

CHAPTER 1

CRIMSON took in a deep breath, keeping her snout above the water as it slapped against her wiry red fur. Crimson was Norterridane, a fierce breed of dogs who had the ability to connect with and protect dragons. In protecting them, she had almost lost everything.

The memories of chaos and horror flooded her mind. The den tunnels collapsing, the serpents attacking her home, and her friend Midnight nearly dying from battle wounds was enough to make Crimson question everything in her life. Crimson had narrowly escaped death, and the Norterridane had just begun to rebuild the broken tunnels of their home. But now, just below the subtle currents of Crystal Lake, a dragon was hatching. A new hope in a world in disarray.

Holding her breath, Crimson paddled down beneath the cool water toward the dragon egg. A small turquoise nose pushed its way through the crack in the eggshell. Piece by piece the egg broke apart and the shells floated away. The sea dragon emerged covered in smooth turquoise scales. Enlarged wings that mimicked those of a moth propelled the dragon through the water. Gills fluttered as the dragon swam up toward Crimson and rubbed her head against her fur.

A rush of cool and calm dragon power flowed between them. Crimson's stomach turned as the familiar pang of power-induced nausea hit her. Gills formed behind her button ears, near where the jawbone connected to her neck. She breathed in the cool lake water. The dragon magic connected them, as if they had known each other all of their lives. The instant connection surprised her at first, just like the time she first called fire from her claws. Crimson relaxed and let the magic take over calming her body. She hadn't expected gills. She would have loved a magical translucent shield that many dragon keepers created when they shared power. But gills gave Crimson a jolt of excitement at the prospect of being able to explore the depths of the lake, and the thoughts of battle faded away. The dragon snapped at a small minnow. Crimson swam after a silver scaled fish, caught it with her claws, and fed it to the dragon. She eagerly consumed it.

Crimson swam to the lakeshore and shook the water from her fur. The smell of dragon entered her nose. A musty lizard odor mixed with the slight sweetness of eucalyptus made the

dragon scent unique from that of other reptilian creatures. Even with a highly developed sense of smell, the dragon scent overwhelmed all non-dragon smells. Crimson's head began to throb. Muddy soil covered the ground near the reeds, and she pushed the hatchling toward it. The dragon's oversized wings dragged through the mud. Crimson rubbed the mud from her paws onto the dragon's body, and she squawked in protest.

"You don't like the mud? It will keep you hidden," Crimson said. The dragon squawked again.

Crimson rubbed a pawful of mud on the dragon's back, and slowly the smells of the world returned. She had been lucky to discover that trick early as a dragon keeper.

"Almost done," Crimson said, looking affectionately at the dragon. The dragon rubbed her mud-covered head against Crimson's leg and looked up at her with purple eyes.

"Your eyes remind me of covellite. It's a stone in the lake. I want to name you Covelli."

The dragon's eyes beamed, and she brushed against Crimson again.

Crimson sniffed the air and looked around the reeds that grew at the lake's edge. The plants near the lake were tall enough to hide in. Farther south, the grass-covered hills peaked out above the reeds, and Jasperillian plants grew sporadically between the grasses. The dragon scent was hidden for now, but they would still need a suitable den. River weasels and cave lizards were often seen near Crystal Lake. The Jasperillian leaves had a powerful smell that helped mask the smell of dragons, but even their potent smell would eventually fade.

Crimson had never made a den. She had lived with her mother until she found the dragon eggs, and when she took care of her last dragons, she stayed with Midnight in his den. Midnight was her best friend, a warrior and dragon keeper. He had taught her everything she knew about dragon keeping. He had been injured by Azuran in the serpent battle, trying to protect her. She knew the basics of den making, and the chances of finding such a readily available shelter here on the southeastern side of the lake were slim. Crimson searched the reeds for a suitable place. Small hills stood a short distance away from the lake. Crimson walked to the hill and scratched the dirt. The dirt was drier than expected. Crimson dug with her front paws, moving dirt out of the way. As she moved the dirt away, more fell from above. Crimson backed out of the small hole and groaned. This wouldn't work, and there were no trees or bushes. Roots would have helped support the ceiling. Crimson sighed and looked at Covelli. The dragon had found a snail to play with and pawed at it whenever its head poked out of the shell.

A light breeze blew from across the lake, shaking the reeds and causing ripples across the water. Crimson sniffed. The scent of an older dragon came from upwind, weak and less sweet, and a slight smell of something else: serpent.

