

## – CHAPTER 10 –

### Soba and Soldiers

“Do you know how to make noodles?”

“Like from scratch? I’ve made spaghetti once a while back.”

“What’s that?”

“Another noodle dish. I’m sure this won’t be too different!”

Ricky and Kawazoko were setting up at a small outdoor cooking area that rested on a short ledge above the creek. Kawa and Tancho’s house stood right next to the waterfall cliff nearby, a thin mist being cast over them by the fall’s spray.

It took Kawazoko a few tries to light the twin fires of the rudimentary clay cooktop they’d be using. Once they were lit, he filled a dented metal pot with water from the waterfall and placed it on one of the cooktops to boil, setting a similarly worn pan atop the other. It was quite a change of pace for Ricky, who was used to working with the many modern utilities available in the student kitchen at Possibility Community College. He found this fact incredibly exciting.

The two set to work mixing brown buckwheat flour with water to make dough, and then carefully stringing it into thin flat noodles. It was a bit tricky for him at first, but Ricky soon found himself getting into the groove of it. When they’d finished shaping the noodles they tossed them into the now-boiling water in the pot.

Next came the sauce. It was a simple recipe: soy sauce, rice wine, dried fish flakes, and a couple sheets of dried seaweed. The alcohol in the rice wine was boiled off, the rest of the ingredients added one by one and cooked for no more than five minutes. The mixture was then poured through a strainer to filter out the solid bits into an unsightly brown lump. Ricky’s mouth was already watering at the rich, fishy smell of the dark reddish-brown stock that was left, and he couldn’t help but take a *tiny* taste of it once Kawazoko had watered it down into a dipping sauce. The salty soy sauce taste dominated the mixture, though there was a slight hint of fish flavor to it as well. Definitely unlike any sauce he’d had before.

*Now how will this taste with the noodles?*

He hadn’t had buckwheat noodles before either and was eager to see if they tasted any different from those he had. He didn’t have to wait long as the noodles finished cooking a few minutes later, but before Ricky could taste one, he was surprised by Kawazoko taking the noodles in the strainer and placing them under the icy cold waterfall for a bit. When he asked why the MudWing was chilling the noodles, Kawazoko explained that this was a *cold* noodle dish!

This only further excited Ricky’s taste buds. After only a few hours in this world he was already learning a brand-new recipe unlike anything he’d made before! What were the odds he could convince the others to stick around here for a while longer so he could learn more?

With the noodles properly chilled Ricky finally gave one a try, finding it to have very little flavor on its own. It was a stark contrast to the strongly salty sauce; the two would certainly make for an interesting combo.

All that was left was to prepare a side. Kawazoko brought out a couple of the largest white radishes Ricky had ever seen – “daikon”, as he called them – and the two began chopping them up. As they did, they were approached by Kokuyouseki returning from her chat with the rest of the village.

“Something smells good,” she commented as she neared, gazing down at the two sitting side-by-side cutting radishes.

“How’d it go over with everyone?” Kawazoko asked.

“I only told them the basics. Some were understandably distraught, but they mostly just want to be left out of whatever is going on,” Kokuyouseki explained. Her gaze drifted past the two, where Ricky turned to see a pair of MudWing dragonets spying on them from inside a nearby bush. “Well, most of them anyway.”

Realizing they’d been spotted, the two dragonets stumbled head over tail out of the bush and darted up to Ricky. They each stared at him with that fiercely inquisitive look only a curious child could have.

“Is it true that you guys came from another planet? Are you aliens?”

“I *told you* they look too normal to be aliens! They’re *obviously* from the lost continent!”

“But SkyWings don’t live on the lost continent! That’s where all the BUG DRAGONS live! More importantly, how did you get here?”

“Are you here to invade us?”

“Why do you have a pet scavenger?”

“Enough you two!” Kokuyouseki scolded, silencing the inquisitive kids almost immediately. “Now will you both stop harassing our guest, or would you rather I tell your parents that you’re talking to strangers instead of doing your chores?”

“No Ms. Koku!” the two shouted in unison, bolting away before Kokuyouseki could get in another word.

A tired look crossed the older MudWing’s face. “And so it begins,” she mumbled under her breath. She turned to Ricky. “Sorry about them, you know how dragonets can be.”

Ricky shook his head. “It’s no bother to me.”

“How long until dinner’s ready?” she asked Kawazoko, who was just finishing dicing the last of his daikon.

“I’d say it’s ready now! The others are already inside waiting. We’ll have the food served right away!”

“Good, I could use a meal after all this excitement,” Kokuyouseki said, stretching out her back. “What a day it’s been!”

