

## Chapter 1

The smell of rotting flesh filled the eastern tunnel of the Underground. Midnight's ears flattened and a low growl escaped through his sharp canines. The rest of his pack stood ready to attack as the dirt wall exploded.

"Cave lizard," he growled. Cave lizards were foul-smelling, strong, bony creatures who preyed upon dragon hatchlings and Norterridane. Any creatures, in fact. Cave lizards weren't picky. They lived under the earth and surfaced when they smelled anything that passed by.

The cave lizard burst through the wall. Dirt exploded into the tunnel. The lizard's long, bony claws came through first, followed by a long snout. Saliva dripped from its long, sharp teeth.

"Wait 'til it enters the tunnel," Midnight said. "And stay away from the teeth."

The pack hardly needed the reminder. One bite could kill them, but if they survived, the saliva in the bite would leave a nasty infection.

Six trained warriors made up the pack: Labrad, Torbern, Chato, Sugil, Jade and Midnight. Of them, only Labrad and Midnight had been dragon keepers. The pack stood, fur raised, waiting for the creature to move into the narrow tunnel, then they attacked. They jumped in between the lizard's legs and sank their teeth into its strong hide, then jumped out of the way. Claws raked against the hard flesh, and blood dripped from the lizard's side.

The lizard pushed its way into the larger tunnel, turned and thrashed its tail, knocking the closest warriors back up the tunnel. Yellow eyes glared at them from beneath the bony eye ridge. The lizard hissed, and it moved closer.

"Watch out for its claws," Midnight barked as he rushed in, slashing the lizard's legs. The only way to win was to go in quick, do as much damage as possible, and get out.

Midnight dodged the lizard's claws and slashed the side of its legs. Torbern ran past him and latched on to its hind leg, tearing into its flesh. Blood ran down the leg when Torbern released his bite. Then its tail smacked Torbern against the wall. He yelped in pain, but got up and returned to the fight.

The other pack members did the same, running in and out, trying to make sure the lizard's attention didn't stay on one pack member. The lizard climbed the wall and hung from the ceiling, protecting its belly, which already had several deep wounds.

“Stay back,” the lizard hissed in common tongue. The breath that came from its mouth smelled of something that had died months ago.

“You invaded our home,” Labrad snarled.

The lizard’s eyes darted to the hole in the wall from where it had come and it turned to flee.

Labrad latched on to the lizard’s tail. The lizard ran across the ceiling, pulling Labrad with it. Sugil ran and jumped into the air, also latching on to the lizard’s tail, slowing it down. The weight of the two warriors pulled the lizard down. As soon as it hit the floor, the pack attacked. Their teeth and claws tore at vulnerable areas of the neck and belly before the lizard could turn right side up again.

The lizard made a futile attempt to slash and bite at the Norterridane. There on the soft broken earth, it died.

The pack had had the advantage, as the lizard was too big to swipe hard with its claws in these tunnels. Had it entered a den, things might have ended differently.

“We need to get the body out of here,” Midnight said, panting. Each of the pack members bit into the lizard’s scales. They dragged the lizard down the tunnel toward the watery entrance connected to Crystal Lake.

Blood oozed from the wound on Midnight’s shoulder. He licked away the blood. He had overworked himself again. But this was his pack. He would do anything to protect them. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Cave lizards were becoming more and more abundant since the dragon hatchlings moved into the Underground. The Underground, a maze of tunnels and dens, where most the Norterridane on this continent lived. The lizards attacked the city at least once a week and the Norterridane had run out of magic stones to fortify the tunnels. They would be destroyed if the cave lizards kept up these attacks.

If Crimson had been there, she could have killed them with her fire power. But the elders sent her away to Alannador to train as magi.

Midnight knew that part of that reason was to keep her far away from the magical source of power hidden in a crevasse in the lake. She was the key to awakening the power, and the elders feared the serpents would make her unleash it and give it to them. Serpents craved magic power to the point of raw hunger. A hunger that drove them.

Beryl, the chief warrior, entered the tunnel, his brown and copper fur covered with cave lizard blood.

Midnight raised a brow.

