

# CHAPTER 1

ICE and snow smashed upon Onixian's wings. He steadied himself against the blow and blinked into the storm. He could not see Fairburn. He lifted his wings again, flapped with all his strength, and moved in the wave like motion that kept him in the air. A few more beats and the ice was gone; rain fell heavily against his scales. Luckily, he had only hit the tip of the hurricane winds. He cursed under his breath. The dragons, at least, were no longer on his trail.

In the distance was the unmistakable shore line. Onixian changed course and glided down towards the beach. He landed. His powerful legs steadying his body against the downpour. He let his wings hang a moment and placed them at his side. Up ahead a forest called to him. He moved underneath the tree branches and surveyed the beach. Footprints could not be seen, and if there had been any, they would have been washed away.

*Had she survived?* He wondered, thinking of his companion. Then a welcome voice came from the distance.

"I think we lost them."

Fairburn moved out from underneath the tree branches, wiping mud from her short, curved tusks and stood by Onixian.

Onixian remained alert, listening to the wind and rain. Wing beats would be difficult to decipher in this storm.

"I knew we should have traveled inland, the coast is much too dangerous," Onixian said.

"There could be more dragons inland, and we don't want them to know we're here. The stone glows stronger still, and stronger as we travel east. We came to find magic stones, not kill young dragons."

"Yes, stone reader, but why not enjoy the added advantage to our journey?"

"I want to kill them as much as you do, but we don't want to alert the dragons that we found this place. We must find the sources of magic and return to tell Malachite. The dragon young are just a distraction."

*You say that only because you have not felt the power,* Onixian thought, for he had felt it the moment the young dragon died. It pulsed through him, like a ripple of warmth sharpening his senses and strengthening his scales. The second kill had been even better, and he longed to find

and kill more. Killing adult dragons provided some power, but nowhere near what the young dragons had.

“If only we could fly there, it would be so much quicker,” Fairburn said, more to herself than Onixian, knowing that flying would only alert others to their whereabouts.

“This place is not like Alannador. The trees are different, look at the bark.”

The trees were different. Unlike the broadleaf trees of Alannador that had thick hard bark and grew wide and tall, the white and black bark grew smooth and shiny. The small green leaves rounded yet jagged fanned out above the serpents catching the rain. Rays from the midday sun peaked out behind the wall of water letting the visitors take in the new land.

“You’re right Onixian,” Fairburn replied. “I can’t believe we didn’t know of this place. Could it be that no other Schorl know of it?”

“The dragons kept their secret well.”

“Dragon young haven’t been on Alannador since the plague. They must breed here and leave those small Norterridane creatures to protect their young.”

“I thought the plague left them barren.”

“Perhaps that’s what they wanted us to think. But if this is the place of the magic, we could turn the tide of the war.”

“Yes, by finding the stones and killing all the dragons we find.” Onixian’s mouth moved into a crooked smile. “When this rain stops, we shall search every inch of this land.”

Could it be that fate had finally brought him here? Calaver, the late Schorl serpent king, had spoken of translucent red stones that held great power. The power that made Obsidian dragons breathe fire so hot it could turn enemies into ash. He had believed that the stones could make Schorl strong enough to kill the Obsidian. The stones’ power could finally be the key to the serpents winning the war.

“It’s hardly fair that the dragons should have two life-filled continents while we are stuck on Calimdural,” Fairburn said.

Onixian ignored her complaint looking through the steady downpour of rain. Droplets rolled from his brow down across his red cat-like eye. The forest grew blurry for just a moment. Onixian’s gaze remained locked and intent. A creature moved within the forest. Onixian quieted Fairburn with a slight touch of his wing.

A smell was on the air. The unmistakable smell of dragons. The pair crouched down scanning the area. A huge Obsidian dragon, her belly enlarged, shifted underneath the trees. Onixian's instinct told him to run, but if he did, she would see him. He sucked in a deep breath and held still as a rock.

