

CHAPTER 1

Just before dawn, the death dragon awoke.

Cinna's violet eyes opened. Blurry images sharpened. She squinted, focusing on images far beyond the cave. Images not her own. She looked through the eyes of another dragon.

It had happened before and would happen again. The telepathic link to all dragons was both a power and a curse of a death dragon.

Something wrapped tightly around the dragon's neck, and it burned with magical pulses of energy. An intense pain, like that of a serpent's tusk piercing through dragon scales, rippled through her. The dragon couldn't scream. The powerful magic squeezed at her throat. A bright light lit up the darkness, blinding her vision. The dragon lurched back to get away.

She blinked as the glowing light faded. Cinna couldn't move, frozen with the dragon. The dragons' wings grew heavy, like stone, slowed and stopped. The dragon gasped for air. Cinna gasped for air. The dragon fell. Its body slammed against the ground; wings crumpled beneath her. Pain blasted through Cinna's body and she braced herself against the cave's hard stone wall.

The dragon barely moved now. Slow wheezing breaths came from the dragon's lungs, and Cinna felt her own labored breath. What pulled the breath from her body?

Cinna crawled to the edge of her cave as if the cool night air would aid her breathing. As if moving would stop her pain, stop the dragon's pain.

It did not.

Ripples of fear shook Cinna's body. The dying dragon's eyes fixated on its assailant. Haunting white eyes, bony cheeks, and sharp teeth lit in an eerie glow by the strange magic light. A furless, scale-less creature stood before her. It held long stick with a glassy black rock attached to the tip. It was sharp, like a dragon's talons.

The creature moved closer. A jolt of pain passed through the dragon, as the spear pierced skin and heart. Pain echoed through Cinna's body.

A surge of dragon magic pulled from within the dragon. Cinna clawed the stone beneath her, instinctively, knowing it would do nothing against the pain. Cinna cried out.

The last drops of magic faded. The dragon died.

Terror shook Cinna's body. A familiar face loomed in the dying dragon's eyes. The dragon's killer was an enemy that all dragons believed extinct.

Another chill passed through Cinna's body. Tingles pulsed through her muscles and under the dragon's scales. She shivered. The dark hunters had found a way to kill an Obsidian dragon.

Cinna closed her eyes and collected herself. She took a deep breath and focused on her next task. She pushed through the veil that split this world and the dream world, and searched through the dreams of sleeping dragons. Colors, shades, fogs, and abstract patterns collided with deep emotions in the dream world. Scenes changed rapidly, creating confusing images to wade through. But she found the king of dragons asleep in his cave near the plateau. It wasn't really the dragon, more of a feeling of a dragon. An intangible essence Cinna called dragon consciousness. The abstract version of the dragon she sought to communicate with.

Cinna never saw exactly what the dragon dreamed, and the dreaming dragon couldn't see her. Sometimes she appeared as a face or a blurred dragon form. Sometimes just her violet eyes would appear, but the dreamer could always hear her telepathic voice. A few dragons, Hornblende among them, had enough conscious awareness in their dream state to reply. What Hornblende saw this night, while he dreamt, she did not know, but she knew he could hear her.

"I need you, old friend."

"I don't feel old," the telepathic voice replied, light-hearted and tender, as if they stood next to one another. Most other dragons needed to be close to communicate this way, another perk of Cinna's innate abilities.

A swirl of fog formed, and the shape of Hornblende stood before her.

"Another dragon is dead, and I fear more will follow. I need to talk with you at once. There is much to discuss."

Hornblende nodded, and Cinna let the dream message fade. She stretched her long body and unfolded her wings. The chill of death still lingered on her scales and on her heart. In time, it would pass.

Cinna walked out of her lair. Warm water splashed over her body. A river traveled through heated stones deep within the mountain and out into a waterfall that fell over the entrance of Cinna's cave. The waterfall kept her lair hidden. The main reason Cinna had chosen this cave over 1000 years ago. Obsidian claws expanded the cave into the mountainside, making it a comfortable place to live.