"Two this time, the other one in the tunnels near the elder cave," Beryl said.

"We can't keep fighting like this," Midnight said and licked his shoulder wound again. The bleeding stopped.

Beryl took a step toward midnight. "You good?"

"I'm fine," Midnight said and stretched his shoulder. "It actually feels much better than it has in days." Midnight ran several short training missions in the last week, and the more he moved, the better his shoulder felt. "Moving it stops it from tightening up."

"Good," Beryl said. "You've killed enough cave lizards in the last few weeks. The elders spotted a dragon near Mt. Xenoti. They want you to see if it's Azuran."

"Why?" Midnight said in disbelief.

"They want you to see if he will help us get rid of these lizards. Since Jet left, Azuran is possibly the only mature dragon left on Genorrdia."

Jet, an Obsidian dragon, had patrolled Genorrdia, protecting them against any serpents that remained after the serpent king died. He left Genorrdia just before the last snows. They assumed all the serpents had gone. But the elders remained cautious.

"I will take the pack," Midnight said.

"See what he knows about the serpents and ask for his protection."

Midnight nodded.

A short time later, Midnight trotted out of the Underground toward a newly carved cave at the base of the dormant volcano, Mt. Xenoti. The frigid air cooled his nostrils and his paws sank into freshly fallen snow. Underneath the snow, grass had begun to grow.

Dried brush and grass covered the hills that led into the Eastern Mountain range.

As the pack neared Mt. Xenoti, dragon scents of eucalyptus and reptile hung in the air. The familiar scent told Midnight Beryl had been right. A dragon lived here and had been living here for quite some time.

Midnight wagged his tail low. The pack crouched near the brush. The dried grass and bushes grew large enough for the pack to remain unseen. They didn't venture to this side of the black mountains very often.

“Stay here. I want to speak to Azuran alone,” Midnight said.

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Torbern said and flopped down in the snow.

“I sense no danger, and we could all do with a rest,” Labrad said and the pack visibly relaxed. They had been on edge for weeks in the tunnels of the Underground. They needed this break.

“I’ll be back soon,” Midnight said and made his way over the grass-covered hills up to the cave. The scents of grass and dirt disappeared. The scent of dragon overwhelmed everything else.

Near the cave, wind had blown the snow into large drifts. Midnight’s paws sank in until the snow reached his knees. Large patches of ice covered the ground.

Midnight stopped and called, “Azuran.”

There was a shuffling inside the cave, and a moment later, a black dragon emerged. His sharp black talons sank deep into the snow and ice, cutting through the frozen ground and leaving deep gashes.

Midnight sucked in a breath. Azuran had grown twice as large since the last time Midnight had seen him. His long tusks protruded far past his jaw, almost as long as some of the full-grown serpents’ tusks. Whatever curse the serpents had put on him did not dissipate when the serpents fled.

Midnight shook his head, remembering that he helped raise this dragon until that fateful day when the serpents had attacked and Azuran fell over the Sapphire River waterfall. A dull ache began in Midnight's chest. How far removed from that time he was now. The serpents usually killed dragons, but for some reason, the serpent Onixian raised Azuran as his own. And now Azuran was turning into one.

Midnight’s black eyes met Azuran’s piercing blue eyes. The fire inside of them, regal and determined, were still dragon.

Unlike the uncertain dragon of his youth, Azuran held confidence. He snarled and scratched his tusks on the ground as he moved. His blue eyes flashed with anger.

Midnight stood strong and unafraid. Today, he sought this dragon and nothing would deter him from his mission. Cave lizards feared adult dragons, and Azuran could chase them away.

Still, Midnight's black fur stood on end, and he tried to calm himself so his canine instincts wouldn't take over. Not that the dragon would care. Azuran could snap him in half or swallow

him whole. But Norterridane raised dragon hatchlings, so Midnight hoped Azuran wouldn't be quick to kill him.

"Why have you come?" Azuran said, his blue eyes glaring at the black Norterridane.

"We need your help. The other dragons have gone, and our home is in great danger. Cave lizards frequently attack. If more come, we won't be able to hold them back any longer."

Azuran tapped his braided whip tail on the ground. "Crimson hasn't come to your rescue?"

"She left months ago to Alannador," Midnight said. He thought about adding, "why haven't you gone?" but he decided against it. All hatchlings were called to Alannador after they matured. Azuran had chosen to stay on Genorrdia.

"The serpents have fled. At least from them, the dragon hatchlings are safe," Azuran said, as if he had read Midnight's mind.

Midnight relaxed his fur. Azuran confirmed the serpents had gone. This was great news. At least that meant one less enemy they would have to fight.

"Well, yes," Midnight said, "but the cave lizards. When the serpents attacked, we had to move the hatchlings to the Underground. And that attracted more lizards. They attack us at least once a week, sometimes more."

Midnight's relief was short-lived when Azuran uttered his next words.

"It doesn't matter, in the future I've seen. They're all dead. Everything is dead."

"So what? You're just going to give up, sit here, and do nothing?"

Azuran snorted. "I'm guarding the lake."

"Crimson's in Alannador learning to use her magi powers to reseal the magic stone. Your vision won't come true. And at least you could help save hatchlings now."

"You want me to help save Norterridane?"

"Ok, that's true. The cave lizards will kill anything they come across. It doesn't matter that the dragon scent attracts them to our home. They will break through the walls and kill anything they can find, Norterridane pups or dragon hatchlings. We need your help," Midnight said.

Azuran walked across the ground, his talons crunching on the snow. He opened his wings, revealing deep, jagged scars. The serpent king Malachite had made the gashes across his wing with Sardonyx-encased claws. Crimson healed him as best she could and used her fire claws to seal the rest of his wound. Midnight moved his gaze away from the wing and back to the dragon's face.

Azuran's eyes followed his movements.

"You could guard the lake better from the Underground instead of this far up in the mountains."

"The cliff above gives me a magnificent view of the lake."

"Is that the cliff where you fought Malachite?"

"Yes, it is." Azuran said. He looked up past his cave to a ledge far up Mt. Xenoti. A ledge that only someone flying could reach. Sadness flashed in his eyes. That, Midnight realized, was where Azuran had lost the dragon egg. Midnight hadn't heard the entire story of what had happened. Azuran had taken the dragon egg in hopes he would get more power. Then, when he was dying from near fatal wounds, he revealed the dragon was gone. But this wasn't the time to ask.

"We need your help," Midnight said again. "You chose a cave close to the Underground. It wouldn't be too much trouble for you to come to our aid."

A gust of icy wind whipped through the trees. The dragon closed his eyes and sighed.

"You are Obsidian," Midnight said. "You could easily fight any enemy that comes to Genorrdia. The serpent king is dead. You stopped the prophecy!"

"As long as the stone is in the lake, the prophecy can come true," Azuran said.

"Living your life in fear of what might happen is no way to live. If you'd returned to your kind, perhaps you could've reversed whatever is happening to you because of serpent magic."

Azuran jolted forward, bringing his massive head right in front of Midnight's body. Smoke curled out of his nostrils. Hot dragon's breath rolled over Midnight's fur, bringing a welcome warmth to the winter's chill.

"If I'd gone, who would you come to begging for help?" Azuran spat.

"I knew this was a mistake. You've turned your back on your keepers and dragon kind," Midnight growled. He turned to leave.

"You don't know?" Azuran's head moved closer. Azuran studied Midnight's face. "Did Carnelian not tell you keepers?"

"Tell us what?" Midnight said, ears turned forward, detecting a change in the dragon's tone.

"No, I suppose she wouldn't have. Not really a secret she wanted revealed." The dragon's tail swayed back and forth as if taunting the Norterridane.

"Are you going to tell me or not?" Midnight growled. "I've more important things to attend to than playing guessing games with dragons."

Azuran curled his tail around Midnight, blocking his retreat.

"When I first regained some memories after my fall, I questioned my existence. I lived with Onixian and the serpents for months, not knowing anything of my past. Onixian taught me to hate dragons, and when I realized I was one, I hated myself. You couldn't understand what that was like. How can one be proud of being an Obsidian dragon, yet also despise their own existence? That is what life had become. I wanted so much to be like the Schorl... