island.

“I should’ve created a place to get back together,” I mentioned to Powder, “Because now I don’t know if I should try to go find them or wait for them to find me!”

There was no answer, and when I turned to where Powder was, I saw that he was fast asleep. Down below me in the middle of the ship. Blasty had also fallen asleep now that he didn’t have to supply the ever hungry boiler with fire.

“They’ll be fine,” I told myself as I climbed down an old, rope ladder into the ocean. It was a short swim over to the beach, and, after listening for a while, I discerned no audible living beings around. I quickly ran through the forest toward the other side of the island where the main village was supposed to be. The long day was starting to really take a toll on me so that by the time I reached the small knoll that looked down upon the village a few kilometers below, I was breathing hard. I don’t know why I always did this to myself. Unfortunately, I couldn’t see much, because there was a thick grove of trees immediately around the village, but I could tell the village was there, because the tops of grass hut roofs rose above the trees. I looked up into the air, but didn’t see any dragons.

“Hmmm,” I thought, “They must be talking with the villagers.” I was suspicious though, because I would have suspected some activity or noise. I placed my two fingers in my mouth and blew a piercing whistle in the direction of the village. This was the whistle that Amber responded to – Sulphur had taught me it a while ago. I then waited for a minute, but no reply came.

“That’s not good,” I mumbled to myself slowly, “I wonder what’s going on.”

I quickly stood back up from my crouched position and turned around to head back to the boat, but that’s when I heard the snap of a twig breaking. Instantly, I ducked behind my shield and unsheathed my Odin’s Storm.

“Kayachoochoa!”

The unfamiliar babbling of a native sounded amid the forest, and I heard the tell-tale signs of several others rustle around me – I was surrounded.

“ZZZHHing!” a small object zipped through the air and embedded in a tree behind me. I briefly gave it a glance and noticed that it was a home-made dart – probably with poison or sedative on the tip. About at that same time, the area around me was suddenly invaded by the natives.

“Fwoop!” I slammed into the nearest native, sending him careening off the edge of the cliff.

Then, I sliced at two more and backstabbed a third. The natives were very courageous, but not nearly as well trained as Berserkers.

“Gong!” I knocked one out hard with my shield while counter attacking another’s spear thrust. Just as I crushed the last native in my sight of vision against a tree, I felt a sharp pain in the back of my neck. Instinctively, I reached behind me and pulled the dart out of my neck. Having been stuck with one a few times before, I had had time to think about how to deal with them. The injection of the substance on the tip was unavoidable, but I usually had about five seconds before passing it if it was just a sedative. I whipped around and chucked the dart back into the forest from the direction it had hit me. I heard a surprised yell and the thud of a body just as I crouched to the ground and blacked out.

Chapter 10: Running

When I came to, I was propped up and tied securely. After shaking my head, I realized that I was completely bound with strong vines to a tall pole of wood. Below me was a small stack of wood. Surprised, I glanced to my left and right and noticed Nuffink and Nuffnut. Just as quickly I finally absorbed the rest of my surroundings and saw the several dozen natives dancing around the poles chanting some creepy tune.

"What did you guys DO?!" I yelled over the din to Nuffink.

"We do nothing!" Nuffink informed me, "We just were talking with them nicely, and then they knock us all out!"

"Where's your dragons?" I asked him.

"I think they got knocked out too!"

"This is not good," I quickly surmised.

"My circulation is being cut off!" Nuffnut whined from across from me.

"That's kinda the point," I pointed out.

"Well I don't like that point!" Nuffnut grunted, struggling to get into a more comfortable position.

"Kaizar? Is that you?!" Sulpher screamed over to me from somewhere to my right.

"YEAH! IT'S ME!" I yelled back.

"ANY SUGGESTIONS?!" Sulpher replied.

I quickly tried to figure out how I could whistle to Powder and Blasty with my hands tied behind me. After about a few minutes, what looked like the leader of the natives walked over to me with a torch.

"Stop!" I yelled at him, "What are you doing?!"

