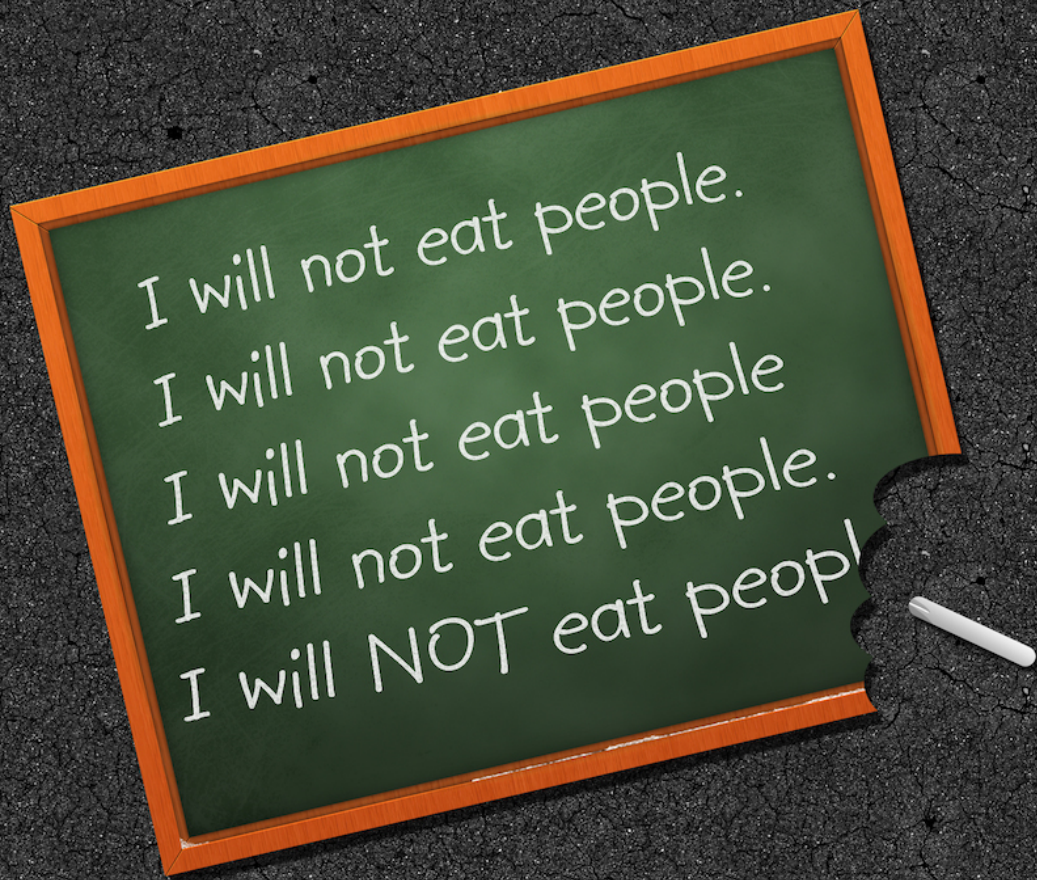


Monster Academy



THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF CREATURE HABILITATION

Matt Forbeck

Monster Academy
Book 1:
I Will Not Eat People

Matt Forbeck

Also by Matt Forbeck

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Dedicated to my wife Ann and our kids Marty, Pat, Nick, Ken, and Helen.
They may spend all day in school, but they come home teach me new
things every day.

Thanks to Jody Lindke for her wonderful illustrations. These were created
as a stretch goal for the Cthulhu Claus greeting cards Kickstarter she ran
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and teared up at just the right spots.

To Pat and Helen for loving the story too.

Finally, a huge thanks to all the readers who backed this book and the rest
of the trilogy on Kickstarter. See the end of the book for a full list of their
names. Each and every one of them is fantastic, and I can only hope this
book justifies their patience and the faith they showed in me.

12 FOR '12

This is the public edition of a book first released as a reward for the backers of my fourth Kickstarter drive for [my 12 for '12 project](#), my mad plan to write a novel a month for the entirety of 2012. Together, 367 people chipped in over \$16,000 to successfully fund an entire trilogy of *Monster Academy* novels.

Thanks to each and every one of you for daring me to take on this incredible challenge — and for coming along with me on the wild ride it's been. And thank you to all my readers, whether you're backers or not. Because of you, I get to tell stories for a living, something I could only dream of when I was in school myself.





Chapter One

The first explosion rocked the lonely castle straight down to the dungeons and threatened to topple it off the mountainous crag from which it stabbed into the sky. Ruddy's ears rang like a bell tower at high mass, and pebbles and dust rained down from the ceiling of the boy's underground cell, coating his mop of shaggy red hair with a layer of dry filth. The sudden noise and shudder surprised him so much he gasped and sucked the crud into his lungs, which sent him into a fit of hacking coughs.

Ruddy wiped the muddy residue from around his tearing eyes and wished his cramped, cut-stone cell had even a tiny window through which he could get some air and look outside to see what was going on. He knew it would have exposed him to the chilly mountain air into which he was sometimes allowed to venture — always under strict supervision — but he'd never feared the cold. He would have traded every bit of that supposed protection for a sliver of a view of the valley below.

Then another explosion shook the whole place, and for the first time in his life the boy felt grateful to have fifteen feet of solid stone all around him.

"Ruddy!" Alphonse called through the cold-iron bars in the cell's only door. The wizard's voice cracked with panic. "Ruddy, my boy! Are you all right?"

"Yes!" Ruddy wanted to say more, but the dust in his throat turned even that one word into a croak.

Alphonse fumbled with the lock and dropped the key. Cursing, he fell to his knees, searching for it in the dim hallway that ran to the door.

Ruddy coughed up something dark nasty and spit it out. "What's happening?"

"They're here." The key scraped into the lock and turned.

"Who?"

The thick door of iron-bound wood swung open on creaky hinges, and pudgy, pasty-skinned Alphonse stood framed in the doorway. The jewels on his velvet robes of midnight blue sparkled in the reddish light that flickered from the top of the long black staff he held in his hand.

"The Royal Watch," Alphonse said. He charged down the short flight of stairs that led to the floor of the high-ceilinged room and grabbed Ruddy by his unwashed tunic. "They already got Yara and Bailey. The blasted guards are trying to surrender. We're the only ones left, and we don't have long."

Ruddy's heart froze for a moment, then burst with a blaze of hope. Might this finally be his chance to leave this wretched place behind? He'd not known another home since he could remember, but he'd hated nearly every moment in this barren place. He didn't understand who these watchers were or what they wanted here, but if he could escape in the confusion of their assault, he might finally be free.

Alphonse hauled Ruddy up the stairs by a spindly arm and dragged him into the stone-lined hallway beyond. From there, the wizard pressed up the narrow spiral staircase that led to the top of the castle's highest tower, huffing and puffing as he went.

Hoping to stall for time to think, Ruddy dragged his feet. If the wizard felt Ruddy resisting, though, the boy couldn't tell. He yanked him along just as hard either way.

Soon, Ruddy tired of barking his shins on the stone steps. He gave up trying to hang back and trotted behind Alphonse instead as they climbed up the twisting stairs.

"Where are we going?" Ruddy asked, hoping that questions might

slow Alphonse down instead.

The wizard ignored the boy, who could see sweat running down the back of the man's neck, darkening his robes.

"Where are we going?" Ruddy said louder.

"We're leaving this place, far behind." Alphonse glanced back over his shoulder and spoke in a brittle voice, his face pale even in the magical light. "You're the cause of all of this, you know. We were fools to think we could ever keep you. I just didn't think they'd find out so soon."

Ruddy wanted to laugh, though he didn't find it funny. Alphonse and the others had imprisoned the boy here in the keep, almost since he was hatched. While those twelve years might not have seemed like a lot to the aged wizard, to Ruddy they stretched to cover his whole life.

"But where will we go?" Ruddy said, curious now. Knowing little of the world outside of the mountains around the castle, his ignorance pained him. He ached to see more of it than Alphonse and his friends had ever permitted.

The wizard ignored the question. "It was that flight Yara took you on the other day, I'll warrant. I warned her against it. 'Someone will see,' I said. She just laughed it off."

Ruddy had loved every minute of that flight, even with Yara riding on his back, prodding him on with her spurs. His keepers rarely gave him a chance to stretch his wings, and he couldn't remember ever having had so much fun. To feel the wind all around him, lifting him up into the air, had seemed like a dream.

Despite Alphonse's reservations—or perhaps because of them—Ruddy had yearned to stay out longer, to wheel higher into the sky, to soar among the clouds, the sun shining on his crimson scales. Yara had let his enthusiasm carry her along for a bit, but all too soon she'd gotten scared. She'd put her sword to Ruddy's throat then, and made him come down and change back into a boy.

Alphonse and Bailey had been furious. Ruddy had been confined to his quarters in the dungeon ever since.

Ruddy had spent so much time as a human that it seemed more

natural to him now than his true form. Red hair and pale, freckled skin stretched over a skinny frame—he wanted to shed it all and fly free once more. He thought of doing so here and now, but that would have only gotten him stuck there in the stairwell.

Soon, he told himself. Soon.

Another explosion slammed into the tower. This one, closer than the rest, knocked Ruddy off his feet and out of Alphonse's grasp. He tumbled back down a few steps before he could catch himself.

As the dust settled, Ruddy peered up at Alphonse, who crouched toward him from the higher stairs, his hand reaching for Ruddy's. The wizard shouted something at him, but Ruddy couldn't make it out over the ringing in his head. Blood trickled from one of Alphonse's ears, forming a rivulet of black sludge as it flowed into the dust caking his face. He didn't seem to notice.

Giving up on conversation, Alphonse pulled Ruddy to his feet, and they started to climb again. Long, tall archers' windows now lined the stairwell. Ruddy only got glimpses of the land outside as they trotted past, but in every direction he saw people—warriors—in red tabards and silver armor standing outside the castle, carrying torches to ward against the approaching dusk.

Although he'd never seen them before, Ruddy knew these people must be from the Royal Watch.

The watchers had no siege engines with them—no large weapons designed to bring down the keep, the kind Ruddy had read about in Yara's books—but they didn't need them. As long as they had enough wands on their side, they could knock the entire castle to rubble overnight.

In that instant, Ruddy understood Alphonse's panic, and he began to share it. If he and the wizard didn't leave soon, they would be captured—maybe even killed if the castle came down on top of them.

The boy sprinted after Alphonse now, his legs pumping for all they were worth. The wizard let go of his arm so they could make better time.

The mad dash left Ruddy gasping for breath, coughing up the last

of the dust in his lungs. His heart slammed in his chest as the pair finally reached the wooden hatch set into the tower's roof and emerged into the encroaching dusk. Ruddy scrambled over to the battlements that lined the flat, round roof and peered between a pair of crenellations. As he looked down, he saw a ball of fire arcing up toward the tower, blazing orange and crackling with uncontrolled hunger. He pushed himself away from the tower's edge, even though he knew it was too late.

The sphere of fire slammed against the side of the tower, several levels below the open circle of stone on which Ruddy and Alphonse stood, and exploded. The entire tower creaked, and Ruddy felt it begin to sway.

Ruddy fell to his knees and threw his arms around the nearest crenellation as if it was the stump of a tree he could anchor himself to. He stared down at the red-robed watchers below and wondered from which direction the next spell might fly. "Maybe coming up here wasn't such a great idea."

"It's our only chance," Alphonse said as he slammed home the latch on the hatch, sealing the roof off from anyone who might storm up the stairwell in pursuit. "Don't you forget that, Ruddy. We're in this together. They want you as bad as they want me—worse, even—but if we stick together, we might escape alive."

The wizard trembled before him, although whether from the chill wind snapping through his robes or the shaking of the tower, Ruddy could not tell. The boy had learned by hard experience never to trust Alphonse. He didn't think he should now, but he couldn't bring himself to abandon the old man here atop the tower either.

Alphonse reached for Ruddy's hand.

The boy gave it to him. Perhaps he'd be able to get away from the wizard later.

A glorious sunset painted the sky above the tower in glowing oranges, purples, and reds as Alphonse led Ruddy into the center of the tower's roof. It seemed like the world was on fire, or the heavens were bleeding, or both. Not having seen too many sunsets, the boy paused for a moment in wonder. Even with the sound of the

watchers chanting something on the fields far below, the beauty of the wider world stunned him, and he hesitated.

"Now, Ruddy," Alphonse said, his authoritarian voice cracking. "You must change now!"

Ruddy wrenched his gaze from the sky and stared at Alphonse for a moment. The wizard had terrified him for so long that at first Ruddy didn't recognize the fear shining so bright in his eyes. When he finally did, he realized that Alphonse may have been many things to him, but the boy had never thought of him as so human.

Giving Ruddy the space he needed, Alphonse scrambled to the tower's edge and glared down at the distant attackers. "Look at those smug Watchers." He glanced back at the boy.

"Seriously, take a look at them. Those are the winners, Ruddy, the ones who destroyed nearly every monster in the entire land, who almost drove your magnificent kind to extinction—save, perhaps, you."

"This isn't a game." Ruddy stayed rooted where he was.

"No, it's not. It's life. And in life, the winners make the rules."

The rueful look on Alphonse's face grew dark again. "Change, damn you. Now! We don't have time to chat."

Ruddy grimaced at the man. Then he looked down at his bare, dirty feet and tried to focus, to reach deep inside himself, to slough off the shell he showed the world.

Ruddy felt it start to work. His skin itched as it transformed into scales, changing in hue from a freckled, pasty white to darker than blood red. His bones creaked as his face pushed out into a fang-filled snout and his wings unfolded from the middle of his back. They snapped out like blades from scabbards, and Ruddy groaned in pain and relief as he flexed the stiffness from them.

Then a final ball of fire blasted into the far edge of the tower, right where Alphonse stood glaring at the boy. Ruddy saw the glow of it approaching and opened his snout to warn the wizard, but the sky behind Lucent exploded before the boy could utter a word.

The concussion of the blast knocked Ruddy back and slammed him against the battlements behind him. At the same time, it

smacked Alphonse high into the air and catapulted him straight over Ruddy's head. Then gravity grabbed the wizard once more and hauled him down past the edge of the tower's roof, out of sight. Either unconscious or dead already, he fell without a scream.

Then, despite the fact that Ruddy wanted nothing more than to take to the sky and escape the horrible, wrecked place he'd been forced to call home, his swimming head drowned in blackness.

Chapter Two

Ruddy's head hurt so much, he wondered if he should bother opening his eyes or just quit fighting and let death take him. The wagon he lay sprawled in jarred over every rut and bump in the road and rattled his brains around inside his skull so hard he thought they might fall out. The warmth of the sun on his skin, though, convinced him that while death might be taunting him, it wasn't coming for him anytime soon, so he gave up hoping for it and peeled his eyelids open.

He found himself in an iron cage strapped to the bed of a wooden wagon being pulled by a team of horses over a rock-strewn road. The pale ribbon snaked away into the distance behind them through rolling hills that stretched toward white-capped mountains far beyond. The light hurt his eyes at first, unused to it as he was, but he shaded his eyes with his hand — a human hand — and that made it better. He squinted at the mountains and spotted a wisp of gray smoke curling up from one of the closer peaks.

He followed the line of smoke downward and spied the ruin of a castle squatting against a distant crag. Its main tower had been turned into a jagged, smoking stump. A distant wind picked up, and the embers that glowed there burst into flames again.

It reminded Ruddy of the pipe that Alphonse often puffed at in the evenings. He'd always hated the smell of the thing, but now he found he missed it. He wondered what had happened to Alphonse and the others, the only people — he couldn't bring himself to call

them a family — he'd ever known.

A shadow fell across the wagon then, and Ruddy pushed himself up on his hands and knees so he could turn around to see what had come between him and the delicious warmth of the sun. The cage was just large enough that he could stand up in it if he wanted to, although in this form he wasn't that tall. He put his fingers through the bars to steady himself and gazed up at the gigantic wall that towered before him.

He gasped in amazement, and the two people sitting at the front of the wagon turned around to look at him.

"Finally awake, are we?" said the woman. She was the most beautiful person Ruddy had ever seen, but considering he could count the number of folks he'd met on his hands, that wasn't much of an achievement. She was clean and well-scrubbed, which put her head and shoulders above Yara, and she had a gorgeous mane of long blond hair that framed a strong chin, a pert nose, and cold, determined eyes.

That last bit warned Ruddy this was not a woman to trifle with. He nodded at her, cleared his throat, and said, "Yes, ma'am."

The man next to her was cut from much cruder cloth. Like her, he wore a suit of silver chainmail under a crimson tabard, but his dark hair was thinning and going gray, especially through his beard, which looked like he'd trimmed it with a butter knife.

He glanced back at Ruddy and gave him a gravelly chuckle, then snapped the wagon's reins as he turned his attention back to the horses and the road before them.

"Too bad for you, lad," he said in a low voice. "Your day's not going to get any better from here."

Ruddy had no idea what the man meant, and the view of the great wall before him drove all other thoughts from his mind. It had been built from pure white stone, paler than bleached bones, and it reached up higher than even the walls of the castle in which Ruddy had been raised. There seemed to be no flaw in the facade, no break of any kind but for the massive gold-trimmed gateway that gaped before them.

A golden carving of a lit torch sat at the top of the gate's arch, the light in it glowing with magical fire that seemed to flicker within the metal from which it had been fashioned.

"Where are we?" Ruddy said, his voice little more than a croak. His stomach rumbled in protest. He had no idea how long it had been since he'd had something to eat or drink.

"Halcyon," the woman said. "Capitol of the Righteous Empire."

Ruddy shuddered at the name. "You can't bring me here," he said, his voice trembling. "They'll kill me for sure."

Alphonse, Bailey, and Yara had told him many things over the years. He'd caught them in enough inconsistencies that he suspected much of what they'd said had been lies. One thing they'd never wavered on, though, was that the Righteous Empire meant death for monsters of any kind — especially ones like Ruddy.

The woman grunted at Ruddy. "Maybe once we would have, but not anymore."