The reeds rustled and cracked. Whatever it was, it was moving fast. She couldn't smell it clearly. She couldn't see it. Crimson stood alert and growled. Dragon scales rubbed against her back leg. Crimson glanced down. Covelli stood between her legs, almost blending in with the mud around her, staring up at the reeds, trembling.

A black dragon head appeared from within the reeds. Like a giant snake, its head moved from side to side. Smooth, shiny black scales covered its body, and sharp ridges covered its spine. Three spines stuck up over the ears on each side, and it turned its eyes inquisitively upon Crimson. The blue eyes, threatening and beautiful all at once, and very familiar.

"Azuran?" Crimson gasped. The last time she had seen him had been in battle, when he had attacked Midnight and the other Norterridane. The hardest thing to process about the battle was seeing Azuran. She couldn't believe it. He had been her first dragon. She had protected him as a hatchling, until a serpent came and tried to kill them. Azuran had fallen into the swift currents of the Sapphire River and over the waterfall. He had died, or so she had believed, until he showed up fighting with the enemy. He fled shortly after she saw him, when more dragons came to the aid of the Norterridane.

Now he stood before her, majestic yet terrifying. His large head moved closer to her. She wasn't sure if she should run or try to fight.

"You're far from home," Azuran said, his voice even. His mouth, so close that Crimson could feel his breath on her fur. His head was at least three times as large as Crimson's small body.

Crimson took a step back, trying to remain calm. She could call the dragon fire from her claws. A rare ability she had gained when she first found Azuran and his sister's eggs. But it wouldn't hurt him. He was an Obsidian dragon. He had impenetrable scales. Scales that were invincible to everything, except other Obsidian dragon claws. He could easily kill her, but something told her he would have already killed her if he wanted to. His eyes didn't seem threatening. He wanted something else.

"Do you remember me?" Crimson said, forcing herself to stand tall. Covelli's tail wrapped tightly around her leg, willing her to stay put.

“I remember how you stopped me in battle, with that arc of fire. It brought back many fractured memories. It seems you have mastered your power well,” Azuran said.

Azuran had killed several Norterridane and was about to kill Midnight when Crimson intervened, calling a wall of fire from her claws. When the Schorl serpents had attacked the city in an attempt to capture dragon hatchlings and to gain their power, the Norterridane had fought them off with the help of dragon-kind. Crimson had called upon the power of all the nearby dragons and created a shield of fire that incinerated the nearby serpents, hastening their retreat. Crimson didn't understand why she could channel the power of many dragons and had only been able to do so with the help of a mysterious white Norterridane named Jasper. Crimson was still learning how to call on her seemingly innate powers and doubted that she could call that much power again on her own.

The scent of serpent was stronger now and coming from Azuran. He had lived with them so long their scent must have stayed with him.

“You smell of serpent,” Crimson said, sharper than she intended. “Are they still here in Genorrdia?”

Azuran's expression changed for a brief second, then hardened. It seemed like a topic he was reluctant to talk about. Then he shook his head. “I am not sure; Onixian and I were separated.”

“Is that the serpent's name?”

Azuran looked down and saw Covelli for the first time. “Another dragon!”

Azuran's muscles jerked, as if he was going to jump off the ground, but he relaxed his body and he moved his head toward Covelli, who squeaked and backed away.

“I won't hurt you,” he said.

Then the dragons were silent. Covelli moved closer to Azuran, and their noses touched for just a moment. Azuran's blue eyes looked tenderly on his kin.

It seemed so peaceful, but his enormous head and large dragon teeth reminded Crimson of the danger. How could she be so calm when he had almost killed Midnight and Torbern? Could it be that she was still thinking of him as a dragon hatchling instead of this dangerous beast before her?

“I have not heard dragon thoughts in such a long time.” Azuran sighed as if he had longed for it. Longed for a connection. Dragons could converse in their own telepathic language, even

inside their eggs. Azuran and his twin sister, Chalcedony, had communicated this way before they learned to speak Norterridane to communicate with Crimson.

Azuran lay down, stretching his body out among the reeds, flattening them into the ground. His large tail, which looked like a braided black root, curled around his body. A whip tail that could cause serious damage to anything attacking him.

Crimson shook her head. “What are you doing here?”

“This is my home.”

“Dragons are supposed to live on Alannador. Don’t you want to reunite with the dragons?”

“The serpents are my kind now,” Azuran said, pawing playfully with Covelli. The little mud-covered dragon swiped at Azuran’s claws, and he knocked her over gently. “I am sure I’ll find them eventually.”

Covelli jumped toward Azuran’s muzzle, tripped on her wings, and tumbled over. Crimson watched them, wondering why Azuran hadn’t gone to Alannador, like the other mature dragons. She had to find out more. Did he really feel like one of them?

Azuran didn’t know if the serpents had left, but this was Crimson’s chance to convince him to find his kind. He couldn’t go looking for the serpents, or they would have an Obsidian dragon as an enemy, and that would be unthinkable.

“Didn’t you hear the call?” Crimson said. “Didn’t you want to go home?”

“The call?”

“The call all dragons hear when they mature, calling them home to Alannador. Chalcedony called it a melody.” Crimson hummed the peaceful yet sad song that Chalcedony had sang when the Obsidian dragons turned the dead to ashes with their fire and sent their kin to the afterlife.

“I heard something like that, once or twice, but I did not understand what it was. Onixian told me to ignore it.”

To hear the call and not go—what does that mean for a dragon? Has he abandoned his kind forever? Maybe I could help him reconnect with them. Can I still feel for his power, as I can other dragons?

Crimson relaxed as much as she could in his presence. Still on edge, she let her mind drift through the air. She focused on his heartbeat, like she had when he was young. The rhythmic thumping focused her thoughts. She called for his power, concentrating on the feeling she had when she’d first connected with him. The joy and comfort she had felt at that moment rushed

back into her mind. His power came to her like the hot rays of the sun heating the rocks upon the shore.

Small flames of white lit up her claw, different from the blue fire that now came without the aid of dragons. The power that connected keeper and dragon. It was weaker than before, much weaker than her bond with Covelli, but it was there, the heat merely a glimmer of the warmth it had been. The emotion that came from the connection was unexpected, and a tear rolled down her furry cheek.

Azuran moved back in surprise, but not from the flames. Crimson knew he had felt it too. The connection was overwhelming. The expression on Azuran's face was one of confusion and possibly fear. He backed away.

Wind blew in from the north, and with it, the scents of two approaching warriors.

Azuran growled and snapped his tail, sending several reeds flying.

"No, Azuran," Crimson said.

Azuran turned away from Covelli and leapt into the air, flying low over the hills toward the eastern Black Mountain range. Crimson watched until he was a small speck in the sky. She longed to go back in time and save him, to make up for lost time. Wherever he was going, she had to find him; she had to get him back.

Covelli, eyes wide, stared into the sky where Azuran had flown. Her scales shimmered in the light. Crimson wondered what Azuran had said to her, but she was too young to speak Norterridane. Azuran didn't seem like an evil monster, like the serpents. In fact, when they had connected, he seemed almost sad.

"He was playful," Crimson said. "I didn't expect that."

Two Norterridane came through the reeds: Beryl, chief guard, a medium-brown Norterridane, and an unfamiliar tricolored male. Beryl had been Crimson's warrior trainer. She remembered clearly his disappointment in how well she had progressed. Her training as a warrior had ceased when she found two dragon eggs. After the serpent battle, Beryl had sent Crimson to the lake's edge to find the dragon's egg as a sign he finally had accepted her as a keeper.

"Crimson," Beryl said as he emerged, pushing his nose up in greeting, "I am glad to see the dragon has hatched. There is another dragon scent here. What is it?"

"It was Azuran."

Beryl's fur prickled. "What did he want?"

“I am not sure,” Crimson said. She recounted their exchange.

“The Elders will want to know of this,” Beryl said. “Have you bonded with the hatchling?”

“Yes,” Crimson said, calling upon the cool, calm power. The gills reformed on her neck.

“This is Labrad,” Beryl said, gesturing behind him. The tricolor Norterridane of white, black, and brown stepped further out of the reeds. The dark brown fur on his face looked like a mask. The drastic contrast in color highlighted his blue eyes, a rare color for Norterridane. “He is a dragon keeper.”

“What is this about?” Crimson said.

“The Elders have summoned you,” Labrad said, his voice calm and confident. “They want to speak with you immediately, about the powerful wall of fire you created during the battle.”

“We need to leave at once,” Beryl said. He observed the dragon carefully as if he was deciding what to do with her. “Will she follow you?”

