

## – CHAPTER 9 –

### Hataya Village

The six dragons (and human) made their way through the dense forest carpeting the Diamond Spray Tributaries at a leisurely pace. With Kawazoko unable to fly they had to travel on foot, though Ricky wasn't complaining. He'd always loved the hikes his father used to take him and Hidden on. The crisp mountain air free of pollution; the sound of the pine trees rustling in the breeze; and the excitement he felt each time he spotted a woodland creature darting about. What wasn't there to love?

Hidden hadn't been quite as big a fan of those walks as Ricky had, feeling more at home in the workshop than the woods. He was currently engaged in a lively conversation with Kawazoko about the Salvation, regaling the many incredible things he'd discovered in his time working on the ship, much to the MudWing's delight. Even Xavier joined in on the conversation from time to time, his own excitement about the ship shining through.

Tancho walked a short way behind the three, keeping a close eye on them. She was obviously very protective of her brother, and her village too. If only Ricky could convince her that they truly posed no threat.

"That's quite some story," Kokuyouseki commented. Ricky had just finished giving her a detailed – and rather lengthy – explanation of their situation.

"Yeah. It is a lot, isn't it?" the SkyWing agreed. "I still can hardly believe it myself."

"This Jade Science Institute place seems interesting," Kokuyouseki continued. "The way you describe it makes it sound much more elaborate than the Jade Mountain Academy we have in our Pyrrhia. Though, I've never had the chance to visit it myself."

Ricky nodded. "Elaborate is definitely a fitting word for the place. They've even got their own bullet train station!"

Kokuyouseki looked at him quizzically.

"Do...you not have trains here?"

"Not that I know of."

"What about cars?"

"Afraid not."

"Electricity?"

"You mean lightning? Oh, we have plenty of that."

Ricky stared at Kokuyouseki for a moment. It seemed like this world had much less advanced technology than theirs did. Had they really gone back in time?

*No, that doesn't add up*, Ricky thought. The Spray *definitely* hadn't been covered in mountains at any time in the past, at least as far as he knew. Hidden had said that he was ninety-percent certain they were in some kind of parallel universe.

"What exactly is a 'train'?" Kokuyouseki suddenly asked, pulling Ricky from his own train of thought.

"Well, it's like this long, snake-like vehicle that travels along a track and carries people places. It's mostly used by humans though."

"Your world sounds very strange," Kokuyouseki stated.

Ricky chuckled. He supposed it would be pretty weird to someone who had no experience with modern technology. Then again, he shouldn't be assuming things about these dragons when he still knew so little about their world.

"So, what is your Pyrrhia like?" he asked.

"Where do I begin?"

Kokuyouseki proceeded to give Ricky a rundown of this version of Pyrrhia. The continent was divided into six kingdoms for the seven different Pyrrhian dragon tribes, with the RainWings and NightWings sharing theirs. The kingdoms were all in roughly the same places as some of the nations of Ricky's Pyrrhia, with the mountainous Mud Kingdom taking up the same area occupied by the marshlands of Reed.

There were a lot of things that surprised Ricky about this world. The dragons here had only just recently discovered the

existence of Pantala a mere ten years ago. A nearly 20-year-long continent-wide war had ended just a few months before that. There was magic, apparently (Ricky wasn't entirely sure whether he believed that, but he tried to keep an open mind). *And* around 5000 years ago, nearly all the humans had been wiped out in an event called the Scorching.

Ricky really didn't like that last fact. The Scorching he was familiar with marked Jaheart's use of atomic bombs to end the great war between dragons and humans a little less than a century ago, but *this* Scorching sounded much, *much* worse. He sincerely hoped nothing like that ever happened again, in either of their worlds.

The unsettling image of humans being burned by an army of angry dragons was swiftly lifted from Ricky's shoulders when he spotted a fox darting by. He only caught the shortest of glimpses of it before it disappeared into the surrounding shrubbery. He smiled.

Of all the places they could have wound up, this place was pretty nice.

"Hey! Guys...!" Ricky heard Reggie call out. He turned, spotting the human struggling to climb over a fallen log that was nearly as thick as he was tall. He seemed exhausted, probably because he'd been trying to keep up with dragons on foot for the past half an hour.