He could tell by the dragon's movements she would lay her eggs soon. He also knew he could not kill her, for she was invincible. Schorl serpent tusks could pierce the hide of most dragon-kind, especially the weaker sea dragons and earth dragons, but the Obsidian hide was too strong. The Obsidian dragons annihilated the serpents with their sharp claws and hot fiery breath, and no serpent could hurt them.

Her presence told him that his reasoning had been right. The dragons were leaving their young here to be protected by the small canine creatures. He had killed them as well as the dragons they protected, not just to keep their presence hidden, but because he enjoyed it, and they made a fine meal. They called themselves Norterridane, he had learned before he killed one.

The rain died down, and the pair crouched in the bushes as much as their large bodies would allow. The Obsidian dragon took flight off toward the mountains in the distance.

Onixian watched her glide effortlessly through the air, and he imagined stabbing her with his tusks and watching her fall from the sky to her death. Then he thought of the power the young dragons possessed. The Obsidian dragons were the strongest, and their young would most likely give the most power. Oh, the power.

He could imagine it running through his veins.

"We must follow her and find out where she leaves her young."

"No, Onixian," Fairburn said, her voice stern and leaving no room for argument. "Our mission is to find the stones, and that is what we are going to do. Plus, you know she would kill us without hesitation."

Onixian knew all too well as he had seen the Obsidian kill countless members of his kind.

Onixian didn't want Fairburn to know what power the dragon hatchlings had, so he left it alone. But one day soon he would search for the Obsidian young and kill them.

Fairburn opened her clawed hand revealing a glowing magic stone. They followed the light of the stone, moving in the direction that made it brighter. The brighter it got, the closer the stones were.

They traveled through the forest under the cover of its leaves. The black and white bark provided camouflage for their black scales. Birds flew up to higher branches, and forest animals scattered away. Onixian's long tail dragged upon the forest floor, and his large clawed feet left deep gashes upon the damp ground.

"Should we not cover our tracks?" he asked Fairburn.

"We will not be here long enough to be concerned," she replied. "And I don't think there are many adult dragons here."

The forest ended abruptly at a rock wall, hundreds of feet high, layered with aging stone. Fairburn opened her bat-like wings and leapt into the air. Onixian followed close behind. On top of the cliff he surveyed the land. He looked around for signs of dragons. No other creatures were a threat to the Schorl.

A deep river rushed along the side of the cliff, heading down rolling hills and disappearing in the distance. Tall grasses brushed up against their knees. The magic stone led them on. They stepped into the cool water and walked up the river against the rushing currents.

The rocks were slippery, eroded and shaped by the rushing water. In deeper parts of the river, Onixian swam up stream feeling more protected and hidden under the water. In the back of his mind, he worried about the Obsidian dragon returning.

Soon they arrived at a huge lake. It stretched for miles toward a large mountain that towered over all the others. The lake gleamed like diamonds. Tall reeds and bushes grew up on the south side. It was not as wide as it was long, and Onixian's sharp eyes made out shapes on the other side. Small rolling hills blocked his view of the northern side of the lake. Tall mountains shot up in the distance.

Onixian crouched down and used his six arms to pull his body closer to the first hill and over it to get a good look. His legs felt heavy as he pulled his body along. Fairburn moved beside him, but at a slower pace because one of her clawed hands tightly held the glowing stone.

Onixian peered over the hill. Lots of those small Norterridane creatures moved about.

"There," Fairburn said pointing toward the mountain peak towering to the east. "The magic is coming from that mountain and from where those creatures live, to the north, across the lake. The Crystalline Sardonyx is within our reach." Her eyes danced with excitement, and the stone in her hand glowed brightly. If they moved any closer, it would be blinding.

"We must return to Calimdural and tell the king we found the location of the stones."

“We could kill them and get the stones now.”

“No, young serpent. There is no way to tell how many there are or if they harness the power of the stones. We’ll go back and let the king decide what to do.”

Onixian frowned but followed Fairburn. After all, she was one of the advanced scouts and advisor to the king. He was only in his fifth year of life and although he had grown stronger and larger than many of the other serpents, he had to do as she said. For a split second, he thought of killing her and going off to search for the Obsidian eggs. It was not uncommon for serpents to kill each other for power, but he admired Fairburn and her strength. He brushed the thought aside. Why was he thinking this way? He couldn’t go up against an Obsidian. Could the power he stole from the dragons be changing him? The new-found strength rippled through his blood and made him feel formidable, as if he could defeat anyone, even the king himself. Now, all he could think of was that he wanted more.

## CHAPTER 2

DEEP within the Underground, a small Norterridane trained. Crimson moved quickly to evade swiping claws. She jumped forward pawing at the muzzle of her training partner who dodged the attack, reared up, and struck hard with her front paws. Knocked off balance with the force of the blow, Crimson fell to the ground. Mica came in for the kill, biting the dark red fur on the back of Crimson’s neck with precision.

Crimson yelped in pain. She cowered into the cold dirt floor, giving up, and curling her tail in submission. Mica released her bite, relaxed her ruffled fur and sat with pride when Beryl congratulated her on her win.

Crimson lay still for a moment. Her breaths came heavy, and she panted to drive away the heat rising in her body. She had lost again and didn’t feel like she was getting any better. She just wasn’t good enough. After a moment, she sat up, head lowered and gazed upon the soft brownish grey dirt of the warrior training den.

“You’re not trying Crimson. You could have easily evaded that attack,” Beryl growled. “If you’re scared to get hurt, then you won’t be able to face a cave lizard.”

“I was trying,” she whispered softly, still looking at the floor, avoiding the weight of his tone and the disappointment she felt in her performance.

“Bowen expects your training to be progressing. He will not be happy upon his return. You need to work harder.” Beryl turned to Mica. “Well done Mica, your training is coming along greatly. I expect both of you to return ready to learn tomorrow.”

Mica nodded.

Tourmaline cast a disappointed gaze at her pup. “The training is not going as well as we hoped?”

“I told Bowen she’s too young. She’s still exhibiting submissive behaviors,” Beryl said.

“They can be automatic in young pups, you know,” Tourmaline said. “Bowen’s worried for her, that’s all. She’s so small for her age, and she needs to be able to protect herself. You know he wants her to be a dragon keeper.”

“Everyone wants to be a dragon keeper, but not everyone can be. She needs to focus so we can get the most out of these lessons. She’s taking time that I could be using to train my soldiers. She might do better in another profession.” Beryl sighed, “I’ll give her a little more time, but if she doesn’t improve we have to think of other options.”

Tourmaline nodded to Beryl and tilted her head calling Crimson to follow her.

Crimson felt a knot form in her throat at the harsh comments Beryl had made. Beryl, chief guard, took time off from his other duties as a personal favor to Bowen, Crimson’s Father. Bowen was a great warrior, dragon keeper, and an alpha. He expected her to follow in his footsteps and become a dragon keeper.

Each year the best trainees of each profession were offered a chance to try out for dragon keeping. Warriors were picked more often than others, and it seemed like Mica would be the one chosen. Mica was already a much better warrior than Crimson, even though they had begun training at the same time. And who wouldn’t want to be a dragon keeper? Dragon keepers got to share the dragon powers. That was the only way Norterridane could have magic unless they were born with the gifts of the Magi. Most Magi used magic to help heal those in need and preferred to be called healers. They could call magic from the stones of the earth. The same stones that created the dragons.

Mica gently nipped at the red fur of Crimson’s cheek.

“Don’t worry too much. Next training will be better,” she said, but her words did little to comfort Crimson’s sullen mood. The friends briefly huddled together.

As Crimson and Tourmaline left the warrior training den, a new and strange scent drifted down the hall from the direction of the Elder Caves where young pups were not allowed. The elders were the alphas of the Norterridane, but their role was very different than the pack leaders of their ancestors. The odor was like nothing Crimson had ever smelled before; slightly musty, with a hint of eucalyptus or mint mixed with a lizard like odor.

“What’s that smell?” Crimson asked, sniffing the damp underground air.

“The smell of dragons, my dear, but do not concern yourself with it now. You are much too young to be a keeper. You must focus on training so that perhaps next year you may get your chance to meet one,” Tourmaline said in the voice that Crimson dared not argue with.

