

A Kingdom Submerged Bonus Scene

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: During Chapter 25

Emil

Emil swam casually through the entrance to the coral garden, his hands clasped behind his back. He still had an hour or so until dinner, and he needed a break from his study.

He drew in a slow swirl of water, his thoughts centered on this time tomorrow, when he would be done, really done. Four years of focus and study were about to pay off. He had no concerns about failing the test. Both Instructor Ibsen and Instructor Wivell had been working extensively with him in recent weeks, putting him through all kinds of practice assessments. It was clear from their demeanor that they were satisfied that he was ready, and that was enough to reassure him. They wouldn't send him into the final test unprepared. They had invested four years of effort into him, and they wanted him to pass the program, and join the ranks of the record holders.

Unlike Merletta.

He frowned at the stray thought, something wriggling uncomfortably in his stomach. He wished he could deny it, but there was no doubt that with the exception of Agner, the instructors *didn't* want Merletta to succeed. The difference in her treatment was marked, had been marked from the very beginning.

When she first started, Emil had assumed that the difference was merely a result of the prejudice against her home city of Tilssted, the most backward of the triple kingdoms. But he was no longer satisfied by that explanation. He was man enough to admit that he'd also assumed the unpolished young mermaid's success in getting into the program had been a fluke, and that

she'd never be able to keep up. But when Agner had let slip that she'd outperformed all of them in her entrance tests, he'd been forced to reevaluate that opinion. And it hadn't taken long for him to observe both her intelligence and her determination for himself. She had to work incredibly hard to catch up from her disadvantaged starting position, and she'd done so with absolutely no outside assistance.

It was impressive. Quite honestly, he thought she was probably the most promising trainee who'd come across his path during his years in the program. And if he could see that, the instructors most certainly could as well. Trainees with that much potential were the Center's greatest asset. Why were the instructors squandering that asset by trying to push her out of the program?

It was true, he reflected, that she had a long way to go in terms of following authority. But the program had its ways of instilling that into trainees. And from his observation, it wasn't so much that she was out to cause trouble, as that her experiences had made her wary of trusting authority.

If he was being honest, he had to acknowledge that the treatment he'd witnessed could only have reinforced such a view.

Either way, he couldn't believe that the instructors' motivation was limited to her being from Tilsted. It just wasn't a strong enough reason to expel her. There was undoubtedly more he didn't know, and that fact made him uneasy. He was about to graduate—shouldn't he be privy to the full picture by now? What was still being hidden from him, and why?

He felt a flash of irritation toward Merletta, even though he knew it wasn't her fault. A year ago, he'd been much more at ease. Her arrival had introduced an alarming amount of discomfort into his life, gradually as it had come. The instructors' treatment of her was only the beginning. He hadn't exactly liked the discovery that key elements of what he'd believed were incorrect. He understood the reasons for the omissions, but he'd still felt a little uncomfortable.

That discomfort had grown to alarming levels when he saw how explicitly the instructors had been, well—there was no other word for it—deceiving the younger trainees. Being taught in more senior classes that much of what was generally assumed by residents of the triple kingdoms was actually wrong was one thing. Being actually taught that false information in the program's junior years was something else entirely.

And why the change? If there was any reason other than Merletta's arrival, Emil couldn't see it. Did the instructors think the other trainees wouldn't notice the difference, or that they wouldn't care? Surely they must have all noticed. Perhaps not Jacobi, who hadn't been in the program long when Merletta started, but the rest of them. Emil's brow lowered. It certainly seemed as though some of them hadn't cared. But Sage...Emil's thoughts drifted for a moment

as he pictured the coral-tailed mermaid with her gentle features and kind eyes. She was a legacy applicant, but carried none of the vanity others had before her. It was funny how he'd never noticed her much in their childhood, growing up so close to one another back in Skulsted. It was strangely difficult not to notice her now.

He shook his head slightly to clear it. He was straying from the topic. The point was that Sage had not only noticed, but had cared. She had been the first to reach out to Merletta, and Emil had applauded the action internally, even if he'd never spoken to her about it. He was pleased the second—or now third—year mermaid had done what he felt it would be too loaded to do himself, and publicly allied herself with the Tilssted applicant. Emil only hoped that Sage had understood his display in the dining hall to be what it was—an expression of approbation for her as much as an encouragement to Merletta.

Because he meant what he'd said on that occasion. He hoped Merletta would succeed. He had a feeling she would shake things up in the Center if she joined the ranks of the record holders, but that wouldn't be such a bad thing. It was possible that those in power had lost sight of their objectives a little, and were clinging to habits of secrecy, formed in more dangerous times, that were no longer necessary.

He was sure that Ibsen, at least, was concerned about what would happen if Merletta progressed far enough to learn the things Emil knew. But Emil wasn't so sure she was a threat in the way the instructor feared. He swished his tail thoughtfully as he remembered the class where Merletta had—without using the word—brought up humans. Emil had been almost certain that she knew the truth. How it was possible, he couldn't say. But he supposed that there were any number of ways that information could have leaked out. And if he was right, and Merletta knew that humans were real...well, she hadn't exposed that information yet, had she? She had, in fact, given the Center no reason other than her origin to think she wasn't worthy of the trust accorded to trainees.

And yet, they showed every sign of suspicion. His discomfort grew at the thought. Sometimes he wasn't entirely sure she realized just how warily she needed to go. For all he wanted to join the record holders, he had no illusions about their absolute power. Merletta needed to be careful.

“I should have known better than to expect sympathy from you.”

Emil paused at the familiar but unwelcome voice, its tone bitter. He had been meandering through the public coral garden, blissfully believing himself to be alone. But it seemed that Jacobi was lingering in the garden's most secluded corner for some reason.

“Yes, you should have.”

The blunt voice completed Emil's irritation. Apparently Ileana was here, too. They were fully obscured by an enormous coral sculpture, but he knew their voices well. The pair were the last merpeople he wanted to chat with, and he turned, intending to swim back the way he'd come.

"If that Tilssted trash passes, I may as well throw myself into the thermal vents and save my family the trouble."

Emil paused at this mention of Merletta, as if the topic of his thoughts had somehow dispersed through the water into Jacobi's mind. He wanted to roll his eyes at the dramatic outburst. Jacobi was so petty and childish sometimes, Emil found it hard to believe that he was sixteen. Seventeen now, Emil realized, remembering with a start that today had been the day of the younger trainee's test. Suddenly his interest was fully captured. Jacobi had come to Ileana for sympathy? Had he failed?

"Better to throw her in," muttered Ileana, and Jacobi gave a snort.

"You have to help me," the copper-haired merman pressed.

"Help you?" Ileana scoffed. "What is it you expect me to do? You think I can change the results of your test? I'd be a fourth year now if I could do that."

"I didn't mean that," Jacobi said, sulkily. "But Agner loves you. Surely you can get me a place with the guards, like you got when you failed your test. I have to have *some* position, or my family will kill me!"

"I didn't sneak my way into the guards," Ileana snapped, sounding furious at Jacobi's mention of her own failure. "I have a place because I passed second year, unlike you."

"You owe me!" Jacobi protested. "I've helped you all year, and kept your secrets."

Emil drew slightly closer. Things were beginning to get interesting.

"Helped me?" echoed Ileana scornfully. "What have I ever needed your help on?"

"That's rich!" protested Jacobi. "I'm the one who found you a box jellyfish! And I used my mother's connections to get that pufferfish into the dining hall for you!"

Emil stiffened. He'd heard about Merletta's accusations, but he'd been inclined to think she was placing too much importance on unfortunate accidents. He'd thought the Center kept too rigid a control to allow such dangerous pranks, even against a trainee so far from favor. Apparently he'd been wrong.

"And," Jacobi pressed, "I haven't told anyone about the time we came at her in the training yard, when you tried to—"

“That’s enough,” Ileana cut in sharply. “If you’re trying to suggest I had to twist your arm to get you to take part in those pranks, you can think again.”

There was a moment of silence, and Emil could easily picture Jacobi’s sulky expression. “I didn’t agree to what you did in the training yard,” the failed trainee said at last. “I wouldn’t have come with you if I knew you were actually going to—”

“Don’t delude yourself into thinking you have power over me,” Ileana said coldly. “Believe me when I say I have nothing to fear from anything you might say about that incident. And as I recall, the jellyfish prank was your idea. You have more to lose than I do from spreading any of these tales. And there’s nothing I can do to help you, in any event. Apply for the normal guard program if you want to be a guard.”

It sounded like they might be about to part ways, and Emil hesitated, trying to decide whether he wanted to remain unseen. He wasn’t afraid of anything either of them could do to him. But he was troubled by Ileana’s words, that she had nothing to fear from exposure. He didn’t know much about the incident they had mentioned, in the training yard. He knew that there had been some run in, and that there’d been a lot of whispering about the Tilssted intruder not being able to accept defeat graciously when she was bested in a bout. But from what Emil had just heard, it sounded like Merletta hadn’t been overreacting when she claimed she’d been attacked.

He frowned. If that was so, how could Ileana be so confident that she wouldn’t suffer any repercussions if Jacobi turned on her? Was she bluffing, hoping to scare him into silence? Or did she really have some protection Emil didn’t know about?

It was a sobering thought, but on reflection, he didn’t think he had anything to fear from Ileana. He was about to become a junior record holder, and she hadn’t even passed third year. There might still be things hidden from him, but he knew how the Center worked. Position was everything, and once he passed his final test, his role as a record holder would give him both influence and security.

On balance, he thought it was more important to curb what seemed to be a dangerously entrenched campaign against Merletta. He thought it would do both Ileana and Jacobi good to feel a little fear of consequences, if nothing else.

With that thought in mind, he propelled himself forward, rounding the corner and coming into view of the conspirators. Both of them started visibly, and all the color drained from Jacobi’s already pale face. Ileana’s face showed alarm for only a moment, before a steely-eyed calm descended on her features. Whatever he thought of her motives, Emil had to admire her nerve.

“It sounds like I need to offer my commiserations to you, Jacobi,” he said smoothly, keeping his face expressionless.

Jacobi swallowed visibly, his eyes darting between Ileana and Emil. He was clearly wondering what Emil had heard, and as clearly expecting Ileana to take control of the situation.

But Emil didn't intend to let her do any such thing.

"I can only imagine," he said calmly, "that failing out of the program must be a crushing blow. But I'm sure that anyone who had ever aspired, even for a short time, to represent the Center, would know better than to take out their disappointment in childish and dangerous displays against those more capable than them."

Ileana flushed at what she clearly understood to be a disparaging comparison between her and Merletta. Jacobi, on the other hand, paled even further at this indication that Emil had overheard their conversation.

"Emil," he said hastily, "you don't understand. It was just—"

"I don't know what you heard," Ileana cut over him, "but you'd be wise to keep it to yourself. Trust me on that."

"I neither trust you nor fear you," said Emil brutally. He measured the mermaid with his eyes. She was certainly confident, even knowing as she must that he would outrank her. There was clearly more at play here than he knew, and he would do well to swim carefully.

He had no intention of sharing any of his thoughts, of course. It had never been his habit to show what he was thinking or feeling. Without another word, he turned and swam away, flicking his tail lazily as he left the coral garden.

Ileana was a guard now. That she had Agner's favor, he knew, and it seemed likely based on what he'd just witnessed that she had some other resource behind her. It would perhaps be unwise to accuse her openly until he had more information.

He fully intended to find that information, but in the meantime, it would gall him to leave the matter unaddressed. His thoughts flew to the other conspirator. Jacobi was clearly the follower, and making him Ileana's scapegoat was hardly ideal. But on the other hand, he wasn't exactly unwilling. And if he really had intentionally introduced a box jellyfish into Merletta's sleeping area, he apparently wouldn't be grieved to see her die.

Yes, Jacobi could be safely dealt with before the matter was further investigated. It wasn't a complete answer, but it would send a message that there were consequences to such blatant attacks. Surely those in authority, however much they disliked Merletta, wouldn't wish to turn a blind eye to actual attempts on her life. The Center could be a little controlling, but it wasn't so insidious that it silenced its detractors by killing them off.

Was it?

Emil gave a convulsive flick of his tail, as if to flick off the uncomfortable thought. The very control that characterized the Center reassured him that those in power wanted order. They wouldn't approve of such dangerous and reckless pranks, and however little store they set by Merletta's complaints, they wouldn't ignore a report by Emil.

He would speak to Ibsen that very evening.