*You can say that again,* Ricky thought.

Kawazoko handed Ricky a stack of small bamboo mats, chopsticks, and little talon-carved wooden bowls, instructing the SkyWing on how to properly serve the dish. Interestingly, the noodles would be served on these bamboo mats instead of plates. Ricky made his way to the house where the others were waiting, Kawazoko following behind with the food and Kokuyouseki tailing him.

Tancho and Kawazoko's house was much like the rest in the village. Standing atop a raised foundation constructed of thick wooden beams, its walls were a patchwork of slightly yellowed paper sheets and haphazardly nailed-on wooden planks. The house had a slight lean to it, its immense thatch roof looking about ready to slide clean off.

It consisted of only two rooms, one containing some storage and a short table that Ricky assumed was for dining, and the other a sleeping area with a few faded blankets. Both rooms were covered by thin bamboo mats that frayed at the edges, the floorboards beneath them creaking under Ricky's weight. Everything inside was slightly damp, probably owing to the house being built right next to a waterfall.

Hidden, Xavier, Reggie, and Tancho were all sitting around the low table in the first room (well, *on* the table in Reggie's case). Tancho looked about as friendly as usual, though even she lit up at the sight of the food being brought in.

"That was quick," Hidden commented as Ricky struggled to squeeze himself around everybody in the rather small room. "Not that I'm complaining. I'm *starving!*"

"We had lunch four hours ago," Xavier stated.

"Yeah, but a lot's happened since then! I've burnt a lot of calories!"

As Ricky finished setting the table Kawazoko began dishing out the food, serving a small pile of noodles onto each of the seven bamboo mats on the table (except for Reggie, who only got a couple noodles since they were already thicker than his arms). Xavier had to whap Hidden with one of his wings to stop him from digging in before everyone had the chance to sit down.

The dipping sauce was poured into the wooden bowls for everyone (except for Reggie, who had his poured into a small measuring spoon Kawazoko had on-hand).

The daikon was set onto a single platter at the center of the table for everyone to grab from (except for Reggie, who got a single cube of daikon as big as his head).

Ricky was about to start eating once he'd sat down, only for the three MudWings at the table to chant "itadakimasu" before doing so. He figured this was a cultural thing that he was unaware of, and he felt a little bad for not having known about it, but none of the MudWings seemed bothered by his ignorance. Hidden had already started eating anyway.

One thing he was sure about: this Zarusoba stuff was *good*. While the noodles didn't have much flavor on their own – aside from a bit of earthiness – the dipping sauce more than made up for it. The sauce was very salty, though as Ricky ate more it took on an additional fishy flavor too. The cold noodles were a little strange at first; he did prefer warm noodles to cold, though these were still very good, and grew on him the more he ate. The daikon was smooth and mild, and made for a nice complement to the noodles. Kawazoko also provided some thin strips of dried seaweed as a garnishing, its flavor reminding Ricky of a still woodland pond.

He knew this wasn't some high cuisine like his professors at PCC always obsessed over, but he didn't care. Good food was good food.

The others seemed to be enjoying it too. Hidden had already scarfed down his noodles before Ricky had even gotten halfway through his own. Even Reggie had eaten as much of the comparatively giant food as he could stomach.

“So, vat're ve gomma dsho now?” Hidden said through his last mouthful of noodles.

“What?” both Xavier and Kokuyouseki replied.

Hidden swallowed. “What're we gonna do once we're done here? Do we just go back to the Salvation and try to get it up and running again?”

“It's probably being investigated by the Queen's soldiers as we speak. If you went back now, you'd likely be taken in for questioning,” Kokuyouseki explained.

Xavier grew visibly distraught at the mention of this. “*Maybe* we don't go back right away then,” he suggested. “I'd rather not be locked up in a dungeon thank you very much.”

“*Oh yeah!* Your Queen's got a castle, right?” Hidden asked.

“She does! Doyousai castle is the oldest standing structure in all of Pyrrhia! It's been a long time since we three were there, but I'll never forget it!” Kawazoko gushed.

“That's cool,” Hidden replied. “We don't have stuff like that back home.”

Kokuyouseki raised a brow at him, chiming in as she finished her own serving of noodles. “Do you not have a queen where you're from?” she asked.

Ricky shook his head. “Our country's governed by an elected parliament that in turn elects a prime minister. Aside from the Ice Kingdom, most nations in our Pyrrhia haven't had proper monarchies for nearly a century.”

This seemed to catch Tancho's interest. She didn't speak up though, returning to her meal in silence.

“Well, our Queen Ban is very kind. I'm sure she'd understand if you explained your situation to her,” Kawazoko offered. Tancho let out a dispassionate grunt at this.

“Are you sure she wouldn’t just lock us up for making a mess of her kingdom?” Xavier asked.

“Positive. It was an accident after all, and nobody was hurt!”

“*That we know of...*” Tancho grumbled, getting a stern look from Kokuyouseki.

“It probably would be best if we spoke with the Queen, that way we can avoid conflict and misunderstandings and all that,” Ricky added. “A lot of problems can be solved by talking things out.”

“I’d like to see that castle too.” Hidden added.

Xavier shrugged. “It does seem like the most sensible thing to do.”

They all turned to Reggie, who stared back at them as if he hadn’t been expecting them to think of him. “I’m fine with whatever you guys decide to do,” the man said dispassionately.

“Then it’s settled. Next stop, Doyousai!” Hidden exclaimed.

Suddenly, there was a loud, authoritative roar from outside. “WHERE ARE THE INTRUDERS?! We know they were heading this way!”

The order immediately quelled the jovial mood. Everyone at the table got up and huddled around the sliding door, peeking out at the village where a new band of MudWings had arrived. They were all clad in armor crafted of carefully shaped iron plates and fine mail, wielding swords and spears and looking

altogether menacing. The three MudWings in the house all tensed at the sight of the newcomers.

“It can’t be!” Kawazoko gasped.

“Unfortunately, it is...” Kokuyouseki admitted.

Tancho let out a growl. “Of all the dragons, it had to be *him*.”

“Who?” Ricky asked.

Kawazoko pointed at the dragon leading the armored MudWings. He was a bit shorter than them, but despite that he seemed to have the most bravado in the way he held himself. His armor was more ornate than the others, with a great big horn not unlike that of a stag beetle jutting out from the forehead of his helmet. There was a sheathed blade at his side and a vicious glare chiseled onto his grim face. His greenish-grey horns curled down and around his ears like those of a ram. He wore a ring of gold through his nose, and had a vicious scar over his right eye. He marched about barking orders at the other armored MudWings, directing them to search the village for the “intruders” that Ricky knew all too well.

“His name is Numawani. He’s the Chief of Staff at Doyousai and one of the top generals in Queen Ban’s army,” Kawazoko explained. “Tancho and I were in Kokuyouseki’s unit during the war, and *he* was her commanding officer.”

“A real nasty piece of work, that one,” Kokuyouseki added disdainfully. “Ruthless and cunning. I heard when the war ended they had to drag him from the battlefield.”

Tancho simply stared at the Chief of Staff, her jade eyes laced with a venom that sent shivers down Ricky's spine.

"I thought you said the Queen wouldn't be mad at us! *They* look pretty mad to me!" Xavier exclaimed.

Kokuyouseki sighed. "That's just how Numawani is. Always so dramatic."

"What do we do? He's the *last* dragon you'd want to have peaceful negotiations with!" Kawazoko worried.

"Do you guys have a back door? We could sneak out and make a break for Doyousai!" Hidden suggested.

"If we try to run we'll just become fugitives," Ricky argued.

"So, what, we just turn ourselves in to this smoke-breather?"

Ricky wasn't sure what to do. If Numawani was as bad as the MudWings said he was, then they might be putting themselves in danger turning themselves over to him. Would he try to kill them right there? Surely he was just here to bring them in for questioning!

While Ricky was mulling this over, he nearly missed Tancho suddenly dashing out of the house toward Numawani. The Chief of Staff had been threatening one of the villagers and was about ready to draw his blade.

"Tancho, wait!" Ricky shouted, darting out after her without a second thought. The *last* thing they needed right now was to be picking fights with the Queen's soldiers!

Tancho seemed determined to give the Chief of Staff a beating, one of her foretalons already raised and balled into a fist. Numawani was too distracted by the villager to notice her approaching; she'd surely take him by surprise.

But then what?

Before Tancho had the chance to land a single blow, Ricky shouted as loudly as he could. "HERE WE ARE! WE'RE TURNING OURSELVES IN!"

Tancho froze, skidding to a stop mere paces away from Numawani. The Chief of Staff peeled his gaze from the villager and turned to the two, first to Tancho and then to Ricky (a noticeably disgusted look crossing his face when he laid his bright green eyes on the SkyWing).

"Hmph, is that so?" Numawani questioned. He glanced at Tancho's raised fist, which she quickly dropped. She stepped aside when Numawani began to approach Ricky, moving to check on the villager he'd been threatening.