"Isn't it obvious?" the leader replied in perfect viking.

"Wait, you speak my language?"

"Yeah," he replied, "I was taught it, and it's a good thing that none of my fellow Granians have been so degraded by impure human blood as to have to speak this vulgar language!"

"You're weak," I told him.

"WHAT?!" he replied, glaring at me.

"You couldn't take me out in a fair fight, so you have to kill me this way," I told him, returning his glare."

The leader stared at me for a minute, "I don't care how good of a fighter you are. You are a stranger; thus you deserve to die."

"Your logic is weird," I told him, "But I also can summon dragons. If you don't let me go, I will summon dragons to wipe out your village."

"I know you have dragons," the leader spat, "But we have captured them."

"Not all of them," I smirked.

"What are you saying?" he replied, his evil smile turning into a small frown.

"I can summon the great white dragon!" I told him.

"What's that?"

"A dragon so big that he could crush half the village just with one fireball!"

“Impossible!” the leader told me.

“Try me!” I challenged him.

“Alright then,” he told me, “Summon him.”

“I can’t with my hands tied behind my back,” I said.

“Then I guess you aren’t a very good dragon summoner!” he laughed, leaning down to light the firewood at my feet.

“Nice try buddy,” I told him, then, doing the only thing that I could think of, I screamed.

“AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH – POWDER!”

My yell was so loud that the leader dropped his torch and clapped his hands around his ears.

“Ouch! Too loud,” he told me.

The torch had now gone out after being dropped on the ground, but the leader went over and picked it up. He then punched me in the stomach with the smoldering end.

“Oof,” I saw stars, and then the sky grew dark.

I knew I was about to pass out, so I sagged my head, but, weirdly enough, I didn’t pass out.

That’s when I heard a joyous yell from Puffnut, “BLASTY!”

“Wut?” the leader said, quickly looking upward as the rest of the other natives did as well.

Screwing my head around, I managed to look upwards and saw the massive wings of Blasty soaring overhead as well as a relatively small dot of Powder soaring nearby.

“You were telling the truth!” the leader replied, surprised, “Fire!”

Quickly, the other natives, loaded darts into their bows and fired at Blasty.

“Nooo!” I yelled at them, but my yell fell on deaf ears – several dozen darts sped through the air towards Blasty’s vulnerable underside. At that same time, however, Blasty launched a colossal fireball down at the village which exploded into a mushroom cloud and incinerated the nearest three or four buildings. The aftershock and heat wave took my breath away and knocked over several of the villagers. That was immediately followed by a screaming noise and the familiar “fsszzzzhhh!” of Powder’s light beam that chopped the top off several trees nearby.

At that, pandemonium broke out. Villagers ran every which way, trying desperately to get out of the way of Blasty’s fire and Powder’s light beam. The leader himself ran off like the chicken that he most likely was. Powder, however, was no chicken and headed straight for the largest crowd of villagers – launching a large cloud of mist at them and paralyzing every single one of them.

In a matter of a few seconds, Blasty and Powder had things well under control, and Powder came over to me first. With a swift snap at my restraining binds, I was free.

“Thanks boy!” I said, patting him on the head, “Let’s go release our friends!”

I had no idea where my Odin’s Storm was, but I picked up the abandoned spear of a native and used it to saw through the binds of Nuffnut, Puffnut, and Sulpher.

“Oooh! My body,” Puffnut groaned, sagging to the ground, “My body isn’t responding well!”

“It’s the after effects of that sedative they used,” Sulpher said, slapping her arms and legs to get feeling back into them.

“Let’s get out of here!” I told everyone as Nuffink and Zephyr stumbled over – hanging onto Powder, “I’ve got a surprise to show you, and these two,” I said, indicating to Powder and Blasty, “Deserve a special treat!”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

It had taken a while to find our dragons who had been sedated and locked up in an underground cavern beneath the main village but awakening them had not been a simple task. Finally, we managed to get back to the beach where Stormheart's boat still stood.