Crimson followed his gaze down at the hatchling. Bright purple eyes looked back. “Yes, she will. Covelli, let’s go for a swim.”

Covelli needed no prodding. She followed Crimson through the muddy reeds and splashed into the lake.

CHAPTER 2

COVELLI swam gracefully underwater. Her oversized wings helped her move effortlessly through the lake. It seemed like she was flying. Her legs were motionless by her side, and her tail moved back and forth to help her change directions.

Crimson swam after her, trying to catch up. She reached for the dragon power. The cool, breezy wave of Covelli’s dragon magic flowed through her mind and body. Crimson felt the water flow through her nose and out the magic-enhanced gills. She pushed herself through the water with her paws, delighting in the feeling. Fish darted out of the way as she swam.

Crimson spent much of her time in water, as most Norterridane did. They were fish hunters, and she could hold her breath for quite a long time. But feeling the water flow through her dragon-enhanced gills gave her a sense of freedom to explore the underwater world that she never had before.

Broad-leaved pondweed, eelgrass, and Jasperillian grew sporadically along the upper layer of the lake, creating a green expanse for fish and other lake animals to hide. Farther down the bank, the plants receded, and the water cooled. At the bottom of the lake was something large and dark that spread across the lake bottom like three enormous claw marks.

Crimson swam to the surface, catching up to Beryl, who had been taking turns with Labrad surfacing for air and keeping an eye on Crimson and Covelli. “There is something under the lake. It looks like dark slashes in the dirt.”

“It’s a large crevasse, nothing down there but darkness.”

“Someone’s explored it?”

“The Magi investigated it long ago, before even I was born.”

The Magi were those Norterridane who were born with the ability to use magic. They did not need to keep dragons to have power, but they only used their magic for healing and bettering the lives of the Norterridane.

“I think it would be really neat to see.”

Beryl swam close to Crimson. “Just make sure your first duty is to your dragon.”

And once again she was back to being treated like a pup.

Crimson swam back under the water. The sooner she met with the Elders, the sooner she could get back to raising Covelli on her own, and she could explore where she wanted.

“Come on, Covelli,” Crimson barked, though her words were muffled underwater. Covelli’s ears twitched at the sound.

Crimson and Covelli followed Beryl deeper into Crystal Lake, to an underwater tunnel. The tunnel turned upward and above the water level, branching off into several dens and passageways. Large boulders stood on both sides of the newly opened entrance, which had been sealed during the serpent attack. The Underground dens had been crafted in the hills and rocky slopes of the Black Mountains. The passage split into sections, leading to the upper and lower corridors of the city.

Crimson covered Covelli with mud once again, and the scent of heated fish filled the tunnel. The fish-drying caves were somewhere under the city, close by, though Crimson had never seen them. Covelli smelled the air and squawked.

“She is hungry,” Labrad said.

“I will get her a fish; I will meet you at the Elders’ cave,” Beryl said, and disappeared through a tunnel on the left toward the fish-drying caves. Beryl left so quickly Crimson didn’t have time to say that she had already fed her. Covelli was probably just interested in the smell. She shrugged and watched Covelli’s awkward walking. On land, Covelli was not graceful. Her wings were large for her size, and she stepped on them often as she walked through the tunnel. Her tail had a large forked fin on the end. A long top fin curved downward over the short, triangle-shaped lower fin and dragged on the ground.

“Pick up your wings, Covelli,” Crimson said, and the dragon tried her best to hold them up on her back. It was a struggle.

“She will get stronger,” Labrad said. “Sea dragons spend most of their hatchling life in water, building up their muscle strength.”

“Can they fly?” Crimson asked, suddenly wondering how Covelli would be able to with such heavy wings.

“They can fly, but they don’t often—they live in the oceans and spend very little time on land or in the sky.”

The walk to the Elders’ cave is going to be a long one. Crimson sighed and walked near Covelli, encouraging her.

“Did you keep a sea dragon?” she asked Labrad.

“Yes, several. Though my latest dragon was a sand dragon. I called him Smokey.”

“Several sea dragons. Have you ever seen what’s in the crevasse?”

“Ya know, I haven’t,” Labrad said. “I took my dragons to my keeper den near the Sapphire River. Just always kept my dragons there.”

“A keeper den?”

“You have to find your own place where you want to keep your dragons, and make a den there. Once you have a good idea of where you feel the most comfortable.”

“I guess I still have some things to learn,” Crimson said.

“You didn’t have much dragon training, so don’t be hard on yourself.”

The group walked along a dark tunnel lit up with glow stones, stones that absorbed sunlight and shone almost as bright. The Underground was in the middle of the vast Black Mountain range, partly hidden in the foothills and surrounded by redwood forest. It had many entrances, some through the forest or the mountains, but dragon keepers were only allowed to

enter through certain tunnels that young Norterridane pups did not visit. Crimson remembered the off-limits tunnels when she was a pup. She had even caught the scent of a dragon but had never been allowed to see one. Her mother had said it was to keep pups from running off, looking for dragon eggs and being attacked by cave lizards.

There were many tunnels now, some slanting downward, others curving this way and that. The ones built deeper into the earth were stone, while the passages moving upward were dirt mixed with stone. Every den had more than one exit so that they could escape if needed.

The scents of Norterridane became more abundant, but none of them Crimson recognized.

“These tunnels were once full of dragon keepers. That is, back when it all first started,” Labrad said, “before we knew their scent attracted cave lizards.”

“Until the lake swelled and the tunnels flooded,” Crimson added.

“Yes, that is true. One of these dens belonged to Jasper.”

“Jasper?”

“Yes, she was one of the first dragon keepers and a Magi.”

Jasper was female? Crimson thought. She had heard of Jasper, the greatest dragon keeper of all time, but she had always assumed she would be male, like so many others.

“I’ve heard that Jasper was able to share dragon power, like I can,” Crimson said, looking behind her to make sure Covelli was still following. She slowed her pace a bit. One of Covelli’s claws was hooked in her wing again. It took her a minute to unhook it. She squawked happily when she was free.

“I wonder what is taking Beryl so long with that fish,” Labrad said.

The glow stones of the main hall came into view. Covelli walked slower now, taking in the sight. There was nothing like it. Crimson remembered the first time she had seen it as a pup; she had never wanted to stop looking at the sparkling stones. There were hundreds of them, lining the walls of the cavern and lighting up the darkness like daylight. The cavern was empty now, but hundreds of Norterridane would gather here for meetings and celebrations. Pups were trained in other parts of the Underground, in the higher levels, to become warriors, Magi, hunters, explorers, and other jobs needed in the Underground.

“Come on, Covelli,” Crimson said, and nudged the dragon toward the long tunnel that led to the Elders’ cave. She heard a voice coming from a nearby den.

“Congratulations! You have been chosen to be dragon keepers. It is a big responsibility, and not one to be taken lightly. You will have the life of another in your hands, and it is your duty to raise and protect your dragon.”

Only the best Norterridane of each class became dragon keepers. Crimson knew that if she hadn't accidentally found those two Obsidian dragon eggs and bonded with them, she would not have been chosen as a keeper. She had not been the best warrior, and it had only been luck that she had found dragon eggs.

Labrad peeked in the den as he walked by, looking at all the new keepers with pride. Crimson glanced in too as they walked by. The new keepers were all about the same age as Crimson; she had become one much younger than usual. Closest to the den entrance was a small brown Norterridane, his eyes wide and sucking in all the heroic ideas of being a dragon keeper.

The trainees turned at the scent of the dragon, and the trainer hurried to the den entrance to block them from coming out to investigate.

“And that,” the trainer said, “that is your first smell of a dragon hatchling. Please let the dragon pass without disturbance.”

The Norterridane stared in awe as the hatchling walked past. Then they looked at Crimson, and their eyes widened even more.

“My apologies,” Labrad said, hurrying Crimson and Covelli along. “We will take the east tunnels on the way back.”

The trainer nodded and continued. “While we see it as an honor to protect dragon young, we must also protect our way of life. The many jobs of the city are important, from fish hunter to warrior. When you are granted a dragon, you will be taken away from the city to live and guard the dragon on your own. This is what you have been trained to do. Yes, it is dangerous, but with the shared dragon magic, you can succeed.”

“They seemed more surprised to see me than a dragon,” Crimson said.

“It is not every day that they see the red Norterridane who called a wall of white fire. You're quite a legend.”

“But how did they know? They weren't there.”

“News travels fast, and your color is unique, just like your abilities, it would seem,” Labrad said as several other Norterridane came out of their dens, smelling dragon scent. When

they saw Crimson, they stared and whispered amongst each other. Crimson hurried Covelli along, hoping this meeting would end soon and she would be away from all the prying eyes.