"Where are the rest of you? My scout said there were three dragons who came out of the vessel. And a scavenger too."

Ricky swallowed, trying his best to retain his composure (he didn't know if he'd ever get used to hearing humans referred to that way). He stared down at Numawani, somehow feeling incredibly intimidated by the MudWing general despite being significantly larger than him.

“I...I first want assurance that we won’t be chained or locked up or anything. We didn’t mean to cause any trouble, and we just want to talk this out with the Queen and be on our way.”

Numawani scoffed. “That’ll be for her to decide, I suppose. You’re not in any position to be making demands, SkyWing.”

The spiteful way he said “SkyWing” did *not* help Ricky’s impressions of the guy. Unfortunately, he *was* right, what with the half dozen soldiers now surrounding Ricky, weapons raised.

One of the soldiers walked up next to Numawani. They looked remarkably similar to him, but were taller, with broader shoulders, much less elaborate armor, and a softer expression that seemed the polar opposite from Numawani’s perpetually sour look.

“Do we really need to be this forceful? He doesn’t seem like a threat,” the soldier questioned.

“Quiet Numagaeru! Don’t forget who’s the one in charge here!” Numawani snapped back. Numagaeru backed up to fall in line with the other soldiers, sufficiently intimidated.

“Now then SkyWing, I’ll ask this again. Where. Are. The. OTHERS.”

“Right here sourpuss!” Ricky heard Hidden shout, turning to see everyone else making their way from Tancho and Kawazoko’s house. Numawani clutched his scabbard tightly, narrowing his eyes at Hidden and gritting his teeth.

“Watch your tongue sand-snorter, lest I cut it of,” he hissed.

Hidden stared at the Chief of Staff, looking more disgusted than intimidated. “Ew.”

Ricky turned back to Numawani, trying his best to look confident and unflinching despite how terrified he was that Numawani would absolutely do as he said, if not worse. “We’re all here now,” he stated. “We’ll go with you to Doyousai, and then we can sort this all out *peacefully*.”

Numawani looked between a barely-holding-it-together Ricky, a disgruntled Hidden, an outwardly nervous Xavier, and Reggie, who had climbed back up into Ricky’s talons in preparation for the journey ahead. Numawani then trained his gaze on the three MudWings who had taken them in, saying “They will be coming with us too.”

“But they don’t have anything to do with this!” Ricky argued.

“They aided and abetted you after you tore a sizeable gash in this kingdom. They clearly have *something* to do with it and will be questioned accordingly.”

Ricky grit his teeth. He couldn’t really argue with that, or rather he didn’t want to for fear of only exacerbating the situation. Xavier wasn’t eager to test Numawani’s patience either, grabbing Hidden by the collar and whispering to him to keep his mouth shut. It was Tancho who finally spoke up.

“The three of us traveled with them together. Leave the other two be. I will come with you and answer whatever questions the Queen has.”

“Tancho, you don’t need to…” Kawazoko started, but his sister cut him off.

“It’s my job to protect this village, and that means protecting you two as well.”

Kokuyouseki stepped up to Tancho, placing a talon on her shoulder. “You don’t need to shoulder all the burden for us over this self-appointed position.”

“I’ve made my decision sensei. This isn’t my first time to the capital anyway. I’ll be fine.”

Kokuyouseki grinned. “Well, I suppose you finally getting out of the village for once isn’t a bad thing. Who’d have thought the determination that bound you to us would see you leaving!”

The older MudWing rubbed her student’s head, Kawazoko stepping up to give his sister a hug.

“Stay safe, alright.”

“You too Kawa.”

“Are you done?” Numawani impatiently asked. He looked utterly disgusted by the displays of affection taking place before him. He truly was one of the sourest dragons Ricky had ever met.

Tancho stepped up to join Ricky, Hidden, and Xavier, staring Numawani dead in the eyes. “I’ll also be making sure no harm comes to these four during this journey. From this point onward they are under my protection.”

Ricky gave Tancho a grateful look, but she didn’t return it, her stoic gaze remaining fixed on Numawani.

The Chief of Staff for his part seemed almost amused at the declaration. “A pity more of us MudWings don’t have your gumption,” he commented, casting a disdainful glance at Numagaeru who stared down at the ground.

He raised one of his foretalons, and the soldiers began to lift off. Hidden, Xavier, and Tancho spread their wings as well, Ricky making sure Reggie was secure before he joined them. As they lifted into the air, Ricky turned to see the entire village watching them depart. He could see Kawazoko and Kokuyouseki waving at them, Kawazoko calling out to them one last time.

“Good luck!”