"Oh...my...goodness!" Puffnut yelled, completely forgetting that she was supposed to be tired, "That is the world's largest boat!"

"Holy eel! That *is* huge!" Zephyr added, "And it still works?!"

"That's how we got over here!" I laughed, "Although we couldn't have done it without Blasty!"

Sulphur shook her head in amazement, "That is one remarkable dragon."

Sulphur and Amber flew over and were the first to land aboard the legendary ship.

"Looks like it's going to need some renovations," Nuffnut had to comment when she landed,

"The décor is so outdated!"

"What décor?" I asked.

"Well, ya know, all these little blue swirlies and ornate do-thingies!" Puffnut responded, poking at the ship's ornate siding with a stick like it was a dangerous animal.

"It's not toxic, ya know," Sulphur reminded Puffnut.

"Toxic art," Nuffnut sniffed, "Whoever designed this had no idea what they were doing!"

"I think it looks quite nice," I told them, "Though it's not necessarily my favorite artwork, it's definitely well done."

"Coming from someone who has no concept of design," Nuffnut laughed.

I grimaced and clapped my hands together, "You wanna bet on it?!"

"Absolutely!" Nuffnut replied smugly.

"Oh come on you guys!" Zephyr told us, exasperated, "You really wanna bet on something this silly. How could we even judge something as subjective as 'art'?"

"You wanna bet on if we can do that?" I replied, laughing.

Zephyr rolled her eyes and ran after Nuffink who had already disappeared below deck – interested in investigating the workings of Stormheart's ship. I followed.

"We're not finished here!" Nuffnut yelled after me, sounding like a mentally unstable villain, "I'll always be a better interior decorator than you, ALWAYS!!!!"

I rolled my eyes and caught up with Sulphur, Zephyr, and Nuffink who were standing around one of the ship's large pistons.

"Just look at it's size!" Nuffink gaped, "It could pull the world!!!"

"It's not *that* strong!" Zephyr chided Nuffink.

"I know, but it feels like it could!"

Considering the rather stressing situation I was in while trying to get the ship out of its harbor, I hadn't very well investigated all the nooks and crannies of the ship, but, upon my closer inspection, I saw that it had been cared for, although in a rather unorthodox way. I could only imagine that the aggressive natives were the ones to have kept it in shape, but for what reason and how they knew what was most important to keep in upkeep was beyond me. For instance, the holding cells had been left completely alone – meaning that they were literally rotting away, and the bars of the main door were completely falling off its hinges. Meanwhile, the piston appeared to be fairly well greased (with something green that looked and smelled awful, but apparently did the job) and the floor was clean. Eventually, I made my way up to the bridge where the steering was all done and a few massive crossbows lay in a heap of wooden splinters

on the ground. As I had seen before, the various levers and steering wheel of the ship were in fine condition, and I could see for quite some ways – what with being this high up on the ship. Below me, I could see Nuffnut and Puffnut with most of our dragons standing around on the main deck with Blasty taking a nap in his usual spot in the middle of the ship. I was just wondering if I should head back to the main deck and intervene between Puff and Nuff's argument when I noticed a small horn-like shell extruding from a long pipe next to the ship's steerage equipment.

"I wonder what this does," I thought, just as it occurred to me what it was probably for.

"Helllooooo!" I said into it, "Anyone on the other end."

I waited for a minute; then said again, "hellooooo, wooooo, this is the ghost of Stormheart!!!!" Promptly, I heard a loud yell from down below, and Nuffink came scrambling up to me on the bridge.

"There's the ghost of Stormheart still here!" he yelled.

"We haven't confirmed that!" Zephyr yelled up after him.

"Are yoooouuuuu suuurrrre?" I hissed back into the loudspeaker.

This time I heard a surprised shriek from Sulpher, but Nuffink quickly caught on.

"There's a ghost of me too!" he yelled into the horn. At this, Zephyr laughed loudly.

"I *knew* there was no ghost!" She yelled, "What are you two up to?!"

