



CHAPTER 20

The Academy Tretch Pod

What was that thing? It looked like something between a ghost and a monster. It moved like a ghost. He knew for sure he didn't want to see it again. It had been carrying the heaviness. The closer he got to the ghost, the stronger it felt. Fortunately, the sensation dissipated as he now surveyed the desolate landscape below.

Conor let the fear dissipate as he slid down to his butt. He rested his head in his hands and tried to calm down as the image of his pursuer continued to run through his mind. So far, it seemed as if they'd escaped, but he still didn't want to take the chance of opening the portal only to find it lingering in the corridor. He'd just wait here a little longer with Titan. Wait, where was the dog?

He got to his feet and looked around for Titan in the red dark. He wanted to call out to her, but then decided against it. Drawing attention to himself hadn't been working well for him so far. He took a few steps away from the rocky wall and realized he was standing at the top of a ridge. It overlooked cracked and blackened ground with rivulets of bright lava cutting through it like rain trails down a windshield. His feet shuffled back from the edge. It was a long way down.

Conor moved to the right, back along the rock wall hoping to bump into her. He resolved to call out in a loud whisper. Hopefully, Titan would come running because he didn't feel too thrilled about exploring Tretch right now. Ari's warnings

about the perils of her home didn't make it sound very hospitable. If this place were so bad, why would they even replicate it at the Academy?

The sky above looked like rolling waves of fire clouds. Another volcano, the spewing geyser of wet lava declaring its active state. He soon wandered up to the twin posts of a suspension bridge formed of narrow perforated planks fastened together with cord. It descended at a slight angle to a plateau. His gut told him not to even think about stepping out onto it, and he was in total agreement with his gut.

Had Titan gone across the bridge? *Please, no.* Then his eye caught a slight movement confirming his fears. There was Titan, standing tall on the plateau ahead, her tail wagging enough to catch against the blood-red light. He called out to her in a harsh whisper, but she didn't react. He had to get closer. Conor placed his hand on the nearest post and rubbed his forehead with his other palm. He risked a step on the bridge. It swayed a bit under his weight, but it seemed sturdy enough. He reassured himself that it should be fine since Titan looked to have crossed without any problems.

His arms spread out to hold both parallel cords serving as handrails—mediocre barriers to a death drop. He risked both feet on the first plank. He bent his knees to test the sturdiness and debated jumping up and down to test it further—and then decided against it. What if it did break? How would he get to Titan? This thought gave him the surge of courage he needed. If he didn't get her, then she'd be stuck and lost alone in this firepit of a training pod.

His right foot found the next plank. Then the left joined it. He thought back to the Ascension obstacle course. This was kind of the same thing, except for the bubble gel and silicone slide to the bottom in case he fell. Hopefully, the bridge would hold, and he wouldn't need any of that. As his confidence in

the walkway's craftsmanship began to build, so his stride began to lengthen.

Titan remained just ahead. Her tail stopped wagging and a low growl vibrated in her throat. Conor recognized this as a pretty bad sign. He couldn't tell what she saw, or heard, or smelled. Was it the black ghost, or something else? He kept moving toward her but slowed his pace. "Titan, come here," he whispered. He called again, this time in a louder tone. She still didn't budge.

Then he heard the thudding footsteps. They came from the plateau, moving upward toward the dog's defensive position. A pair of sharp, orange eyes pinned against a jagged black shape moved upward with each thundering footstep. The eyes moved up and up until towering high above Titan. The form now came into full view.

A Dragor. The devastator of Ari's home.

Interwoven scales, thick and jagged, coated its massive torso, and its oversized head sat between wide, muscled shoulders. Its two long arms extended just past two crooked legs, each the size of full-grown tree trunks. It slammed a four-taloned foot right in front of Titan and swiped both clawed hands across the ground in an X. It directed a retaliatory growl at the dog in an effort to terrify the bizarre new threat.

This didn't deter Titan. She stood her ground and roared a tremendous bark. The Dragor recoiled in surprise at this smaller beast's tenacity, but that just infuriated it more. It opened its jaws wide, revealing dagger-teeth the size of Conor's hand. It lowered its head and reeled back its neck, displaying a churning ball of flame resting at the back of its throat.

"Titan, look out!" Conor screamed. A spinning stream of flames shot out, drenching the plateau's corner with a wave of fire. Titan didn't anticipate the fire breath, but she moved too fast to get caught in it. She scooted to the side, causing the attack to miss its mark. The Dragor turned to the left, and,

rather than try to catch the dog again with fire, it whipped one of its forearms at her. The blow struck Titan in the torso, sending her rolling and spinning in the black dust.

Without any plan of attack, Conor instinctively rushed forward in her defense. He had to get to her fast. However, a second stalking Dragor suddenly leaped onto the bridge behind him, launching him airborne. Conor landed on his stomach and quickly rolled over. The second monster now thumped across the bridge, moving ever closer with each lumbering step. The bridge's cords stressed under the initial impact and began to shred. Conor heard the tearing and clambered to reach the plateau before it either broke away or the creature bit him in half.

He couldn't reach it in time. The cords snapped and the planked walkway disappeared underneath them both. Conor flailed his arms, stretching for something to grab, but found nothing but air. The Dragor fell first, twisting and slashing to stop its plummet. Conor fell an instant later, both of them helpless to stop gravity's pull.

The Dragor smashed headfirst into the unforgiving rock. Its neck broke, and the rest of its body plopped lifeless with a loud boom. Conor fell slower than the monster, but it seemed fast enough. His legs hit first causing his knees to buckle and his chest to slap hard like a belly flop in a cold swimming pool.

He grimaced and rolled to his side. His chest felt like it'd been hit square in the ribs with a baseball bat. His first thought was "ouch." His second thought rested on the mystery of how he was still alive. The third thought made him jump back to his feet. He lay just several feet away from the monster's slack jaws. It didn't move, but Conor didn't want to wait around for it to spring back to life.

Hot lava rock now singed through his shoes as they burst into flames. He peeled them off and flung them away only to realize nothing protected his feet from the blistering surface.

He pranced away to keep the heat off his feet but realized the lava rock didn't burn. It felt warm, but not overly hot, like sun-drenched beach sand.

Conor couldn't help but look back up at the shattered bridge to reassess the height of the fall. The distance looked much too high to survive without wings or a parachute. He checked his body for blood and broken parts, but all things being considered, he felt okay.

Conor jolted with the sound of another roar as a splash of flames spilled over the edge of the cliff high above. One Dragor remained, and it was battling his Titan.

He sprinted around the mountainside to find an easier, faster way to the summit. He spotted a slope cut into one side of the jagged hill. Its steepness looked daunting but manageable. Conor hurdled a waist-high ridge and began his ascension. The pounding of his heart in his ears muffled the barks, roars, and intermittent fire spurts as he rushed upward.

The pathway stopped at a drop-off. It only led back down. He'd have to free-climb. He jumped to snag a chunk of rock sticking out like a hitchhiker's thumb. It was a short leap and an easy pull to climb on top.

He hesitated a moment but then collected his courage. The climb to the top would be the only way to save Titan. He took some comfort in the fact that he didn't need to climb a mountain—just a plateau. He could make it. He had to.

Conor dug his fingers at two opposing handholds and pulled himself up, one after another. His feet easily found plenty of places to push from. The rock was bumpy and riddled with pockmarks large enough for his fingers. He soon found a climbing rhythm as the fear of not reaching Titan in time replaced the fear of falling. The rock suddenly broke away under his right foot and Conor hung by a single handhold. He yelled out and looked down between his legs. A pang of

fear pulsed in his mind as he spotted the ground far below. His fingers dug in tighter to the brittle rock as he swayed suspended by one hand.

Then a powerful revelation struck his mind like a spotlight in a dark room. Why was he afraid to fall? Hadn't he already fallen all the way from the top and landed on his feet . . . kind of? The fall wouldn't hurt him. He didn't know the reason. He just knew it wouldn't.

His muscles surged with the fuel of assurance, and this emboldened him. His climbing speed doubled as he grabbed whatever handhold he spotted, now moving with the dexterity of a tree lizard. He pushed himself, untired and driven. He looked down to the right and recognized another path leading to the plateau. He glanced back to the top and launched himself upward. He'd take the fastest route instead.

He soon reached the top edge and climbed to his feet. Titan lay on her side, her body pinned and crushed under the weight of the Dragor's foot. Its talons dug into the ground, locking her down. Conor cried out and dashed forward with the intensity of a falling meteor. The Dragor spotted him and snarled. Conor charged, wishing for a weapon to chop off its leg right at the knee, but he'd have to use the only weapon available—his body.

His shoulder lowered as he dove at the monster's ankle like a guided missile. The collision erupted with a resounding *snap* and an aching roar from the beast as it staggered back and toppled over. Conor rose up, hoping the crack he'd heard wasn't any of his own bones. He still felt strong as he turned to check on Titan. Surprisingly, the tenacious dog was already on her feet, poised for a counterattack.

The Dragor clumsily pressed to its feet using its long arms to push itself up. It was unable to rest steady on its left leg due to a freshly broken ankle, and Titan seized on its immobility

to grab the easiest target. She lunged at the monster's tail, sinking her powerful fangs into the meaty flesh. The Dragor's scaled armor proved insufficient to protect against the bite as scales splintered off and flitted away like ice chips tossed in a spinning fan.

The Dragor roared again in agony, but it wasn't ready to accept defeat. It violently thrashed its tail but couldn't manage to shake the dog or lift her from the ground, lacking either the leverage or the power. It turned toward her and slashed Titan across the back with its extended claw. This took effect, and the dog released her grip.

They squared off again like two tired gladiators in a fight to the death. Conor wanted to uneven the odds. Blood was oozing from the Dragor's wounded leg, or more accurately, its foot. Conor looked over and found his weapon. Two of its talons had broken off and were rooted in the ground. They called to him like horned swords beckoning the chosen king to claim his destiny.