"Need a lift?" Ricky offered, walking back over to Reggie and offering a talon for him to climb onto. The man leapt from

the log and into Ricky's palm, settling down and taking a moment to catch his breath.

"Thanks..." he gasped.

"No problem!" Ricky replied.

As Ricky caught back up with the group, he noticed Kawazoko approaching him. "Wouldn't it be easier if he rode on your back?" the MudWing asked.

Both Ricky and Reggie gave Kawazoko a confused look, before Ricky remembered that the dragons here had only just found out about humans' sentience around the same time they found out about Pantala (another unnerving fact about this world he didn't like to think about).

"Where we're from, it's considered really offensive for a human to ride on a dragon," Ricky politely explained.

"Oh! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to offend you or anything!"

"It's alright, just a misunderstanding!" Ricky said. He looked down at Reggie, who didn't seem all that bothered either. Then again, he hadn't seemed very fussed about anything since the Salvation had carried them to this place.

"It's strange," Kawazoko continued. "Even though I've known for a while that Scavengers are just as smart as dragons, I still haven't fully gotten used to it. I guess it's just 'cause they haven't visited our village yet."

Ricky, Hidden, and Xavier had all stopped in their tracks after his last statement.

"Dude," Hidden flatly stated, the same disgruntled look on both his and Xavier's faces. Even Reggie seemed a little rattled for once.

Kawazoko stared at them, looking equal parts confused and scared. Ricky sighed.

"The S-word is also considered really offensive where we're from. Like, *really* offensive."

"Oh...I..." Kawazoko started, only to be stopped by Ricky wrapping a reassuring wing around him.

"Like I said, just a misunderstanding."

"Yeah man, you're good," Reggie added. He leaned back against Ricky's talon, relaxing in its softness.

The group pressed onward for another ten or so minutes. The afternoon sun continued its journey across the sky, the shadows it cast from the mountains occasionally draping the group in a false night. By now Ricky couldn't even see the faint plume of smoke drifting up from the Salvation's crash site anymore. Had anyone else come to investigate it yet?

The village was supposedly not much further ahead. However, the sound of struggled grunting caught Ricky's attention and pulled him from his path. He let Reggie down, and after a bit of searching for the noise's source he spotted a frail,

shriveled old MudWing fighting against a bundle of bamboo stalks twice his length.

Without a second thought Ricky darted over, lifting the rear end of the bundle that was dragging along the ground and giving the MudWing quite a shock.

“What the?! Who are you?”

“Ricky! I was just passing by and thought I’d lend a talon!” He gave the MudWing a friendly smile.

The MudWing returned Ricky’s smile, a few gaps in his teeth showing between his wrinkled lips. “Well, I certainly can’t say no to that!” he exclaimed, his voice hoarse. His gaze suddenly shifted behind Ricky, who turned to see Tancho approaching.

For a moment Ricky worried that Tancho would get mad at him for fraternizing with one of the villagers. Instead, she offered to carry the front end of the bamboo in the elderly MudWing’s place.

“I’ve told you time and again, your back can’t take this kind of hard labor.”

“Oh, you know how it is Tancho! Cutting is in my blood! I can’t just give it up!”

“Then at least have someone come with you to help.”

Tancho hefted up the bamboo onto her shoulder, turning to Ricky and giving him a nod. It was hard to tell, but Ricky thought he felt some camaraderie from her for once.

The others joined them soon enough, Kawazoko now the one carrying Reggie. They continued onward to the village, Ricky now able to hear dragons in the distance.

Soon, they stepped into a wide, circular clearing in the forest. Towering stalks of bamboo leaned into the open space ever so slightly as if they were attempting to envelope the settlement that had dared to carve itself into their territory. A shallow creek twisted its way through the middle of the clearing, trailing from a waterfall that spilled over a small cliff at the far side of it.

"Welcome to Hataya Village," Kokuyouseki said, gesturing to the scattering of quaint wooden huts that dotted the clearing.