"Still ought to, you ask me," the man said with a cold grunt.

"No one did," said the woman.

Ruddy backed away from the front of the cage. He didn't think they'd have brought him all this way to slaughter him at the city's gate, but the notion stabbed through his mind.

"Sure," the man said. "The king made his declaration. I get that. But the rest of us have to live with it — or die by it — while he's safe inside his keep."

"Would you have us execute children?"

"Better than having them eat us."

Ruddy stared at the gates of Halcyon as they passed through them. The arch soared so high over their heads that a giant could have passed beneath it without having to so much as slouch. The doors seemed to be made of raw steel trimmed with glittering gold. They'd be just as strong as the stone walls themselves, which stood twenty feet thick at the base, narrowing just a bit toward the top.

A team of guards bristling with weapons stood to either side of the gate, keeping a close eye on the traffic as it passed in and out of the city. Others looked down from above, glaring at the passersby

from either side of the battlements atop the alabaster curtain wall. They all stood dressed in their silver armor and red tabards, exactly like those of the people driving the wagon in which Ruddy sat, and for that reason they gave the wagon little more than a passing glance.

The people on the road were a bit more curious, peering at the wagon and its trembling cargo. Ruddy realized then that he wore little more than the set of rags he'd been wrapped in when the castle had been attacked. He'd never felt so naked in his life.

"He doesn't look like a monster," one little girl said to her father as she and her parents walked in the opposite direction.

"They never do," the father said, giving Ruddy an evil eye.

"If he did, he'd be dead already," the girl's mother said. "The king got rid of those sort long ago."

The little girl continued to stare at Ruddy as her parents ushered her forward. She gave him a little wave just before she was lost from sight.

They were almost all the way through the gate and into the city proper when one of the guards there drew his sword and raised a hand to stop the wagon. The man holding the reins hauled back on them, and the wagon came to a halt.

"What is it, sergeant?" the woman said, not bothering to hide the edge of irritation in her voice.

"Just want to see what you nicked from that old castle," the guard said as he peered through the bars of Ruddy's cage. "Hear you got a good one."

"A fine specimen of monsterdom, you ask me," the wagon driver said with a chuckle. "We're just lucky the lad didn't wet himself."

"I can help with that." The guard hefted his blade and stabbed it through the bars at Ruddy, who had to press himself hard against the back end of the cage to avoid it.

Ruddy yelped in terror as the edge of the blade rasped against the bars. The woman's hand lashed out and grabbed the guard's arm by the wrist. She squeezed until he let go of his sword and it clattered to the ground.

"He is under the king's protection," she said as she glared down at him in disgust, "and so he is under both yours and mine."

The guard yanked back his hand and massaged his bruised wrist as he gaped up at the woman. "Your pardon, Lady Tellus," he said. "Only having some fun with him."

"Tormenting a prisoner? A child, no less? You call that fun?"

"He's more monster than child, I'll wager," the guard said. "After all those bastards have done to us —"

"We have laws in Halcyon," Lady Tellus said. She pointed at the golden torch embroidered on the front of the man's tabard. "If you can't bring yourself to follow them, perhaps you should not be in the business of enforcing them."

The guard gave her a swift and embarrassed bow, then scooped up his weapon and scampered back to his post like a whipped dog. "Apologies, my lady," he said, shamefaced. "Won't happen again."

Lady Tellus turned her glare away from the man and nodded toward the street before them. The man sitting next to her snapped the reins in his hands, and the wagon lurched forward again.

Ruddy pressed himself forward in the cage now, toward the front seat. While Lady Tellus terrified him, she at least seemed determined to make sure that he came to no harm on her watch, which was more than he could say for anyone else he'd met so far.

He tried to shove himself into as tiny a ball as he could manage, and he did his best not to meet anyone else's gaze, afraid they might take it as an invitation to heap abuse on him. He'd learned better than that back in the castle, where an odd look at Bailey might invite a beating. Yara often intervened to protect him, when she'd been there, but she wasn't anywhere now.

Ruddy wondered what had happened to everyone else in the castle. Were they all dead? He'd often wished to be able to leave that horrible place and never see any of its occupants again. Now that his desire had come true, though, the reality of it terrified him.

At least back at the castle, he'd learned how to live with the others, how to avoid trouble. He had no idea how to act in Halcyon, and if the behavior of the guard at the gate was any indication, he

might expect murderous hostility from any quarter. He found himself longing for his barren stone cell.

Despite that, he couldn't help but stare at the city as they rode through it. Having spent his entire life in his captors' castle, the utter chaos of such a sprawling place bustling with people of all kinds stunned him. The new noises, sights, and scents threatened to overwhelm him.

He saw wide, paved streets and narrow, winding alleys; glorious fountains spouting water from statues spearing out of pools in the centers of open squares that could have swallowed the entire castle; busy bazaars crammed full of stalls, tents, and stands hawking foods, goods, and services; towers stabbing high into the sky, rising above the shoulders of the shops and homes that loomed over the slate-lined walks that lined the sides of the cobblestone streets.

He saw people in all sorts of shapes and colors and sizes. Brown-skinned men chatted with each other on one street corner. Pale children with fresh-scrubbed faces darted in and out of the crowd, playing some game that Ruddy couldn't understand. Olive-skinned women with lustrous black hair called out from half-doors, inviting people into their restaurants and shops.

A few of them even looked like Ruddy: freckled skin with hair red and curly. He knew they could be nothing alike though. He wore his form as a disguise, a falsehood to keep the world from ever seeing his true self, which he knew would frighten them all to the point they would try to kill him.

The man at the gate had been terrible enough, and he hadn't known anything about Ruddy other than the fact that he was different. If he had suspected how different Ruddy truly was, would he have stopped at poking at him with his blade? Would Lady Tellus have been able to halt him with mere words?

The wagon came to a halt in front of a lone and imposing building with dark stone walls. Bars covered every one of the tall windows in the place, and sharp spears spiked from every cornice and the edges of the roof. Magical lights burned on every face of the place, and while they did little to illuminate the streets below in the middle of

the day, Ruddy suspected they would light the entire block up so bright in the middle of the night that you might not notice the time changing.

The words "The Royal Academy of Creature Habilitation" had been carved over the entrance to the building, which consisted of a single iron-bound wooden door covered with magical runes and wards that glowed with power. The words gleamed with an inner light that set them off against the dark stone in which they'd been carved, and while they seemed harmless enough, they disturbed Ruddy for reasons he could not explain.

"Royal" had something to do with the king, he felt sure, but he didn't understand how such a place could be an "Academy." It looked far more like a fortress than a school, and even the castle hadn't been half as well defended as this.

"Creature" was the word that troubled Ruddy the most. A creature could be all sorts of things, from a flea all the way up to and including a mountain giant, the kind that Alphonse said had constructed the castle for him once upon a time. What did it mean here?

Was this a place for studying creatures? Alphonse had done that from time to time, dissecting insects and animals to see what made them work or how they ticked. Or did the people of Halcyon consider people to be creatures too, as Yara had sometimes claimed them to be?

He didn't understand what "Habilitation" meant at all.

"Welcome to your new home, kid," the wagon's driver said with a nasty little chuckle as Lady Tellus leaped down from the seat beside him. "For the rest of your days, however few you may have."

"Or until he graduates," Lady Tellus said, correcting the man, a warning burning in her eyes.

The driver ignored her glare and laughed out loud. "Come on now," he said. "Does anyone ever actually graduate from here?"

"It's been known to happen," Lady Tellus said.

"Just not very often, right?" The man shook his head and then turned to look back at Ruddy, pity and amusement mixing in his

eyes. “Well, maybe you’ll be one of the lucky ones. Welcome to Monster Academy!”

Chapter Three

A platoon of watchers stood guard in front of the Royal Academy of Creature Habilitation. Some of them peeled off to patrol around the building whenever others rejoined them from walking their own beat, ensuring their numbers never failed. They all wore grim and determined expressions, as if they'd been charged with the most serious of all the duties available to a watcher in the entirety of the kingdom. A handful of them marched up to the wagon, their weapons drawn and at the ready.

Four of them carried gleaming swords with edges so sharp Ruddy feared they might be able to cut the daylight to pieces. The last thrust a white wand out before him, ready to cast a lethal spell at a moment's notice. They surrounded the wagon, one to each side of it, with the watcher with the wand standing next to the blade-bearing guard at the rear.

Lady Tellus came around and pulled a key from her pocket, then fitted it into the lock that held the door on the rear of Ruddy's cage closed. It came open, and she removed it, unlatched the door, and stepped back.

"Come on out," she said.

Ruddy goggled at her as if she was insane. Despite how little he liked being in a cage, he felt far safer inside it than emerging from it in front of so many armed watchers. He gave her a silent shake of his head, fearful of even opening his mouth and triggering an attack with some unwitting offense.

"You're no better off in that cage than on the street," she said in a soft and easy tone. "I thought the guard at the gate would have shown you that."

None of the watchers laughed at her little joke. They just stared at Ruddy, the muscles in their arms taut and ready to spring into action at the first sign of trouble.