"It's a sort of intercom system!" I yelled to them, "Pretty helpful for communicating across the ship!"

"Neat!" Zephyr exclaimed, "But, uh, can we just get back to Outcast Island? I'm exhausted!"

"For once," I stated into the intercom horn, "I wholeheartedly agree!"

I blew a whistle to Powder who, growling softly, roared to Blasty. Blasty was just as unhappy to be awakened as Powder, but quickly understood what to do. He shot a colossal fireball into the boiler and fell back asleep.

With that, the hiss of steam immediately filled the network of pipes, and, after yanking hard on the lever to my right, the ship slowly creaked, groaned, and lurched forward. All eyes turned towards the front of the boat, as, almost unbelievably, we headed for home.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

It was several months later, in the dead of winter, that I got bored. After Zephyr and Nuffink had left with Dart and Ruffrunner respectively, the rest of us had found things to keep us busy during the rest of the summer and into the fall. Renovating Stormheart's ship had turned into a major job, but one of which everyone had rallied behind. After a dozen or so test runs in which the War Lord boats had been either scared away or completely annihilated, Tuffnut and Eret had deemed the project wildly successful. However, now that both Blasty and Stormheart's boat had been acquired by us on Outcast Island, the War Lords had been completely ignoring and avoiding us, meaning that there was not really anything interesting going on besides boar, mud pit events. Sulpher and I were currently playing a game of "Maces and Talons" with Puffnut and Nuffnut who were doing surprisingly well.

"You know... I think I want to go back to Wing Maiden Island now," I said to Sulpher.

Puffnut looked up in surprise, "But I thought that you were staying away from them!"

"Yeah, but I miss all my friends and family there. I don't think it's right to keep them thinking I'm dead for too much longer," I replied.

"You're probably right," Sulpher said, "I'm honestly surprised they haven't come visited us for as long as they have!"

"They're probably really busy fortifying their defenses," I surmised, "What with them being easily beaten by Lemmirg and Blasty."

"Psshhh," Nuffnut laughed, "We have Blasty!"

"They know that, but knowing my dad," Sulpher replied, "There's never enough weapons!"

I pushed my tiny longship along the game board and collided it with Nuffnut's.

"And that's one boat down for you!" I declared.

"BUT!" Puffnut quickly replied, "You failed to see my army sneaking along here!"

She moved her game piece, representing a mid-sized group of special-op soldiers over to my fort.

"Aha!" Sulpher exclaimed, "But our longship has long-range crossbows on it, and they destroy your fort's walls!"

"But even *that* is too late!" Nuffnut broke in, removing my archers from my fort, "Because my special-op soldiers take out your last defenders and move in to claim your fort!"

"One word," I told Nuffnut, "Trap."

"Uh oh," Puffnut responded, understanding their terrible misfortune, "We forgot their pit of doom!"

"Wait, wut-?!" Nuffnut replied, "Oh no..."

"Oh YES!" Sulpher crowed.

While Nuffnut and Puffnut bemoaned their defeat, as it was apparent that our long ship's soldiers would quickly overtake their fortress, I got up to go see Eret and Tuffnut. I finally managed to track them down in the main study.

"Hey guys! You got a minute?" I said, knocking on the wooden frame entrance.

"Yeah, huh?" Eret said, scraping back his chair and standing up. Tuffnut continued to pour over some yellowing maps he was holding.

"Sulpher and I were thinking of heading back to Wing Maiden Island," I told Eret, "We think it's time to go back."

"Understood," Eret replied slowly, "Being away from family can be awful taxing, but what are you going to do about Stormheart's ship and Blasty?"

"Good point," I replied.

"We need to have at least one so that the War Lords don't overtake us," Eret commented.

"IF they realize that you are much more defenseless," I stated, "Which we don't know how well their surveillance is!"

"True," Tuffnut surprisingly interrupted from his corner, "But I think I know that they aren't concentrating on us anymore!"

He quickly stood up and triumphantly handed me a pile of maps. I stared at them in confusion.

"Uh???...."