The village was miniscule when compared with the metropolises of Drakenon and Possibility with which Ricky was familiar. Around a dozen buildings were scattered about the clearing, held a few meters above the ground by wooden stilts and covered in droopy thatch roofs. Splotchy dirt paths wound their way between them, worn into the earth from generations of use. A couple wooden bridges had been constructed over the creek, one looking brand-new and the other like it could collapse under the weight of a single dragon.

All throughout the settlement MudWings were going about their day. Some sat near small campfires cooking animals caught in the surrounding forest. Others lingered in the huts, busy working on anything from weaving baskets of bamboo fibers to carving wooden bowls and utensils. Dragonets played in the stream, splashing each other with water and rolling around in the riverbed while giggling uncontrollably.

Ricky loved the place already. He'd never been somewhere so cozy. It was far from the constant hustle and bustle of the city that he was used to. He could easily see himself lying down and relaxing by the waterfall or hanging out with his friends around a camp fire roasting seasoned rabbit. It was just the kind of place he'd love to settle down in when he grew old.

Tancho led Ricky toward a nearby hut, one of the smaller ones in the village. Bundles of bamboo were piled up in a towering mound behind it, the two setting theirs down with the rest while the old MudWing thanked them for their trouble.

"You always do so much for us Tancho! If only there was a way for me to repay you," he croaked.

"It's fine, really."

"Well, if you say so..." The elderly MudWing turned to Ricky. "And thank you to you too...um...what did you say your name was again?"

"Ricky! And I'm just happy to help!"

The MudWing smirked. "Strange name for a SkyWing, that is." He turned and stepped up onto a small wooden porch at the front of his house, sliding aside its wooden door and disappearing inside.

"I'm not sure I've ever met a SkyWing as eager to help others as you," Kokuyouseki commented as she and the others joined Ricky and Tancho by the bamboo cutter's house. "All of

the ones I fought alongside in the war acted like someone had shoved hot coals up their rears."

"Koku!" Kawazoko barked, giving her a playful jab with his elbow.

Kokuyouseki let out a laugh. "What? It's true! Scarlet made it her mission to fill her army with the worst-tempered dragons in her kingdom!"

"Well I can assure you that I'm no grumpy soldier," Ricky stated. "I've just always believed in treating others the way I'd want to be treated!" Both Kokuyouseki and Kawazoko gave him a surprised, yet appreciative look. Ricky turned to Tancho, hoping she'd eased up on her suspicions of them, but she seemed more puzzled by him than anything else, and still a good deal skeptical.

Tancho gestured to a house on the far side of the village, next to the waterfall. "Our house is over there, we can talk more inside," she explained. "We shouldn't cause a scene."

"Might be a bit late for that," Xavier added. A glance around the village showed that almost all the MudWings around were staring at them. They would have undoubtedly heard the Salvation crashing from here, and it was likely they didn't get many visitors who weren't MudWings either.

"I'll fill everyone in on what they need to know," Kokuyouseki offered, breaking away from the group. "You lot get dinner started; I'll know when it's ready by the smell."

She trotted off, a group of MudWings already gathering around her to ask what was going on. Ricky didn't pay her much mind though. Her last statement had caught his attention.

"Oooh, what are we having?" he asked. A new world meant all-new dishes he'd never tried before. He was starting to feel as excited as Hidden was whenever he got a new set of gizmos to tinker with.

"I'll be making Zarusoba!" Kawazoko explained. "Had it before?"

"I think I've heard of it, but I've never had the chance to try it," Ricky answered. "You wouldn't mind if I helped out, would you? I'm a bit of a cook myself!"

"Oh sure! We'll need bigger portions for all seven of us, so I'd be glad to have the help!" Kawazoko replied. "It'll take some time to prepare, so we should get to it!"

Kawazoko set Reggie down and started off for his and Tancho's house, Ricky following behind him with a grin that stretched from ear to floppy ear. He was never one to pass up the chance to learn a new recipe.

He caught Hidden murmuring "like two peas in a pod" to Tancho as he left, the MudWing simply grunting in response. But when he glanced back, he swore he could see the faintest of smiles across her snout.