Heated water rolled over her scales, soothing her body and her mind. Some dragons created their own heat. Obsidian dragons' fire stomach warmed their entire bodies. Their scales grew hard and shiny black, like the volcanic rocks of Alannador. Cinna could not produce heat, nor could she call forth the ocean waves like water dragons or camouflage herself with in the forest trees. She did not have many of the coveted powers of dragons, but in her long life, Cinna learned to love her powers and viewed herself as the powerful dragon she was.

What it would be like to be invincible, turn invisible, breathe underwater, or speak the language of the plant eaters? Even without impenetrable scales or sharp obsidian talons, she harnessed powerful magic. Communicating with dragon hatchlings across continents, or dragons in their dreams, took an enormous amount of power. If she used enough power, she could even communicate with other creatures through their dreams. Cinna, like Obsidian, did not fear serpents. They wouldn't have the strength to kill her, but the dark hunters could. This enemy twisted and changed magic. This enemy had tried to wipe dragons off the face of the planet, and they had almost succeeded.

"Can I join you?" Hornblende said aloud. Cinna paused for a moment longer, not wanting to leave the warmth of the water.

The majestic Obsidian dragon king's scales shimmered in the sunlight. He landed a dragon's length away on a rocky ledge across from the cave.

"I fear you would overheat." Cinna laughed and moved out of the water onto the rock ledge. Although Cinna was twice his size, his presence commanded attention. Hornblende's large horns stood atop his head and hardened spines layered his back and neck. The dragon had a beautifully sculpted tail made of interlocked scales knotted together that smashed stones and broke bone.

He had an invincibility to almost everything in the world, save Crystalline Sardonyx and Obsidian claws. And now the dark hunter weapon.

Hornblende scratched his black scales along the rocks, basking in the sun, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"What is it about this dragon's death that has you worried" He asked, one eye glancing in her direction.

Cinna frowned, "It was an Obsidian. Carnelian is dead."

Hornblende jolted up and faced Cinna, concern spread across his face. "Carnelian? How?" Another serpent attack? We just lost Jet. I thought we had killed those serpents with Sardonyx tusks."

"An Obsidian stone blade took her life."

"An Obsidian? Serpents using stones?"

Cinna shook her head, "I believe our old enemy has returned. Dark hunters would often carve stones to kill the elk and deer. Now they are carving Obsidian rock."

"I thought they were dead," Hornblende said. Cinna heard the wariness in his voice. This war had gone on too long.

"Deep down, we knew they were hiding, waiting for the right time to surface. I think Crimson awakened them."

After a moment of contemplation, he said, "I never thought one of those canine creatures could become so powerful, but Crimson's magic is beyond anything I've seen before.

"Jasper had similar powers," Cinna reminded him. The dark magic in the stone was an evil creation. The hunters mixed magic to create a plague that nearly wiped out all dragon life. Jasper, a Norterridane and dragon keeper magi, sealed the stone in a rock wall to stop the magic from spreading.

"You think it was the stone that awakened the hunters?" Hornblende said.

"I do. Dark magic calling to a dark being." Cinna said. "There could be no other explanation."

"What of Crimson?"

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "I didn't see her through Carnelian's eyes. She might be dead."

"You planned to train Crimson to use her magi powers to seal the stone. Can you train another magi? Bring one from Genorrdia?"

"There isn't time, and even if there were time, most Norterridane magi can't share dragon powers. Crimson was the only one."

"Do you know where the hunters are now?"

"I only see what the dragon sees, but they have to be on one of the out-laying islands, patrols would've spotting them if they were on Alannador."

"I should have been guarding the islands as well," Hornblende sighed. "How much time do we have?"

"A few weeks, if the pattern of dragon deaths tells us anything."

Hornblende clenched his talons. "No time to prepare."