"Isn't it obvious!?" Tuffnut crowed, "They're doing something on Dragon Island!"

"Dragon island?" I said, trying to understand the myriad of red lines drawn over the map on the top of the stack, "There's nothing there anymore but rock and lava."

"My point precisely," Eret spoke up, "which makes me suspicious of what they are all doing over there!"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I don't know, but going *back* to our original conversation," I said, "How about I take Blasty with me since he responds well to Powder, and we can leave you with Stormheart's ship."

"Done!" Tuffnut exclaimed, "Because with *you* gone, *I* get to steer the ship!"

(previously, I had done most of the steering as I had more experience with it)

"Now wait just a minute!" Eret argued, "As I'm *clearly* the most sane person here, I should naturally be the one!"

Eret and Tuffnut continued to argue while I gently set the pile of maps down on another table nearby and edged out of the room. I then promptly ran into Sulpher who had, apparently, been eavesdropping outside!

"Sulpher!" I exclaimed, "You scared me!"

"C'mon!" She replied cheerfully, "Let's hurry!"

Sulpher yanked me by the arm and ran back towards our sleeping quarters. Apparently, she had warmed up to the idea of our homecoming quite quickly.

"Uh, Sulpher, you realize that it's early afternoon, and it'll take at least a dozen hours to get to Wing Maiden Island!" I yelled to her.

"Sure, sure, sure..." Sulpher replied quickly, not really listening to me.

"You're crazy! You know that, right?" I told Sulpher.

Sulpher finally stopped in mid-step, right before opening the door to her room.

"Not really!" She smirked.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"Okay, okay, so we have to make an entrance," Sulpher was telling me.

It was very, very early in the morning on the next day, and my eyelids did *not* want to stay open, but Sulpher had insisted on leaving right that instant. Now, I found myself riding a very grumpy Powder with an even grumpier Blasty towards Wing Maiden Island with Sulpher and Amber.

"They have already seen us approaching," I reminded Sulpher, "With this full moon and massive dragon, it's kind of hard to miss us!"

"I know, I know, but they still think you're dead, and we can use that!" Sulpher declared.

"Can we just go in and land normally? I'm tired," I told her.

"Weakling," Sulpher told me, "I'll go in with our dragons, and we'll drop you off on the beach.

You work your way in on land and whistle to me when you arrive. I'll try to be outside talking to everyone," Sulpher explained to me, completely ignoring my previous remark.

"Fine," I sighed.

Ten minutes later, Powder had dropped me off on the beach and flown after Sulpher and Blasty on their way to the village. I, on the other hand, found myself slogging through the forest on a very cold winter night.

"This is just crazy," I thought to myself. I was just thinking of a warm bed when a sudden loud call from the shrubbery in front of me stopped me in my tracks.

"Who goes there!" the voice called out. I couldn't tell who it was, and it was quite muffled, so I paused and said, "It's me."

"Whose me?" the voice shot back.

"Uh, Kaizar?" I replied, not sure what else to say.

"He's dead," the voice replied, "So would you mind telling me who you really are before your head is dislodged from the rest of your body."

"Look," I said grumpily, "It's me alright? I didn't die permanently, now if you wouldn't mind letting me go, I'd like to see my parents!"

There was the sudden swish of fire, and a figure emerged from the shrubbery to my left holding a large torch in one hand and a sword in the other – it was Magur.

"So it *is* you," Magur said, getting closer to my face and staring hard, "But what happened to your face?!"

"We're not going to talk about that right now," I told him, "Now if you don't mind..."

I brushed him aside and continued marching through the forest.

"Halt!" Magur said, leaping onto me from behind and pushing me into the ground, "I was sent to find out who you are, so you're coming with *me*."

"I can't breathe!" I wheezed, as I was pinned to the ground.

Magur yanked my shield and weapon off my back and shoved me forward, "WALK!"

At this point, I was in an even more unhappy mood, but I did what he said.

"Don't you think you're going a little over the top? Especially considering that it's just me?" I told Magur.