Tourmaline moved quickly out into the pine forest. Crimson followed reluctantly. She had heard stories of dragons and how majestic the creatures were. She guessed that most of the stories were told to make Norterridane want to be keepers.

“Maybe Beryl’s right. Maybe being a warrior is not the path for me,” Crimson said as they strolled.

“Beryl has good judgement. Perhaps he’s right, perhaps not, but your father expects you to give training your best effort. When he returns, they can discuss possible options.”

Dragon keeping seemed to take a lot of one’s time. Bowen was always gone. He always had some business to attend to, and she was too young to know what it was.

“I will tell you when you are older, little one. It’s dragon keeping business. You focus on your training,” her father had said each time he left. Crimson tired of hearing how important warrior training was. Though she wanted to be a keeper, there were other jobs that Norterridane could choose, such as scribe or explorer. Her father did not want her to choose, he wanted her to be a dragon keeping warrior. How unfair was that? It seemed that being an explorer and looking for magic stones would be much more fun. A dragon keeping explorer would be even better.

As soon as they entered the den, Tourmaline lay down to sleep, exhausted from the day’s excursions. Crimson lay down beside her on the soft pile of leaves and redwood needles. Her eyes closed, but a moment later a strange scent filled the air. It seemed familiar, like the scent in the Underground near the Elder Cave. *Dragons, it must be dragons.* Her eyes widened. She sat up and sniffed again. *Perhaps trainers are out with their dragons.*

Crimson had never seen a dragon, and this was her chance. She would go quickly, get a peek at the dragons, and return to the den. Besides, this could be the only chance she would ever get. Her short tail twitched in excitement. She ran out of the den ready to dart left or right if anything came suddenly out of the woods. Her black eyes adjusted to the dim light, and she concentrated on the shapes in the forest, watching for sudden movements. Like the wolves that once lived here, her eyes could see well in the dark. The air was cold, and the sun set behind the mountain top. Cold winds reached out and grabbed at her soft heart shaped nose. The dense undercoat of Crimson's fur kept her very warm on most days, even when the autumn breezes brought colder winds from the north, but her nose and footpads often felt the chill.

Like the other Norterridane, Crimson was adventurous and loved to explore. She was a descendant of the Irish and Norwich terriers that once lived on the far away continent of Alannador. The Norterridane were predators, as most dogs are, but they were a peaceful race and respectful of nature. Perhaps that was why the dragons chose them to care for their young.

Crimson ran on the worn dirt path towards the Black Mountains and deep into the woods. The path ran as far as the Sapphire River, and Norterridane used it to travel back and forth from the Underground. This night the path was empty. It was dry from the lack of rain, and dust flew up into the air behind Crimson as she ran. Her short sturdy legs carried her quickly on her mission.

A while later, her paws left the forest ground and landed on the familiar desert sand and rocky ground of the Black Mountains. The scent assaulted her nose, and she slowed to a walk. A short distance away a small cave sunk into the mountain side. It was not there before. Crimson sniffed the air again for danger. *Well that was pointless*, she mused when the strange sweet scent filled her nose.

Because of the strong scent, she wouldn't be able to detect a cave lizard if she wanted to. Cave lizards, enormous lizards who preyed upon her kind, often roamed the mountains, and she couldn't defeat one alone. Her mother wouldn't approve of her ignoring the danger and continuing. Then again, her mother would not approve of her leaving the den in search of dragons.

She lifted her button ears that looked like upside-down triangles, and turned her right ear towards the cave entrance. She listened for sounds of movement, but heard nothing beyond the almost silent whistling of the wind.



The cave was about thirty paws up on the rocky slope. Crimson navigated the landscape carefully and slowly made her way to the mouth of the cave. Because of her small stature, she had to jump up towards a few of the larger rocks and felt some of the smaller rocks fall away beneath her paws. *Careful*, she told herself as her paws felt for more solid ground.

The rocky terrain made walking difficult. With each step, the ground felt less stable. Small rocks poked painfully into the padding on her paws. Crimson jumped again trying to reach a large flat rock jutting from the mountain. The ground gave way, and she slipped and fell a few feet down the mountain side. She let out a yelp as a dull pain stabbed in her back. For a moment, she wanted to go home and forget about the strange smell. But for some reason she heard Beryl's voice, "You're not even trying."

*How can I be a dragon keeper if I give up so easily?* she told herself and stood up.

Her ears pointed upward. A faint thumping sound resonated from above. She held her breath and her stomach turned.

*What if they see me?* She thought. She shook her head in hopes of getting rid of the nauseating feeling. *One quick look and I'll go home.* She had to see a dragon just once.

Crimson continued upward to the mouth of the cave, carefully navigating the slippery rocks. Large and small chunks of broken rock, newly unearthed dirt, and sand covered the ground near the cave.

Crimson crouched low and inched her way to the opening. The cave appeared to be empty. She moved closer scanning the dark room. Large gashes and jagged scrapes lined the walls. The chamber was small. Crimson estimated that it could fit five or six Norterridane. Upon the cave floor, there was a small layer of dirt, and the sounds and smell radiated from beneath it. The thumping sound was louder now. It seemed strangely familiar, but she couldn't recall what the sound was.

Crimson moved closer and scratched at the dirt with her claws. She scraped away the soil, carefully at first and then with more force, pushing the soil away with her front paws. Her paw hit a hard material. A rush of excitement consumed her, like catching a fish for the first time. She stuck her nose in the dirt, sniffed, and sneezed when the dirt got sucked into her snout. She shook her head vigorously and looked down at a large grey egg half the size of her body. *A dragon egg!*

Crimson moved away more dirt and there was another one. The egg was surprisingly warm, and the thumping sound was louder, coming from inside the eggs. But the creature inside didn't seem to be moving or making noises. Crimson lay her ear onto the hard, grey shell.

*Is it a heartbeat?*

As Crimson concentrated on the sound, a strange warm sensation flooded her body. It felt like the heat of the sun moving from her ear into her mind and all through her body. A feeling of calmness and peace came over her, and all the world stood still. Relaxed and calm, she listened to the beat. Soon her own heart beat matched the beat of that in the egg, and they were as one. It was as if the dragons had spoken to her, connecting them in some way she could feel, but couldn't explain.

Hours later, the sun peaked over the mountain. The light shown through the cave with a soft glow, reminding Crimson of her responsibilities. *Oh, no, I must go train*, she thought. *Maybe if I can beat Mica today they'll let me take care of one of these dragons.*

A crackling sound pulled Crimson from her thoughts. The scent of the eggs was stronger than before. She examined them and found a small crack had spread across the center of the larger egg. Crimson was filled with both panic and eagerness. She ran to the cave opening thinking perhaps some Norterridane had come to meet the dragons. Surely dragon keepers had been assigned for hatching eggs.

Further down the mountain, animals that normally hid among the rocks or in the forest congregated near the cave. A small group of peculiar blue birds flew in circles, perching on a nearby tree. The tree was about fifty paws away on another rocky portion of the mountain. The trees grew sporadically on the south side of Black Mountain, and those that survived grew small.

The group of birds weighed heavily on the tree's small branches watching the cave and waiting. *What are they waiting for?* Crimson wondered, eying them suspiciously.

They stared back at her twitching their heads from side to side. *Did they want the dragon eggs?*

She had no way of asking them, unless they ate meat. Meat eaters and plant eaters spoke different languages. Even meat eaters each had their own language that no others could understand. Sometimes they chose to use the common language or their own depending on the purpose. *Perhaps the creator made it this way so that your meal wouldn't be talking with you, pleading to be set free.* She shook her head to rid herself of the unpleasant thought.

The smell from the eggs increased. There was a large hole in the first egg, and the dragon was working hard to free itself from inside. Its grey nose poked through the small opening, and sharp black teeth worked on breaking the eggshell pieces away. Soon its grey foot and black claws ripped apart more of the shell. A small grey baby boy dragon emerged and clumsily collapsed on the dirt near Crimson's foot. The young dragon rubbed his scaled snout up against her leg and Crimson moved back her paw.