He rushed over to the nearest embedded talon, sliding along the broken shale and skidding to a stop just beside it. He wrapped his hands around it and yanked, hoping it wasn't as stubbornly impossible as the Harbinger's Bane axe. He breathed relief as it slid smoothly out of its dust sheath, a curved black dagger of savagery. It extended the length of his entire arm and took both hands to carry. He leveled it like a jousting lance and charged.

The Dragor spotted the boy with the stolen spear and swiped at him. Conor dodged and slipped on some broken gravel. He fell and immediately collected himself enough to scamper over and grab the talon-lance again. He hefted it up just in time to see the Dragor's dripping fangs looming overhead. There were too many teeth to count, but the Dragor obviously wanted to use them all.

Conor lunged forward with his weapon, but the monster had already pulled back. It hadn't wanted to eat him, at least not without cooking him first. The Dragor belched a wall of fire too massive for Conor to fully avoid. He planted the talon on its end and tucked as small as he could behind it. His eyes slammed shut as he buried his chin into his chest. The flames engulfed him, splitting around the vertical shield and carrying over him like an angry wave crashing on a weathered dock.

He couldn't get small enough to hide completely from the intense heat blast. It licked and shredded away his uniform sleeves up to the shoulder, and his pants disintegrated below the mid-thigh and around the hips. The fire burst was short, but it felt like broiling, slow-motion death.

Conor dropped to the ground once the flame faucet snuffed out. His arms and legs were charred; they ached as if the fire had siphoned all his energy directly out of his skin. Even his hair hadn't emerged unscathed. It was singed all over, and a wide streak of hair had been wiped clean away above his right ear.

The Dragor hadn't finished with him yet. It lingered over him, its eyes wide like a child who'd just been handed an ice cream cone covered in rainbow sprinkles. It moved closer, its tongue coating cracked teeth with a fresh coat of saliva. Orange eyes sparkled with the lust of a fresh kill.

But just as it whipped its head down to grab the seared snack, it jerked backward. Titan had its mangled leg in her maw and pulled the beast off balance with the power of a tow winch. The Dragor lost balance and stumbled to its knees. A shrill screech shot from its throat. It couldn't reach the nuisance yanking on its leg, so it turned back to the prey it could reach. It bit down toward the boy but found only rock and dust. Conor had moved.

He was now standing at the Dragor's right, just under its lanky arm. He lifted the curved lance up and drove it hard and

deep into the beast's chest, piercing through scales and bone and lung. The creature recoiled in agony. It danced backward, toppling over the plateau's edge and pounding against the rock face over and over as it fell.

Conor limped over to ensure the battle was finished. Far below, the Dragor lay lifeless and contorted on its side. It didn't move, and this brought Conor some respite. Titan joined him at his side. Claw marks cascaded from the top of her back and down to her belly. They both wore the wounds from a challenging fight, but they'd somehow survived. One thing was certain: the creatures inhabiting these pods weren't simulation at all.

Considering himself lucky to have endured thus far, Conor felt ready to leave. There was just one problem—a significant one. The bridge leading to the exit had disintegrated, leaving just dangling cords. He didn't see any other way to get up to the portal on top of the ridge, unless he tried climbing, but he didn't have the strength for that right now. His arms felt like dead branches, and his skin looked like tree bark.

Looking out over the vastness of the Tretch pod, Conor wondered what else might want to put him on the menu. For now, he just wanted to lie down. But he couldn't do it up there—they were too exposed. "Let's get down," he muttered to Titan as he tugged her collar and started toward the best downward route. Fortunately, the Dragor's death drop had carved out enough patches of rock to navigate a way to the ground without climbing.

It took a little longer than anticipated, but Titan nudged him along until they finally reached the bottom. Conor snuck quietly past the dead Dragor just in case it wasn't as dead as it appeared to be. They wandered away into a small canyon, hoping there wouldn't be any more surprise attacks.

The volcano boomed in the distance, briefly drowning out the groans bellowing from the rock formations all around.

A bird screeched above them, and he looked up. No, not a bird. It resembled a giant bat, and it was circling with two companions. He needed to hide, find some sort of shelter.

Just ahead, he spotted a dark hole cut into the mountain. They moved to it and discovered it wasn't as deep of a cave as he'd hoped for. At least it would get them out of sight. After all, he had no idea if Dragors lived in caves and didn't want to stumble upon a lair. Why couldn't Planetary Studies have started with a discussion about Tretch instead?

This would be fine. It was a small, sheltered dent in the mountain as if a giant had dug out a boulder, broke it in half, and placed the parts just outside it. Conor ducked and crawled inside, placing his back against the wall. Titan moved inside to inspect it and then spun around to take a seat just at the entrance. She put herself on protective watch. Conor slumped his head, feeling grateful for his dog's new training regimen.

The wounded boy petted her back, being careful to avoid the bloody marks cut into her fur. "Good job, girl. You're the best," he whispered.

Then he slid down and passed out.