"Nope. For starters, I have no idea why you deceived everyone into thinking you were dead. If that isn't nefarious, I don't know what is! And second, I have no idea if you *are* alone," Magur replied.

"Sulpher went to the village ahead of me, but that's it," I told him, still slogging through the forest.

"Figures," he said, "You've deceived her too."

"Uh, how do I deceive her if she knows I'm not dead?" I told him.

"You deceived her into thinking you're all nice and kind," he told me, "When, really, at any minute you could betray us all and kill a good many of us!"

"You really think I'd do that?!" I said, shocked.

"It's highly likely!" Magur replied.

"ANNNND that's why I stayed away for so long," I retorted, angrily, "Because of people like you that treat me like dirt!"

"And why shouldn't I?" Magur said, "You always claim the spotlight!"

"Not intentionally!" I told him, "I just have a habit for getting myself in tight spots and then getting myself out of those tight spots!"

"Well, why don't you just *stay* in one of those tight spots!" Magur said, "I'm sick of you always getting the praise! When you were gone for these several months, I was suddenly the new and upcoming prodigy. Do you realize how good that felt?"

"Uh, sort of?" I said.

"And you wouldn't know because you always are *in* the spotlight!" Magur grumbled.

By this point, we had almost reached the village, and I could see the towering form of Blasty above the trees as well as the loud talking of the village. I quickly blew a whistle.

"What was that for?!" Magur exclaimed, quickly looking around.

"I was just signaling Sulpher that I have arrived," I told him.

"You're not going *anywhere*!" he told me.

“ANNNDD I have a special guest!” I heard Sulpher say to the crowd of people, “Introducing...” There was a slight pause as Sulpher expected me to probably jump out from the trees and reveal myself. There was a slight problem though. Magur had his sword against my chest. “You’re coming with me to my general, FIRST!” he declared.

That was my last straw. Swift as lightning, I ducked under his sword, grabbed Magur by the collar of his shirt and chucked him out of the forest. He went spinning and spluttering head first into the crowd right outside the stand of trees.

Sulpher had chosen the largest open field to land in (for Blasty’s sake), and we had just arrived on the perimeter. When I stepped out from the forest, I saw that there was a significant crowd, as well as many warriors. I could even make out Aunt Mala, standing a foot taller above everyone else.

The crowd had been surprised to see Magur come literally flying out of the forest, and when I stepped out, they all took a long look at me.

“It’s...KAIZAR!” I heard a familiar voice declare – it was Dagur.

There was a murmur of surprise, and then everyone pushed forward to see if it was true.

“Where have you been?!”

“How are you alive?”

“Why did you come back now?”

“How did you tame that giant dragon?”

And many more questions bombarded me, as well as the by far, wildly popular question: “What’s the deal with your face?!”

I grimaced.

“Give him space!” I heard a commanding voice yell over the commotion. Snotlout shoved his way through the crowd over to me and offered me a hand.

“Welcome back, Kaizar. It’s good to know you’re not dead!” he told me, completely unphased by me being alive.

“Where’s my parents?” I asked him.

“I think they’re still at their house,” he told me, “Your mom hasn’t been super outgoing lately.”

“Why not?” I asked, worried.

“Well, what with being pregnant and all, I’d say it’s safe to say she isn’t feeling exactly *normal*,” Snotlout droned on.

“Pregnant?!” I cried out, shocked.

“Pregnant?!” Sulpher yelled in surprise.

“Uh, yeah? You didn’t hear?” Snotlout told us, confused.

“They’ve been gone for several months,” Minden chuckled.

Without waiting to hear another word, I tore straightaway towards home. I had to dodge around the crowd of curious onlookers, but finally made it to my parents’ house. I rushed through the door and found myself barging in on a lively game of Maces and Talons. Dad and Mom looked up in surprise when I came in.

“Wha...what...is that you?” Mom asked, in total shock.

Dad jumped up from the table, knocking the game onto the floor, and grabbed me by the shoulders, shaking me hard.