Ruddy tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry. "All right," he said in a raspy voice.

He squirmed his way out of the cage and slipped to the pavement behind the wagon. Despite the fact his feet were bare, the coldness of the cobblestones did not bother him at all. He stretched to his full height, which still made him shorter than anyone around.

"He's but a boy," one of the guards said in amazement. "My son is taller than him."

"He's the most dangerous boy you'll ever meet," said Lady Tellus as she put her hand on the hilt of her sword. "It took a full brigade of the Royal Watch to bring him in, and don't you ever forget it."

That made Ruddy's capture sound far more impressive than he remembered it. He wondered if he'd somehow managed to fight on in a fit of madness after striking his head. Had he flown into some kind of berserker rage that had obliterated his memories of how hard he'd fought for his freedom? He'd been astonished that he'd woken up at all rather than being slaughtered, his corpse burned bereft of ceremony or grave.

Lady Tellus stepped forward and took Ruddy by the elbow with a firm but painless grip. She turned him toward the building the wagon had parked in front of, and she led him up its front steps. He offered no resistance. He wasn't sure what might be inside the building, but he knew he didn't want to get into a fight with a gang of armed watchers on its steps.

The doors opened as Ruddy and Lady Tellus reached them, and she ushered him inside. No one stood there to greet them in the darkened foyer, but the door slammed shut behind them anyhow, barring and locking itself with audible clicks. At that moment, doubts surged inside Ruddy that entering the place without protest

had been the right choice.

Beyond the foyer, the room opened up into a large common area from which stairways and hallways speared off in many directions. Sunlight shone down into the open space from a skylight that didn't seem to be there. The illumination seemed to filter through the solid ceiling instead, leaving Ruddy to wonder which was the illusion: the ceiling or the light?

No one else stood inside the larger room either, and Lady Tellus's metal-shod boots clanked on the marble-tiled floor as she strode across it, heading for a door with a sign over it that labeled it "Office."

"Lucky you," Lady Tellus said. "The other students are all at lunch right now. We should be able to get you enrolled without any interruptions."

Ruddy rubbed his aching head. "I don't feel lucky," he said.

She chuckled at that, a sound that lacked any warmth. "I don't suppose you would, but you're luckier than you have any right to be, my little monster. I can't count the number of ways you could have been killed at Castle Chaos."

"Where?"

"The place where we found you. I suppose they didn't use that name for it?"

Ruddy shook his head. "They just called it the castle. Or home."

"We've been trying to find it for years. Your friend Alphonse there had it hidden behind some truly impressive spells."

"He's not my friend."

"Not anymore at least."

Ruddy took that to mean that Alphonse was dead. He wondered what he should feel about that. Triumph? Sadness? Relief? Grief?

He couldn't tell. Maybe it was a mixture of all of those things, with a touch of despair.

"Did you kill everyone?"

Lady Tellus stopped in front of the door to the office. "But you? Probably. We'll be sifting through the ruins there for weeks to make sure."

She put her hand on the door's knob, unwilling to indulge him in another moment of introspection. "Are you ready for this?"

Ruddy shrugged and looked up at her with his bright green eyes. "Ready for what?"

She put her other hand on his shoulder. "You have a lot to learn, but I suppose that's what we're here for." She opened the door and guided him inside.

Ruddy gaped at the interior of the office and had to fight every instinct in him that told him to turn and run. Lady Tellus's steady grip on his shoulder helped him manage that, but only just.

The place looked like a mausoleum. It was fashioned from the same dark stone as the rest of the building, but it felt blacker, colder, and somehow sadder. Magical lights burned without smoke or heat from unmelted crimson candles sitting in stone sconces scattered about the place. What they showed Ruddy made him shudder.

A sky-blue-skinned woman with long black hair sat in a chair behind what Ruddy would have taken to be the stone lid of a tomb, but for the papers and other odds and ends scattered across its flat and even top. One of these things included her head, which she picked up and stuck back onto her shoulders as Ruddy and Lady Tellus entered the room.

"Sorry about that," she said as she blinked her wide, pale eyes at them. "I just like to get a different perspective on the day's work from time to time."

Ruddy gaped at her until Lady Tellus reached over and lifted his chin back into place with a stiff finger. "Staring is rude," she said in a matter-of-fact way. "You're going to see far stranger things here at the Royal Academy, so you might as well start getting used to it now."

Ruddy gave her a nervous nod, then apologized to the woman behind the desk. "I'm sorry," he said. "I — I don't get out much."

"That's fine dear," she said, unperturbed. "New student?"

Lady Tellus gave the woman a firm nod. "Yes, Miss Stake. Fresh in from Castle Chaos."

Miss Stake arched an eyebrow at that. "Finally found it, did we?"

Didn't realize that would be a source of new recruits for the academy."

"He's the only one."

The woman picked up a quill from the side of her desk and dipped it into an ink pot that resembled an overturned skull, its bone-white surface stained by years of use and stuck to the desk's surface with a small pool of black wax. At least Ruddy hoped it was wax.

She shuffled a paper in front of her and gave him an expectant look that almost toppled her head from her shoulders again before she righted it. "Name?" she said.

"Is it really Miss Stake?" Ruddy said.

"I meant *your* name, dear," Miss Stake said.

"Oh," the boy blushed in embarrassment. "It's Ruddy."

"Hello, Ruddy," she said with a smirk. "And to answer your question, that wasn't always my name, but it's the one I respond to now. As you might guess, I made a horrible mistake once."

"And you use your name to remind you to never make it again?"

She smiled at him. "My, aren't you a sharp one? Last name?"

Ruddy hesitated. "I — I don't have one. Not that I know of, at least."

"You don't," Lady Tellus said with some authority. "Your people never do."

Ruddy hadn't been aware that he had a people, but now his curiosity was piqued. This didn't seem like the time or place to ask such questions, but he resolved to dig for more details about his people as soon as he could.

"Breed?"

"I don't understand," Ruddy said.

"Draconis," Lady Tellus said. "If that show you gave us on top of Castle Chaos is anything to judge by. No idea about the exact lineage, but we'll figure that out in good time."

Ruddy realized that Miss Stake was now gaping at him. It made him uncomfortable enough that he now understood what Lady Tellus had meant about it being rude.

The woman closed her mouth when her head threatened to tumble forward onto the desk before her. “Draconis,” she said as she wrote the word, finishing it with a flair. “You don’t say. Do you think bringing him here is wise?”

“Does he look like a threat to you?” said Lady Tellus.

Ruddy gave Miss Stake a weak, nervous smile.

“It’s just that, well, that’s a particularly dangerous breed, isn’t it?”

A door in the rear of the chamber — which looked like the front of a crypt — creaked on its hinges then. The words “Mr. Mortis, Principal” had been chiseled into its stone surface, which Ruddy managed to read just before the door swung all the way open.

A skeletal figure in a hooded crimson robe stood revealed there, glaring at Ruddy through the greenish glowing orbs sitting in its skull’s open sockets, right where the eyes would normally be. Ruddy might have thought it was little more than a human skeleton — much like the one that Alphonse kept hanging in his laboratory back in Castle Chaos — except for the way it moved and spoke like a living person.

“Every breed — every person — carries the potential for danger,” the skeleton said in a surprisingly deep and resonant voice that seemed to echo throughout the room. “This young boy is no exception, but then neither is the king.”

Lady Tellus put her hand on the hilt of her sword in a casual way, as if to remind everyone in the room it was there. “You verge close to sedition with those words.”

“Then it seems I’m not trying hard enough,” Mr. Mortis said. “He’s also an ugly slob who is far past his prime and has long since proved himself a far better conqueror than a ruler.”

Ruddy had never heard anything but long and bitter rants about the king from the people in Castle Chaos. They usually focused on what a horrible person he was for saving the land from the monsters and demons that had threatened to kill the regular folks. Ruddy had to admit he hadn’t really ever understood any of it, other than the fact that it seemed to have put the king at odds with the masters of Castle Chaos and they were furious about it.

"You'd do well to hold your tongue in my presence," Lady Tellus said.

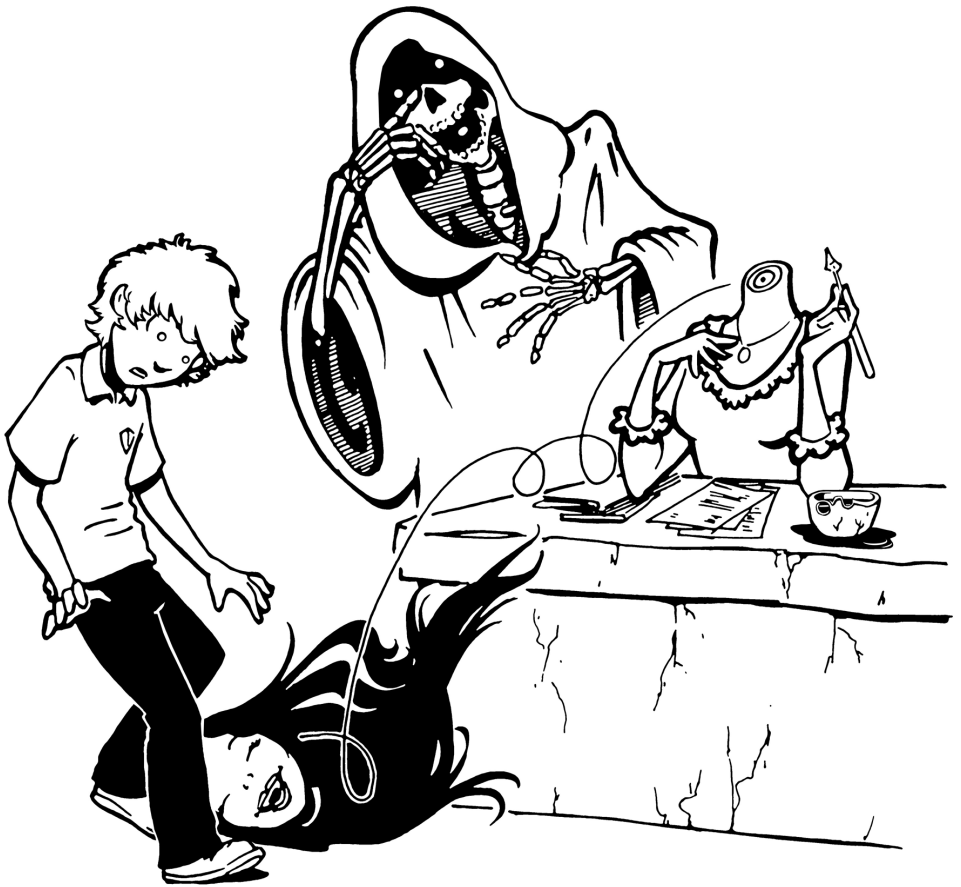
"I would, but thanks to your king's treacherous friends, I don't have one," Mr. Mortis said. He opened his jaw wide and wagged it at the woman, and it gaped at her, empty.

Lady Tellus seethed at the skeleton's irreverence. She turned to Ruddy and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "I'd like to say that I'm happy to be leaving you in such good hands, but every part of that sentence would be a lie. Best of luck to you, child. You will most likely need it."

With that, Lady Tellus spun on her armored heel and strode out of the office, leaving Ruddy alone with the sometimes-headless secretary and the skeletal principal. They waited until she left, slamming the door behind her, and then started to laugh.

Mr. Mortis guffawed like a giant, his non-existent-belly laugh filling the entire room. He wiped at his eye sockets as if invisible tears flowed past his glowing green orbs. Miss Stake laughed so hard that her head toppled off her shoulders and bounced along the top of the desk until it tumbled to the floor and came to a rest at Ruddy's feet.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said to the boy as he recoiled. "Be a dear and bring me back to my body, would you, please? We still have some paperwork to finish."



Chapter Four

When Ruddy had given Miss Stake as many answers as he could furnish — which, he was sad to report, didn't add up to much — Mr. Mortis insisted on walking the boy up to his new room. "It's the least I can do after running your escort off," he said. "She really doesn't have much of a sense of humor."

"Didn't you already know that about her?" Ruddy said as they left the office.

"Of course," Mr. Mortis said. "I depend on it."

The skeleton moved like a much heavier man, and Ruddy wondered what he'd looked like when he'd been breathing and had flesh attached to his bones. It seemed that nothing could scare him, but perhaps that was because he'd already suffered through death. What could be worse?

The principal impressed Ruddy like no other person the boy had met. He did what he wanted and said what he liked. He seemed to have no respect for anyone in authority. Despite the fact that he was at least nominally in charge of this school, Ruddy felt like the man was conspiring with him against something.

"We're glad to have you here at Monster Academy, Ruddy," Mr. Mortis said. "I've actually been preparing for your arrival for some time."

"How could that be?" Ruddy said. "I was only captured last night, wasn't I?"

"We knew there was someone like you out there. The Royal Watch

has been hunting for a young dragon on the loose for the past dozen years. It was only a matter of time until they found you — or you turned up dead.”

Ruddy shuddered as Mr. Mortis led him across the main room outside of the office and toward one of the stairwells that led higher into the building. They made their way up it for more floors than Ruddy thought the place could possibly hold, Mr. Mortis talking the entire time. Ruddy couldn’t tell if the principal’s chattering teeth make more noise than his rattling bones, but it helped distract him from the enormity of the changes that had happened to his life, and for that he felt some gratitude.

“You knew about me?”

“It’s not too often we get one of your kind through here. In fact, I think you’re the first. But we knew that you’d been born — produced, whatever the proper term might be — and the Watch had been unable to account for your whereabouts. We had reports that you — or at least your egg — had been stolen about the time your parents were killed. It takes a lot to hatch an egg like that, though, and I didn’t think old Alphonse had it in him, to be honest with you. But it looks like he did.” He clapped a bony hand on Ruddy’s shoulder.

“My parents are dead?” Ruddy had always assumed this to be true, mostly because that’s what Alphonse, Bailey, and Yara had told him, but he’d harbored a private hope that they had all been lying to him. They’d steered him wrong about so many things over the years that it hadn’t seemed impossible — or even unlikely — until now.

“Um, well, maybe,” Mr. Mortis said in a tone more tender than Ruddy would have believed it possible for a skeleton to produce. “Death’s a weird thing, after all, and not always as final as most people think. I, for instance, have been dead for years, and look at me.”

He stretched his frame wide. “In some ways I’m actually healthier than I was when I was alive. Well, maybe healthy’s not the right word, but I feel better than I did when I was breathing. My arthritis used to just kill me.”

"What happened to them?" Ruddy said as they reached another landing.

"My joints?" Mr. Mortis held up his hands to peer at them. "Seems that without nerves, you can't feel the pain. Who'd have guessed, right?"

"I — I meant my parents."

"Oh, sure," Mr. Mortis cleared his non-existent throat. "I didn't really know them. I mean, I knew *of* them, but back in those days I was on the king's side."

"And now you're not?"

Mortis snorted. "Not since he made me the head of this place."

"Being in charge of the academy is some kind of punishment?" Ruddy had never had a principal before, and he didn't know how to take this sort of conversation with someone in charge of him. It fell far outside of his realm of experience.

"It was either take the job or die," Mr. Mortis said. "And I seriously considered not taking the job. What does that tell you?"

Ruddy hesitated. "That you didn't want the job very much?"

"Of course not! What sane person would? To be in charge of a prison full of young monsters, just waiting for them to do something wrong so the Royal Watch can step in and execute them? Who would want to work under that kind of pressure?"

Ruddy stumbled on the stair in front of him and fell down, barking his knee. "They execute us?" The shock of what Mr. Mortis had revealed kept his mind off the pain in his shin. "Why?"

"For being monsters, of course. Well, that's most of it."

"There's more?"

"Don't get me wrong. Despite how I needled Tellus, the king is a good king, as kings go. He just has some odd ideas about how to best deal with creatures of evil."

"But I'm not evil," Ruddy said. "Honest."

"Are you human?" Mr. Mortis said. "Not just in how you look, of course, but in your true self."

"N-no. But does that matter?"

"Far more than you might imagine. Ever faced down an orc?"

Ruddy shook his head. Life at Castle Chaos hadn't involved many visitors.

"Nasty folks by all accounts. Just as soon stab you through the heart as spit in your face."

Ruddy gaped in horror. "But just because they're bad, that doesn't mean everyone who's not human is evil. Right?"

Mr. Mortis gestured toward the walls. "Ask the people of Halcyon."

"So they hate anyone who's not human?"

Mr. Mortis shrugged. "Elves are all right by most standards, as are dwarves, although the Flame knows I've seen plenty of evil elves and dwarves in my time."

"Aren't there evil humans too?"

"More than enough, but they don't usually *look* evil. It's harder to pick them out of a crowd. To be fair, they also don't toss their lots in with necromancers and join armies that march on enemy kingdoms and try to grind them under their iron-shod heels. Well, not nearly so often anyhow."

"I don't understand."

"You're not the only one," Mr. Mortis said. "Seems to me there's plenty of evil around this world without us having to go looking for it."

Ruddy thought about that for a while. "What about you? Are you human? *Were* you, I mean?"

"Once upon a time, I was, now that you mention it. Does that make me good? Or am I evil now that I am no longer entirely human? Or living?"

Ruddy looked up at Mr. Mortis. The sight of the creature made him shiver. He was literally unnatural, and that made Ruddy's pale skin crawl. Still, he'd treated him fairly so far, and he didn't seem out to hurt him in any way. Rather the opposite.

"I don't know," Ruddy said in a small voice.

Mr. Mortis turned to him, and Ruddy could not shake the notion that the principal was smiling at him, despite his lack of lips. "That, my boy, is the absolutely right answer. Here at the Royal Academy

of Creature Habilitation, we judge people not by who they are but by what they do.”

“Really?”

“Well, we try. I try, at least. I can’t speak for everyone else.”

Mr. Mortis waggled his head, which hurt Ruddy to think about how he managed it. “In any case, it remains the central part of our creed, our institute’s very reason for being. Without that, we’re just a warehouse for future crooks and killers, raising them here until they’re ready to be released into the unready world — or executed for their crimes.”