"Like I said, we're out of options," Cinna said. "They want to finish what they started with the plague."

If the dark hunters got a hold of the magic in that stone, they would surely strike dragon kind from the earth.

"I haven't forgotten."

"But how many have forgotten? This dragon-serpent war began before many were born. Do they remember that the hunters stripped serpents of their innate magic and forced them to hunt us and take ours?"

"If Crimson is dead, we don't have magi powerful enough to seal the stone back into the rock of Crystal Lake."

Cinna shook the water off of her scales and walked across the rock ledge to Hornblende. "There is one solution. We need the serpent's help."

Hornblende's jaw tightened. "We don't need them."

The king's response was valid, but against this enemy, dragons and serpents would need to stand together. "We've drained the Crystalline Sardonyx supply and less than a dozen Obsidian live. We can't survive without help."

"You don't know that," growled Hornblende. "I know this war has taken its toll. What would you have me do, fly to Calimdural and offer magic stones for help to fight our enemy? The cost would be high, and they would betray us the first chance they get."

Cinna froze, her eyes no longer saw Hornblende. A forest appeared, tall and green. A dragon collapsed on the ground. Hundreds of dark hunters stalked out of the forest toward the dying dragon. Again, the hunter with white eyes killed the dragon. This time, it looked through the dying dragon's eyes stared directly at Cinna. The menacing stare caught Cinna's breath as the dragon's life faded away. Cinna realized the army was coming for her.

"Another death?" Hornblende asked, though he needed no answer.

"The hunters have learned how to pull magic from dragons. I felt it drain from her body," Cinna gasped, catching her breath.

"I don't envy your power, friend. If I could ease your pain, I would." He placed his head against hers.

"It saw me," Cinna said. "It used the dragon's connection to show me it knows about me and my power."

"We will protect you," Hornblende said. "I will send Obsidian to guard you," He stopped then.

"You realized they won't be enough."

"I will learn what they are capable of."

"No Hornblende, they are more powerful now than ever. I can feel it. "

"Feldspar will go with me under cover of darkness."

"And suffer the loss of two Obsidian?" Cinna shook her head. "No. We must get the stone in the lake before they do. Even now, it is absorbing the power of stones around it. The more it gains, the farther it's reach."

"Even if it we seal it, the hunters will seek it."

"We get it first," Cinna began, knowing her next words would change everything. But they needed to be said. Her plan to train Crimson was no longer an option. If they searched for her, even if she was alive, more dragons would die. "A dragon can absorb the power of the stone."

Hornblende narrowed his eyes. "You are talking about the traitor, Azuran. I will not have a traitor..."

"Azuran is not what you think."

"Really, enlighten me. A hatchling sharing his powers with serpents and is now becoming one. That is dark magic if I ever heard of it. Save me your foolish ideas."

"He needs to find his way," Cinna said.

Hornblende's eyes narrowed to dangerous slits and his lips curled, teeth bared. "Lost! He chose his path. First you want me to join serpents, and now this." Smoke curled out of his nostrils.

"What choice did Azuran have?"

Hornblende smashed his talons into the stone, cracking it with the force of his blow.

Cinna remained calm. She expected this reaction.

"And what would you have me do, death dragon?"

Cinna ignored his harsh words. Their friendship spanned hundreds of years. "Convince him to join us. Convince him to absorb the magic of the lake. The hunters must not get it."

"We should not mess dark magic. We must destroy it. I don't trust Azuran."

"You don't know him."

"Neither do you."

"It's the best choice. Dragons cannot absorb magic, and we are running out of time. They are coming, they will get the stone, and they will kill us all."

Hornblende thought for a long time. Cinna looked at her old friend. He looked so young, showing no signs of aging. His scales were smooth, not cracked or dry; eyes still glowing with youthful spirit. The war weighted heavy upon him. Dragons couldn't continue living like they had, praying their young would survive in the care of others. If the Obsidian died, dragons would be helpless against serpents. And now, with the dark hunters, did she dare to hope?

"There must be another option?"

"None that I can see."

Hornblende relaxed his talons and sighed. "If what you say is true about the hunter's power, we can't stay on Alannador. We must leave Alannador, but I am not the dragon for this. I am not the one who must convince Azuran."

"If not the king of dragons, who?"

Hornblende stood tall once more. "If what you say about Azuran is true, there is another." He spoke clearly with resolve, "The one who must convince him is Chalcedony."

CHAPTER 2

The young Obsidian dragon stabbed her talons into the stone cliff. Climbing conditioned her muscles, keeping her in optimal fighting shape, but after the night of patrolling, Chalcedony longed for rest. She reached the top of the cliff just as three green dragons flew off the ledge and disappeared, their invisibility hiding them from view. This signaled the end of Chalcedony's patrol. Sunlight broke into the darkness, lighting the sky with a gray blue horizon. Chalcedony watched the sunrise. The world was calm, just as it had been calm the last six times she patrolled the southern cliffs. It was too calm.

Just a few weeks before, word came that the Schorl serpents, dragons' most hated enemy, had left Genorrdia. The dragons believed they would come to Alannador, but there had been no sign of them, no serpent sightings, no animal bones found, and no scents on the winds. Chalcedony stretched her wings. A dull ache settled upon them now that she had stopped moving. *Invincible scales do nothing for sore muscles*, she mused.

Invincibility came with the responsibility of keeping the other dragons safe. Forest dragons patrolled in the day. They made perfect daytime scouts with their invisibility and ability to blend in with the forest trees when not invisible. There, of course, were scouts of the sea as well. All of Alannador had constant surveillance.

"Took you long enough," a telepathic voice said., *"If I were a serpent, you'd be dead. Well, if you weren't invincible."*

Chalcedony shrugged and stretched her wings again, *"If you were a serpent, you wouldn't be invisible."*

"True," Seraphin conceded. *"But that takes all the fun out of sneaking up on someone."*

"Do you have it?" Chalcedony replied in focused telepathy, as the forest dragon's invisibility faded, just in case another dragon lurked nearby. The chances of that were almost zero, but she wasn't taking chances. Dragons spoke telepathically in groups or individually, depending on their focus, and Chalcedony didn't need anyone listening in.

Seraphin's full form materialized before her. Her light green scales, taking on a grayish hue in the dim light.

"I do, but it wasn't easy to get," the dragon replied, opening her claws to reveal a tiny red stone. *"I waited for hours near the death dragon's cave. She almost never leaves it."*

"I owe you big time, Seraphin,"

Chalcedony took the stone and turned it carefully in her talons.

Seraphin looked around the cliffs nervously, *"This was a one-time deal,"*

"What do you think Cinna would do?"

"Besides crushing us with her talons? Maybe haunt my dreams forever."

Chalcedony nodded. The thought of death dragon retaliating sent shivers down her spine. Every dragon had heard her voice or seen her in their dreams. She was powerful and powerful dragons were dangerous. She hated asking her friend to steal from Cinna, but this was important. *"And thank you for not asking what I need it for."*

"It's probably better I don't know," Seraphin replied. "Though I've heard talk about what is happening with Azuran. Twins are deeply connected. I hope it isn't affecting you."

Chalcedony turned to her friend. *"I will tell you when I am ready. I just have to figure out a few things on my own."*

Chalcedony knew Seraphin wanted to ask if this request had something to do with her brother and his bond with a serpent. It did. But she wasn't ready to talk about it. Dragons believed that Azuran, her twin brother, was turning into a serpent. When they were hatchlings, they had been attacked by a serpent. Azuran had fallen off a giant waterfall and had been believed to be dead. Everyone had been shocked to learn he was alive. The serpents raised him, but then he began growing tusks, and his once invincible scales grew weak. He nearly died in a battle with the serpent king. All hatchlings shared their magic with those who raised them. Chalcedony shared her powers with her keeper, but somehow it was different with Azuran. Something had gone wrong with the bonding magic he shared, something that could be affecting Chalcedony.

Seraphin looked over the cliff edge. "How was patrol?" She said out loud.

"It's quiet, just like every other night."

Seraphin nuzzled up against Chalcedony's shoulder, "It will be a perfect day to go rock collecting."

"I'm not sure the quiet is a good thing. We haven't had serpent sightings in months."

"Maybe they finally decided it wasn't worth fighting."

"No, it's something else. They have to be up to something. No one has seen them on Genorrdia either. And we know that there is at least one serpent that has Crystalline Sardonyx tusks. He could be out there killing Obsidian dragons, but he isn't."

"You worry too much," Seraphin said. "Be glad they aren't here."

Chalcedony looked over the ledge. Waves crashed against the cliffs. "Serpents crave magic more than anything in the world. Something has happened. I know it."

"I have a surprise for you," Seraphin said, winking. "Amethyst is meeting us today. She knows of this island near the Dead Sea. It has some sort of wood that has turned to stone through the ages. She says it's the most beautiful thing she has ever seen and coming from a sea dragon, that means a lot."

"So, you want me to be backup?" Chalcedony replied, not surprised her friend wanted her company on an adventurous journey.

"That's not the *only* reason" Seraphin said, linking her talons with Chalcedony's.

"Yes, I'll go." Chalcedony replied.

"Good, I don't think I'd be able to do it without you." She spread her wings and jumped off the cliff ledge. Seraphin was gone, once again masked with invisibility.

Chalcedony gazed over the cliff once more, spinning the stone in her talons. A chill rippled through her body. There was no telling what the punishment would be for taking a Crystalline Sardonyx from the already dwindling supply. Obsidian used Crystalline Sardonyx, a red volcanic stone, to turn their already hot breath into a vicious heat. Fire that turned bone to ashes in seconds. Serpents could also use Sardonyx, but they could not consume it like dragons. The serpents affixed a liquid form to their tusks and claws, making the already deadly weapons capable of killing Obsidian dragons.

Jet died patrolling Genorrdia. The first Obsidian to die at the tusks of serpents. If only Jet had chewed Sardonyx before he went to look for Azuran, he would still be alive and those serpents would be dead. But Jet died, and there was one less Obsidian to help fight the war. Chalcedony closed her talons tightly around the stone and looked around.

Far from the homes of dragons, a sharp flash of light lit up the forest. The small flicker faded into the early morning light. Chalcedony tilted her head towards the light. The dragons on patrol had surely seen it. She would leave it to them to investigate. There were more important things to worry about at the moment. She jumped off the cliffs and soared through the sky.

She turned in the air, adjusting her path, and flew over the forest toward her cave. A herd of deer grazed below. A welcome sight, as the deer population had dwindled in the past year, and signs of it increasing were slim. Dragons assumed the serpents had returned to Alannador and fed on the deer, but Chalcedony had a feeling it was something far worse. It started with a small feeling, like the gentle touch of magic. But now the feeling followed her in dreams and hung to the air, the grasses, and the water.

She landed on the ground near her cave. Once inside, she paced back and forth and tapped her tail on the cave floor, glancing every few seconds at the cave entrance.

Ok you're fine. Remember to breathe.

She took one more deep breath and bit down on the stone, crushing it with her sharp teeth. Teeth made for chewing stone, breaking bone, and tearing flesh. The Sardonyx crushed easily, with the same crunch as deer bone, but did not splinter. She swallowed down the bits of stone and waited patiently for the rumblings inside her fire stomach. The rumblings that would call fire breath.

How long would it take? Minutes, hours? She didn't know. *Why hadn't she asked?*

Minutes passed. Chalcedony paced around the stone cave, holding her wings at her side. Her tail twitched back and forth, mimicking her mood.

Azuran, she was afraid to say anything to Seraphin because of Azuran. Whatever was happening to him might be affecting her, and she couldn't tell anyone. She just couldn't.

It's taking too long. She scratched her Obsidian claws against the hard stones of the cave. The sound of stone grating on stone bounced off the walls, sending a shiver through her spine. The strange oval shape of the cave gave it distinct echo properties, making Chalcedony once again wonder why she had not just carved her own cave out of the cliffs of the plateau when she first arrived on Alannador over a year before. But that social setting wouldn't serve her purpose today. And something always felt odd when she was amongst hundreds of dragons.

This cave felt more like home. When she was a hatchling, she spent a long time in the cave dweller caves on Genorrdia, which had dark smooth walls, like the cave she lived in now. Perhaps, in some ways, it reminded her of that time. Chalcedony peeked her head out of the cave and her green eyes surveyed the area. The forest was clear. Her stomach grumbled. Was it starting? Chalcedony wrapped her tail snugly around her front leg, an anxious habit. It calmed her. Dragons were always playful, so full of energy and social. She was not. She preferred to be alone or with her friend Seraphin. Seraphin understood her best of all the dragons. Chalcedony thought she'd feel at home on the continent of Alannador, with her own kind, but the longer she lived among them, the more unease she felt. She always felt alone. When Chalcedony had brought up feeling disconnected, Seraphin said it was probably because of her twin. "Twins have a bond, an unbreakable one."

These unwelcome thoughts had become more and more intrusive in recent months. Azuran was not only alive, but an ally of the dragons most hated enemy. She had mourned his death only to find out he was alive and never came home to Alannador, which disturbed her more than she'd admit.

She scraped her talons again on the cave walls and watched them sharpen.

A rumbling surge began in her stomach. First small, like pain of hunger, then a wave of nausea and pain.

The cave walls spun. Her stomach squeezed tightly and her legs buckled. Weak, she stumbled from the cave. She reached out, her talons bracing herself against the trees. *This was how it felt to breathe fire?*

Crystalline Sardonyx fire would be hot. She had to be careful.

She swayed and dug her claws into the ground. She turned toward the cave. Better to melt stone than start a forest fire or turn the forest to ash. Chalcedony opened her mouth and spewed.

Fire did not erupt from her mouth, but a black acidic goo. Her stomach clenched and heaved more of the substance. It bubbled and sizzled, melting the stone.

Chalcedony turned up her snout. A horrid smell that assaulted her senses, like the stench of cave lizards, rot, and death. Then she puked again.

When her stomach had finally emptied of the tarry substance, she dug into a mound of dirt and began covering the goo. A hot sensation hit her forefoot. She instinctively snatched back her talons. Sharp pain seared up her leg. She roared in agony and backed away. She brought her claws to her face and the right index claw had melted almost in half.

She stumbled.

The pain in her stomach stopped and but the nausea did not subside.

Everything blurred. Muscles on her back knotted and ached.

Chalcedony wobbled away from the cave and into woods. Mud on the forest floor swished between her talons, cooling and soothing her. She collapsed on the ground, rolling in the mud as she had done as a hatchling. There, on the forest floor, she closed her eyes.

She lay in the mud, with a terrible twisting ache in her gut, for hours. When she opened her eyes, the sun shone high in the sky. Pushing herself to her feet, she moved to the spot of black liquid. The bubbling goo had solidified. There was a large hole in the ground where the goo had melted away before it mixed with dirt and stone. She covered it carefully with dirt. She didn't need anyone asking questions. Her talon would grow back in time. The goo had not damaged the quick, but it would not be easy explaining how an invincible Obsidian dragon had broken a claw. This was not the way things were supposed to go.

The plan had failed. Her best idea hadn't worked. Chalcedony had to face what she had denied for so long. She was an Obsidian dragon that couldn't breathe fire.