“It *is* him!” he declared.

“Hehe,” I said, then noticed mom’s large belly.

“Are you pregnant mom?!” I told her.

Dad smiled, “Yes she is! You’re going to have a new little sister!”

Character Relations:

Hiccup (Horrendous Haddock The Third):

Married to: Astrid
Children: Nuffink and Zephyr
Weapon: Inferno (without fire)

Astrid (Haddock):

Married to Hiccup
Children: Nuffink and Zephyr
Weapon: Double bladed axe

Nuffink (Haddock):

Child of: Hiccup and Astrid
Sibling of: Zephyr
Weapon: Viggo's Inferno (without fire)

Zephyr (Haddock):

Child of: Hiccup and Astrid
Sibling of: Nuffink
Weapon: Single bladed axe

Snotlout (Jorgenson):

Married to: Minden
Children: Sulpher
Weapon: Stone hammer

Minden (Jorgenson):

Married to: Snotlout
Children: Sulpher
Weapon: Sword

Sulpher (Jorgenson):

Child of: Snotlout and Minden
Sibling of: None
Weapon: Metal hammer

Fishlegs (Ingerman):

Married to: Heather
Children: Kaizar
Weapon: None

Heather (Ingerman):

Married to Fishlegs
Children: Kaizar
Weapon: Extendable axe with blade at each end

Kaizar (The Sneak Ingerman):

Child of: Fishlegs and Heather
Sibling of: None
Weapons: Odin's Storm and Hiccup's Old Shield

Dagur (The Deranged):

Married to: Mala
Children: Magur
Weapon: Chieftain's axe

Mala (The Defender):

Married to: Dagur

Children: Magur

Weapon: Long curved sword

Magur (The Deliberate):

Child of : Dagur and Mala

Sibling: None

Weapon: Double blade axe

Tuffnut (Thorston):

Married to: Tala

Children: Puffnut

Weapon: Mace (named Macy)

Puffnut (Thorston):

Child of: Tuffnut and Tala

Sibling: None

Weapon: Mace

Ruffnut (Thorston):

Married to: Eret son of Eret

Children: Nuffnut

Weapon: Mace

Eret (Son of Eret):

Married to: Ruffnut

Children: Nuffnut

Weapon: Broadsword

Nuffnut (Daughter of Eret):

Child of: Ruffnut and Eret son of Eret

Sibling: None

Weapon: Mace

Lemmig (The Wrathful):

Child of: Grimmel and Liner

Sibling: None

Weapon: Crossbow

Ogard (Bludvist):

Child of: Drago and Dinah

Sibling: None

Weapon: Metal reinforced, wooden stick

Kroquette (The Swift):

Child of: Krogan and Kliah

Sibling: None

Weapon: Power axe

Vyker (Grimborne):

Child of: Ryker and Sarah

Sibling: None

Weapon: Two curved broadswords

Liggo (Grimborne):

Child of: Viggo and Susan

Sibling: None

Weapon: ornate longsword

Jolianne (The Trader):

Child of: Unknown

Sibling: Unknown

Weapon: Daggers

Stormheart (The Pirate):

Child of: Unknown

Sibling: Unknown

Weapon: Ornate wooden stick

Author Bio

KaiZar Ingerman:

Kaizar, better known as Kai, is a pen name for an amateur writer located in the United States of America. Kai is a Junior at the local University and is currently working towards a Bachelor's in Computer Science. In his spare time Kai likes to play chess, program applications, build Lego robots, watch his favorite TV series, and write books.

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Kaizar and Sulpher are back in this action-packed sequel to the best-seller How To Train a Speed Stinger. This time, the mysterious visitor from the previous book comes back - urging Kaizar to help him train a new hybrid - but this turns out to be Kaizar's toughest challenge yet! Then, something happens to Kaizar, and Sulpher is forced to lead the rest of the Mutant Dragon Riders to save the archipelago from the greedy grasp of the likes of Lemmirg, Ogard, Krogette, and others. Read... if you dare!