The dragon was covered in thousands of soft tiny scales. He felt slimy and smooth instead of rough like she expected. Horned lizards were usually rough. The dragon had three sharp protective spines above his ear, odd because reptiles don't usually have ears, but the dragon had a pointed ear, and it seemed to be made of the sharp pointed spike. Spiked ridges grew down his back to his long tail, reminding Crimson again of the tiny horned lizards that roamed the mountain. The braided scales on his long tail made a beautifully sculpted whip.

Crimson rubbed her paw over his back and his tail. Crimson wondered if it would harden into a deadly weapon as the dragon grew. It was only a few moments old, but stood tall. His head reached up almost as high as Crimson's shoulder. His blue eyes looked fondly up at her as if she were his mother. Crimson suddenly thought about the dragon keepers and why they had not come to get these dragons. She had found them. Was she a keeper? Was it her job to take care of these creatures? Her job to feed them, and protect them, and...name them?

The other hatchling broke free of its egg shell. It, too, was a charcoal grey color, though it was a female dragon with the most beautiful dark green eyes. As the dragon walked closer to Crimson and her brother, her eyes seemed to change color from green to gold and back as the morning sun rays beaming into the cave fell upon them. This dragon was smaller than the first and did not have ridged scales down her back. She held her small featherless wings flat against her body, also smooth except for the three protective, rough looking spines above her ears and her braided tail like her brother's. The dragon moved closer to Crimson, smelled her fur and rubbed against her. The slime from the eggs dampened Crimson's fur. The nausea had returned.

Crimson looked out of the cave. The strange birds waited patiently as if something amazing was about to happen. Small lizards ran about the rocky cliff and scattered away. Mule deer and mountain goats moved away from the cave and settled near the bottom of the rocky steep.

The dragons moved around smelling and exploring their new world. The boy nipped playfully at his sister. He tried to chase her around the cave and instead tripped on his wings and face planted in the dirt. He shrieked and shook it off.

Crimson barked softly, catching their attention. "My name's Crimson. I guess I'm supposed to protect you," she said, not certain they could understand her. "You need names, and I think I have just the ones." Turning to the boy and his beautiful dark blue eyes she said, "I'd like to call you Azuran. Your eyes remind me of the Azurite that forms in the Underground. They're beautiful stones, just like your eyes."

The dragon stepped closer to Crimson who lay down, allowing him to snuggle with her. The girl followed her brother and lay beside him and Crimson. The dragons felt dryer now, but still smooth.

"And you," she said gazing at the girl. "Your name shall be Chalcedony, for your eyes change color, like the stones of the Crystal Lake near my home."

Naming the dragons filled Crimson with warmth and love. Her heart had never felt such a connection as it did in that moment. She wondered if her own mother had felt the same way with her. She licked their scaled heads like her mother did every night to her.

The dragons drifted off to sleep, and Crimson carefully moved away to look out of the cave. Most of the animals had gone. Perhaps they had come to witness the dragon's birth. The strange blue birds, however, lingered and perched on the small tree, watching. Occasionally, they would fly up to the cave opening as if checking in on the dragons. Crimson studied the birds as they flew by. They had long narrow beaks and red eyes. Their beaks held rows of small jagged teeth, and sharp curved talons hung from their feet.

Crimson's stomach tightened, and her legs felt weak, suddenly realizing the birds had come for the dragons.

Crimson considered her predicament. Her stomach growled. How could she get food with the flock of birds waiting nearby? She couldn't leave, and she couldn't take the dragons with her. She wondered for the second time where the dragon keepers were and why they had not come for the hatchlings. The restless birds squawked as they flew by the cave entrance a few at a time. Crimson puffed up the fur on her back, making herself appear much larger than her actual size. She growled and scratched to keep the birds at bay.

Rocks fell from above, and a horrible stench filled the cave air. The stench of dead flesh rotting for days. Crimson curled her nose, and her stomach churned. The dragons smelled it too, and their eyes grew wide with fear. They backed away to the wall. Crimson's body trembled, sensing their emotion. Her pounding heartbeat drowned out all the other noise until a sharp clawed hand reached over the cave opening scraping the stone. *SKREEEEK*.