“Do they wind up executed either way?”

Mr. Mortis put a bony hand on Ruddy’s shoulder. “Perhaps that’s a bit fatalistic, but in the long run, we’re all dead, right?”

He laughed at that. Ruddy wanted to join him, but he couldn’t figure out what part of it was supposed to be funny.

They reached the top floor of the building — or at least the floor where the stairs they were on ran out — and they entered a long passage lined with doors on both sides. Mr. Mortis led Ruddy down the hall, their footsteps echoing in the emptiness, until they reached the door to Room 66. He tried the knob with his bony fingers, but it was locked.

Mr. Mortis rasped his fingers against each other in what might have been a snapping motion if he’d had flesh on his hand. The lock jiggled in response, and the door opened.

The principal showed Ruddy into the room beyond, a common area filled with desks and chairs, plus couches and rugs arranged around a fireplace in one wall and a set of bookshelves crammed to bursting on another. High windows lined the far wall, blocked by thick shutters. Ruddy suspected he’d find bars on the other side if he were to open them.

“Those stay shut at all times,” Mr. Mortis said when he noticed Ruddy peering at the windows. “Some of our students don’t do well with sunlight. I’m not particularly fond of it myself.”

“Doesn’t it get stuffy in here?” Ruddy was used to the drafty chill of the cellar of Castle Chaos, and he found the idea of being in a

sealed, heated room just a touch stifling.

"It's far better than the alternative," the principal said.

"I saw bars on the windows outside," Ruddy said. "Is this a prison or a school?"

Mr. Mortis gave a sad shake of his head. "Those are there to protect the students as much as they are to keep them in. To be clear, you are not permitted outside of the school's grounds without an escort, but that's for your own good. It's simply not safe for a young creature out there. Too many torches and pitchforks being passed around by fearful people, even in these relatively peaceful days."

"Are you saying people would attack me?"

"Would?" Mr. Mortis snickered. "They have! The people of Halcyon like nothing better than a monster to rail against, torture, and kill. Believe me, you do not want to be on the opposite end of that. We've lost more students that way."

Ruddy quivered. "Do you lose a lot of students?"

"Not so many as we once did," Mr. Mortis said in a soft voice. "But far more than I would like."

He forced himself to change to an optimistic tone. "Enough of that. Let me show you around your new home. This entire floor of the academy is devoted to living quarters. Most of the floors below us feature classrooms and office suites in which our teachers both work and live."

"They don't have homes to go back to at the end of the day?"

"Some, yes, but not all of them are welcome in the rest of the city. I count myself among those."

Ruddy wasn't sure why, but he felt sad for Mr. Mortis. To him, the school was a huge step up from his cell in Castle Chaos, but he suspected the same wasn't true for his principal, whoever he'd been before he'd taken the job.

Mr. Mortis opened the door next to the fireplace. "The boys sleep on this half of this dorm," he said. He pointed to a door among the bookcases along the opposite wall. "The girls are over there. There are communal washrooms at each end of the hall, split by gender once again. Or at least as far as we can manage it. With a few of our

students, it can be a challenge to tell."

Ruddy walked into the boys' quarters and gazed in amazement. Several canopied beds with stuffed mattresses lined the walls, and a wardrobe stood opposite each of them, gathered in a cluster in the center of the room. The floors were clean and made of polished wood, and whitewashed plaster covered the walls. The ceiling glowed with a magical light that cast the place in a warm and welcoming glow.

"It may not seem like much," Mr. Mortis said, "but our students manage with what we have quite well."

"Not much?" Ruddy said, too excited to be afraid of contradicting his principal. "This is the nicest place I've ever been."

Mr. Mortis gave Ruddy a slow shake of his head. "That's a sad thing, my boy, but it makes me glad to have you with us. At some point, I'll sit you down and have you tell me all about your life in Castle Chaos. For now, though, I'm afraid we've run out of time. Lunchtime is just about over, and your roommates are due to return here any moment for a short break before they resume their afternoon classes.

Ruddy's stomach rumbled at the thought of food. He didn't want to be any trouble, but it felt like it had been days since he'd had anything to eat.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Mortis said, cocking his skull at the sound that came from Ruddy's belly. "Did Lady Tellus not feed you?"

Ruddy didn't want to get anyone in trouble, especially not someone with as much authority as he imagined Lady Tellus had. Still, he didn't want to lie to Mr. Mortis either, and he was starving. He gave a silent shake of his head.

Mr. Mortis nodded. "Once you're settled in here and have had a chance to meet your roommates, come down to my office, and I'll make sure you get something to eat." He pointed at a bed in one corner of the room. "That's yours, and you'll find a fresh uniform in the wardrobe across from it. The things in there are yours as well."

Ruddy stared at these things as if he'd just been given his first-ever birthday present and unwrapped it to discover it was exactly

what he wanted. In a sense, that was true. He'd gotten what he'd silently hoped for every day of his young life: a new place to call home.

"Thank you." He sat down on the bed and marveled at the place.

Mr. Mortis let himself out without another word and left Ruddy alone to come to terms with how his life had changed in so many unexpected ways in so little time.

Chapter Five

Ruddy lay on the bed for a moment — his bed! — then realized that he was lounging there in the rags in which he'd left Castle Chaos. He leaped out of the bed, hard as it was for him to break away from it, and launched himself toward his wardrobe. He flung open the doors and found several sets of fresh outfits there, all of which seemed to have been tailored specifically for him.

Each of the outfits formed what he assumed was the school's uniform: black pants and a blue shirt with the school's emblem — a stylized shield — embroidered on it in red. Ruddy gathered a set of clothing — complete with a pair of shoes that fit him, something he'd never had his entire life — and slipped down the hall to the washroom marked for boys. There found a magic fountain that brought warm water into a basin for him, and he scrubbed himself as clean as he could manage. He was just putting on his new clothes when he heard voices coming toward the washroom from the hall outside.

Ruddy's first instinct was to look for someplace to hide. He didn't know the people here at all, and that scared him a bit. The few visitors they'd had at Castle Chaos had often been terrifying people, and he'd learned to avoid them if he could help it. He'd later applied that same lesson to Alphonse, Bailey, and Yara, and the times he could manage it the quality of his life had skyrocketed.

He chastised himself for having such thoughts here. While Lady Tellus and the watchers in front of the building had frightened him,

everyone else he'd met so far had been wonderful, although he had to admit that only included Mr. Mortis and Miss Stake so far. He told himself he had to be open to new experiences. If he was lucky, he might even make a friend.

The door to the washroom burst open, and a group of boys piled in. At least Ruddy thought they were boys. They comprised such an odd bunch of individuals he couldn't be sure.

The first boy through the door looked not too different from Ruddy. His skin was darker, sure, and his hair was curlier and black and at least as shaggy, but he seemed altogether human.

Of course, Ruddy wasn't human, was he? Who knew what secrets might lie under the boy's skin?

The others who'd stormed in were as far from human as anyone Ruddy had ever seen. They stood only about three feet high and were covered — as far as Ruddy could tell, considering they were wearing their uniforms — from head to toe in a layer of orange fur. There were three of them, and they stared up at Ruddy with wide, expectant, brown eyes and flashed rows of pointed teeth at him that would have seemed right at home in a bear trap.

"Hi," the first boy said with a wide and easy smile. "You're the new kid, right?"

Ruddy nodded, uneasy despite himself. The way the littler ones stared at him made him wonder whether they were curious about him or — he hated to think it — hungry.

"My name's Ruddy," he said.

"We're your roommates," the boy said. "I'm Growf."

"Pleasure to meet you," Ruddy said, doing his best to remember his manners. The people at Castle Chaos hadn't bothered to teach him much about such things, but he'd watched the way they behaved with each other and especially when guests arrived. He had no way to know if he was getting it right or if the customs were different here in the academy than they'd been back at the castle, but he had to try.

"These others are the quadruplets," Growf said. "Ay, Bee, and Cee."

"We're goblins," Ay said in a suspicious voice. "What are you?"

"Did you say quadruplets?" Ruddy said, confused. "What's that?"

"Four kids born at once, of course," Cee said with a scowl that made Ruddy wonder how stupid the kid thought he might be.

Ruddy's jaw dropped. He'd heard of twins before, but he'd never even considered something as amazing as quadruplets. "That's incredible."

"Not really," Bee said with helpful glee. "It's terribly common in goblin families. There are always lots of us around."

Ruddy made a quick count and only came up with three goblins in front of him. "Is there another one of you hiding around here somewhere?" He peered over the tops of their heads.

"Their sister Dee rounds out the lot," Growf said. "She's not allowed in here, of course."

"She's not a boy like the rest of you?" Ruddy said, wondering if, in fact, Ay, Bee, and Cee were boys. He had no way to know what a goblin boy looked like compared to a goblin girl.

"We're not identical, if that's what you mean," said Cee.

Growf grinned. "Right. They're all individuals."

"We're all individuals!" Ay, Bee, and Cee said in unison, each with a similar smile that told Ruddy they'd made this joke before.

"Me too!" came a voice from the hallway that Ruddy could only assume belonged to Dee.

"It's good to meet you all," Ruddy said. "I'm looking forward to staying with you, maybe for a long time."

"Let's hope," Growf said with a smile. He stood about as tall as Ruddy. If forced to guess, Ruddy would have thought they were about the same age. Maybe that was why Mr. Mortis had put them into the same room together.

"Not us!" Ay said, folding his spindly arms across his chest.

"Don't you like him?" Bee asked, concern for his brother wrinkling his brow.

"He's fine, I guess," Ay said.

"He just wants to go home," Cee said. "Don't you?"

It took Ruddy a moment to realize the question had been directed

at him. "Ah, no, actually. I don't have a home to go back to, I think. And even if I did, they didn't treat me very well there."

"Ah," Bee said. "You were abused. We see a lot of that around here. Kids whose parents didn't want them to be monsters, but they couldn't help it." He gave Growf a pointed look the bigger boy ignored.

"We weren't abused," Cee said. "Not until we came here, at least."

That set Ruddy back on his heels. "They abuse you here? What do they do?"

Visions of torture machines swam through his head. He imagined the goblins had once had thick fur, but it had been singed off by hanging them over an open pit of lava. Although he'd read about them in Alphonse's books, he'd never seen an actual goblin before, so he had no way to judge how they should have looked.

"They don't hurt us, if that's what you mean," said Bee. "But some of us spend an awful lot of time down in the principal's office."

"We should be set free," Cee said. "What gives them the right to keep us in this prison?"

"It beats being killed," said Growf. "Doesn't it?"

That sobered them all up.

Then the door to the washroom slammed open, and the huge figure darkening it grumbled down at Ruddy and the others. "Who here wants to be killed?" the creature said in a low, angry voice. "Maybe I can take care of you."

Growf scurried away from the door, and the three goblin boys disappeared with a chorus of yelps and squeaks. Ruddy's feet felt rooted to the floor. He had no idea who this creature looming in the doorway might be or what it might want to do to him, but he also had no clue where he could hide.

The creature stepped forward, and Ruddy felt the floor shake beneath his feet. Or maybe the tremor came from his legs. He couldn't tell.

"Hello, you," the newcomer said in the least friendly way. "What are you then?"

Ruddy goggled at the creature, who stood a full head taller than

him. His arms were as thick around as Ruddy's waist, and his legs massed even more. His skin was blotchy and scarred and mostly the color of the needles of an evergreen tree. His teeth were both prominent and yellow and included a set of fangs that stabbed out from his jutting lower jaw. The nasty sneer on his face made those teeth even more prominent, and Ruddy wondered how painful it would be to have one of them sink into him.

The creature's most stunning feature, though, wasn't his size or how ugly he happened to be. It was the fact he wore an academy uniform — and that there was one large enough to fit him.

"What's the matter?" the creature said. "You deaf?" He glared at Growf, who peeked out at him from around a corner. "Can he hear me?"

"I'm new," Ruddy said, interrupting in a voice far higher than he'd hoped to produce. "I just got here."

The creature chuckled at that. "I think we can see that. What kind of monster are you, I mean? You don't look like much."

Ruddy gaped up at the creature. "Oh. What are you?"

"Half-orc on my father's side and half-troll on my mother's." He leered over Ruddy, drool escaping from where a tusk pressed against his lower lip. "Best of both worlds."

"Oh. I'm Ruddy. I'm pleased to meet you."

"Name's Krasha," the creature said. "And don't you dare tell me that sounds like a girl's name."

"Of course not!" Ruddy said, perhaps a bit too fast. "Why would anyone think that?"

"Last kid who did, well, let's just say they never did find all of him." Krasha glared out at the rest of the washroom behind Ruddy. "Did they, fellas?"

No one answered. None of the others wanted any of Krasha's attention.

"Are you one of my roommates?" Ruddy crossed his fingers, hoping the answer would be no.

Krasha threw back his head and laughed, a horrible sound that made Ruddy's toes curl up inside his brand-new shoes. He wanted

to flee, but Krasha blocked the doorway so well Ruddy couldn't see how he could squeeze past him. Worse yet, he didn't know if there was any other way out of the washroom.

"They gave me and my little brother Basha our own dorm," Krasha said as he folded arms the size of tree trunks across his chest. "We don't leave much room for others."

"Oh," Ruddy said. He couldn't think of anything else. Then his stomach growled loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. He tried to keep from blushing. "If you'll excuse me, I need to get down to Mr. Mortis's office for lunch."

Krasha didn't move. He just glared down at Ruddy with his red-tinted eyes. "You think you're something special, huh? Eating with the principal?"

"Um, no." Ruddy didn't like where this was going, but he didn't see how he could avoid it. "Not really. I'm just — I haven't eaten all day."

Krasha unfolded his arms and reached out to jab a thick finger into Ruddy's chest. "Just you remember how things work around here. And who's really in charge."

"Mr. Mortis?"

The words were still on Ruddy's lips when Krasha's hand shot out and wrapped itself around Ruddy's neck. It felt strange, not painful at all, just firm and as solid as steel. Ruddy had sometimes been forced to wear a collar at Castle Chaos, and this felt a lot like that. He didn't like it.

"Hey!" Growf came around from one of the screened-off areas in the back of the washroom. "Let him go!"

Krasha chuckled at the boy. "Who's going to make me?"

Growf stood next to Ruddy, just out of reach of Krasha's arms. "He's new here," he said. "Give him a break."

"Which arm?" Krasha chortled at his joke.

The goblin boys stepped up on Ruddy's other side. "He doesn't understand," said Cee.

"And it's not funny," said Bee.

"Not as funny as your face, at least," said Ay.

Until that moment, Ruddy had held out some hope he'd be able to escape the situation without anyone getting hurt. When he saw the red glow in Krasha's eyes growing darker, though, he knew those chances had all slipped by. The troll-orc brought up his free hand to take a backhanded swing at the little goblin boy, and Ruddy could only think of one thing to do.

He bit Krasha's hand, sinking his teeth right into the soft part between the troll-orc's index finger and thumb. This so surprised Krasha that he let go of Ruddy and staggered back out the door, howling in agony.

Chapter Six

"That'll teach you!" Ay said as the three goblins rushed up and slammed the washroom door shut. Bee leaped up on Cee's shoulders so he could reach the door's lock and slide it closed.

Something heavy smashed into the other side of the door, and Ruddy braced himself for the entire thing to come flying at him. Somehow it held.

"Magically reinforced," Bee said as he clambered off his brother's shoulders. "Very handy."

Growf frowned at them all, saving his grimmest look for Ruddy. "I know you didn't know any better, but you really shouldn't have done that."

"He was going to hit Cee," Ruddy said.

"You mean Bee," said Ay.

"Sorry," Ruddy said to Bee. "He might have killed him."

"It wouldn't be the first time Krasha's beaten one of us," Growf said. "We all heal pretty fast. It's been a while since the last time he sent one of us to the infirmary."

"Don't you complain?"

"All the time," Cee said.

"And nothing ever happens?"

"What are they going to do, expel him?" Growf said. "Do you know what that means? I mean, what it means *here*?"

Ruddy shook his head. He'd never been a part of any school.

"Death," said Growf. "Creatures who get kicked out of Monster

Academy go one of two ways. If they're lucky, they get banished. If they're considered dangerous?" He drew an index finger across his throat.

"Not even Basha deserves that," said Cee.

"Really?" said Ay. "Sometimes I'm not so sure."

The pounding on the door grew more insistent. "Come on out of there, you little runts!" Krasha said, his voice like thunder. "Come on out and get what's coming to you!"

"Don't do it," Cee said.

"We have to leave the washroom at some point," Ruddy said.

"Wait for Mr. Mortis to show up," Growf said. "Or Lady Tellus, or one of the other teachers. Until then, it's not safe."

"Flame it." Ay cupped a hand to his ear. "I hear something coming."

"You mean 'someone,'" said Bee.

The pounding on the door had stopped, only to be replaced with a thrumming beat Ruddy could feel through the floor. Instead of moving away from them, though, the vibrations grew stronger by the moment.

"Run!" Dee said from the hallway outside. "Hide!"

"You rotten little rabbits got nowhere to go!" Krasha crowed in triumph. "Not anymore!"

The others scattered like insects exposed by an overturned rock. Ruddy stared after them for a moment, unsure of which way to go. His hesitation cost him when the mightiest blow yet struck the door.

The lock held, but the door's frame gave way. The slab of the door burst inward, and it knocked Ruddy from his feet and sent him skidding on his back across the washroom's smooth-tiled floor.

Ruddy pushed himself up on his elbows and saw something that made him wonder how hard the door had hit him. A massive troll-orc stood there in the doorway, a beast so large he had to duck down to avoid hitting his head on lintel.

"Get him, Basha!" Krasha's voice said. "Show him who's boss!"

To Ruddy's amazement, the creature standing in front of him hadn't moved his lips at all. He just glowered at Ruddy in a way

that almost made him long for Castle Chaos.

"Did he just grow into that?" Ruddy asked no one in particular.

"That's Krasha's little brother!" Growf said from somewhere behind him. "Well, younger, at least!"

"I don't want any trouble," Ruddy said. The thought that there were two troll-orcs at the school didn't stun him so much as the idea that either of them could be so big. He felt something wet on his lips and brought his fingers to them. They came away stained with blood.

The gigantic troll-orc reached into the room with an open hand and slammed it down on Ruddy's chest so hard it drove the air from his lungs. The world began to dim, and spots danced before Ruddy's eyes as he struggled to breathe, something the pressure on his chest made impossible.

Desperate, Ruddy tried to transform into his true shape, but he couldn't muster the concentration to make it happen. His brain was too busy trying to find air to let him do anything else.

Ruddy grabbed at the troll-orc's fingers with his hands and tried to pry them away, but they seemed as heavy as anvils. He couldn't get them to budge an inch. He brought his head forward to bite at them, but they were out of reach. He tried to scream for help, but with no breath to draw on, he couldn't make a sound.

It seemed like such a shame for Ruddy to have escaped Castle Chaos, to have survived the Royal Watch's attack on the place, and yet to wind up getting murdered by the worst schoolhouse bully ever here, where he was supposed to be safe. He wondered if the Flame would take him into its light when he died, and if he'd see his parents there when he went. Would they welcome him with open arms? Or would he find himself banished into the darkness forever?

Just as Ruddy felt ready to go meet his ancestors — whether he wanted to or not — Growf bounded forward from wherever he'd been hiding in the back of the room. "Stop it, Basha!" he shouted at the troll-orc wedged in the doorway. "You're killing him!"

Basha lashed out with the one arm he'd reached into the room and backhanded Growf aside. The boy went flying over Ruddy's head

with a yelp of dismay and crash-landed into one of the screens behind him.

Without Basha's hand on his chest, though, Ruddy could breathe again. He gulped in huge lungfuls of air, and the room brightened around him. He used the fresh energy from the adrenaline surging through his veins to scramble backward on his butt and hunt for some way to escape.

As Krasha had said, though, there was no other way out of the washroom. The windows stood shuttered and barred, and the monstrous troll-orc occupied the only doorway. Worse yet, he was working his way farther through the doorway now, inch by inch. Once he made his way fully into the room, Ruddy had no doubt the creature would kill them all.

Ruddy reached down deep inside his skin and found his true self waiting there, desperate and clawing to get out. In the past, he'd hesitated to let that happen, unsure of how to best go about it and afraid of reprisals from Alphonse or Bailey if something went wrong. That uncertainty had ruined Alphonse's attempt to escape with him from Castle Chaos, and it had nearly cost Ruddy his life as well.

Rather than letting Basha finish the job the Royal Watch had started the night before, Ruddy ripped his real self out of the skin he wore. The little, red-haired boy he'd been disappeared in a flash of blood and heat. His crimson scales coated his flesh, and his wings sprang from his back, stretching to their full span with a leathery snap. His face pushed out into a long snout filled with vicious teeth, and his chest expanded and filled with gallons of air.

As the oxygen flowed into his belly, it stoked the latent fires slumbering there, and they burst into a raging blaze that caused every bit of Ruddy's metallic scales to glow with heat from the top of his head to the tip of his tail.

Basha stood rooted before him and goggled at the revealed dragon in sheer and utter terror, his red-tinged eyes round as saucers and his fanged mouth slack in awe. Somewhere someone screamed, and the sound jostled the troll-orc from his state of shock. He gibbered

into the dragon's face, and for a moment Ruddy thought he might attack again in his panic.

Ruddy had never killed anyone before. The people at Castle Chaos had done their best to keep his existence a secret, and he'd rarely found himself in a situation in which he'd had to defend himself. There had been one time Alphonse had been incautious during one of their rare flights, and he'd been forced to face off against a roc. A bit of fire applied to the giant creature's tail feathers, though, had sent it smoking back toward its nest.

At that moment, Ruddy didn't know what to do. He didn't want to hurt anyone, but Basha had almost murdered him — and may have killed Growf for all he knew. What choice did he have but to defend himself?

Ruddy drew in a deep breath and felt the fire inside him grow. He cocked back his head to let loose with a blast of steel-melting fire straight from his gullet, but he caught himself as he saw a flash of orange fur dive between him and the troll-orc.

He clamped down on his lips as hard as he could and held his breath tight. A goblin — much like the boys he'd seen before, but wearing a black jumper bearing the school emblem over a blue shirt, instead of pants — leaped in front of him, her hands stretched wide, which barely spanned one of Basha's legs. "No killing!" she shouted at the top of her lungs.

Surprised, Ruddy coughed, and flames burst out through his nose. They stung the flesh there and made his eyes water as he fought back the rest of the blaze.

Even this relatively small blast made the goblin girl scream in terror. She flung herself against Basha and hung on to his leg for her life as he shoved his way out of the room and went tearing back down the hallway as fast as his massive frame would carry him.

"Dee!" the goblin boys said as they appeared from wherever they'd been hiding in the washroom. They sprinted past Ruddy and raced down the hall in hot pursuit of their sister. Seeing them come after her, she let go of Basha's leg and sprang back toward them, meeting them halfway down the hall in a massive group hug that

looked to Ruddy like a crazed, four-headed pileup of limbs and orange fur.

Meanwhile, the pressure in Ruddy's belly continued to build. Having stoked his fire so fast, he didn't know what to do with it now. He could have fried Basha to a crisp with it, but the gigantic troll-orc was gone now, and Krasha seemed to have disappeared as well.

He glanced around, his situation becoming more desperate by the moment. He spied Growf staring up at him in a mixture of joy and awe, and he pointed at his mouth.

"Can't you just change back?" Growf asked in a soft voice, still stunned at what had just happened.

Ruddy shook his head and pointed to his belly.

"You need something to eat? Someone, I mean?"

Ruddy would have growled in frustration, but doing so would have meant unleashing the built-up fire. Instead, he hunted around for a window to open. He could have let loose his flames in the hallway, but that ran the risk of setting the building on fire. While that might have been acceptable when his life was in danger, with Basha having run off he didn't see how he could justify it — not to himself and certainly not to Mr. Mortis.

"Whatever you're doing, you better do it fast," Growf said. "Here comes Lady Tellus, and she looks mad!"

Ruddy peered down the hallway and saw the watcher marching toward him, her sword out and ready. If that was meant to calm him down, it had the opposite effect. He almost coughed up his flames in terror.

Ruddy dove back into the room and finally spotted what he needed in the back of the room: a basin full of water. He stuffed his snout into it and let loose his flames all at once. They boiled the water around him instantly and turned the entire contents of the tub into steam.

That might have scalded anyone else to death, but heat of any kind had never bothered Ruddy. As the pressure in his belly relieved, he decided it would be best to transform back into human

form. He didn't want Lady Tellus to come in swinging that sword of hers and kill him. He needed to change back into a familiar shape so he could try to explain.

He let the heat of the transformation flow out of him, and he felt his scales begin to fade beneath his skin as he grew colder and colder. His wings folded back down next to his spine and melted into him, and his face retracted once more into that of a human boy with shaggy red hair and bright green eyes.

He brought his head back up out of the basin, the metal edges of which now glowed red from the heat he'd poured into it. Billows of white steam shrouded the entire room, so thick that he could barely see his fingers at the ends of his arms. He felt chilly despite the warmth and had to suppress a shiver at the rapid change of his internal temperature.

It was then that he felt the edge of a sword at his throat. He froze at the sensation, worried that the slightest move on his part would spill his blood.

"Are you quite done?" Lady Tellus's voice said, hidden in the steam somewhere on the other end of the blade.

"Yes," Ruddy said in a small voice, careful not to nod. He knew that if Lady Tellus had wanted him dead she could have already run him through or even taken off his head. Still, he knew from her tone that he would be wise to not give her even the tiniest additional excuse to dispatch him.

She already had plenty of reasons, he knew. He'd been caught transforming into a dragon on the school grounds. He'd been ready to burn one of his fellow students alive. And he didn't even want to know what kind of shape the washroom would turn out to be in once the steam dissipated enough to lay it bare.

"Have you destroyed your clothes?" she said.

"No." He ran his hands over the front of his shirt and down to his pants, and he wriggled his toes in his shoes. They were damp but intact. "My transformation, it's not physical. It's magical."

"Not all monsters are so fortunate," Lady Tellus said. Her blade disappeared, and her face came at him out of the steam. She glared

at him as if she her gaze could stab straight through his skull — no matter what shape he might wear — and peer into his mind.

She grabbed him by the shoulder of his shirt then and marched him out of the washroom. As they passed through the splintered frame where the missing door had stood, Ruddy summoned the temerity to ask her the question that burned him more than any flame. “Where are we going?”

He had visions of being marched off to an execution chamber where they would place him into a guillotine with a blade sharp enough to cut through his scales. Or maybe she’d haul him to the top of a tower where they would chain his wings to his sides and drop him to his doom. Or perhaps they would hurl him into a bottomless pit that led straight down to the underworld instead, where demons would feast on his broken bones.

“To the principal’s office. He’ll determine your fate.”

That answer — anchored as it was in reality and not some fanciful fantasy — scared Ruddy most of all.