Narrow, yellow eyes stared into the cave from beneath the bony eye ridge, focused and intent. They promised death. A snake like tongue slithered from a dry, wide, tooth filled mouth as the cave lizard pulled its body onto the ceiling and slithered slowly across the stone.

Crimson froze with fear. She had heard of these cave lizards, even smelled one once while hunting with her mother. She heard tales of their attacks on the Underground. They came through the walls, killing unsuspecting Norterridane and their young. It would have come through the walls of the dragon's cave had it not been carved out of solid stone.

The lizard dropped from the cave ceiling to the floor. It moved quickly toward Crimson, its blood-stained teeth formed an evil grin.

"You're quite small for a dragon protector," it hissed in the common tongue. "You should run lest I make you my meal as well."

It snickered, moving closer. Its foul breath filled the cave. Crimson backed away, unsure how to defend the helpless creatures against this beast.

Just then, Tourmaline pounced onto the lizard's tail that protruded out of the cave. Crimson breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of her mother.

Tourmaline slashed at the creature with her sharp claws, piercing the flesh. Blood rushed to the open wounds. The lizard turned to face its assailant, whipping its long tail away. Tourmaline jumped toward the lizard, claws exposed to hook and tear the lizard's flesh. The lizard moved rapidly and struck the Norterridane with its hard claw knocking her backwards and down the rocky cliff.

"Mom!" Crimson cried, fearing for her safety.

The lizard turned back toward Crimson and the dragons. It rushed forward. Crimson's heart raced, and she unconsciously moved her tail between her legs as she cowered. The dragons whimpered behind her. The maw of the lizard opened. Instinctively, Crimson jumped left and sliced at its jaw. A small amount of blood dripped from its cheek.

*GRRRRRR*. A low growl echoed in the cave.

Tourmaline was back, slashing and fighting. The lizard turned and defended itself. Its claws slashed Crimson's mother's right leg and then her side. Tourmaline yelped in pain and backed away. She struggled to fight with her other paw and teeth. The lizard's tail thrashed and hit her hard against the cave wall. Tourmaline struggled to get up, but her shaking and bloodied legs fell beneath her. The lizard grinned and turned towards its intended prey.

The Norterridane's only chance of defeating a cave lizard was in a pack, and without her mother, Crimson would have no chance of winning.

"Crimson, run!" her mother called with an unsteady and weak voice.

Crimson started to move, but the hatchlings squawked behind her. She couldn't leave them. She unsteadily braced herself, legs still shaking. She lifted her hair on end and growled as loud as she could. She would fight, even knowing she would lose. She prayed the dragon keepers would show up and save them. But she couldn't leave the dragons alone.

Crimson felt the nausea return, her stomach tightened and turned. A wave of heat flowed through her muscles. In seconds, her body tensed, and her claws dug into the ground beneath her. From her claws burst a hot blue fire. It spread in an arc across the floor. Like an explosion, the fire burst out and burned the lizard, knocking it backwards from the cave.

Crimson stared unblinking for a moment. She crouched low, expecting the lizard to return to the cave. The heat faded as quickly as it had come, and the queasiness was gone.

"Wha-what?" she looked back to her mother who was crumpled on her side.

"Crimson, it's dead," her mother said.

Without thinking, Crimson ran to the edge of the cave and looked down at the now lifeless lizard. The flock of birds descended upon its charred corpse, picking at the blood and flesh with their beaks.

Crimson returned to her mother. Her leg had swollen, and blood soaked her white fur. There was another wound, a shallow gash on her side. Her eyes closed, and her breath came in shallow gasps like she was asleep.

"Mom? Mom!" Crimson cried, but her mother didn't wake.

The dragons moved from the rear wall to get close to Crimson's side and whimpered softly, still afraid.

"It's gone," Crimson said, pulling the dragons in closer with her paws.

Crimson moved up next to her mom and lay her head on her shoulder, careful of the wound on her side. Her head hurt, and her mind raced.

“I made a mistake,” she whispered softly. “I should have never followed the scent. Please wake up and tell me what to do. I need you.”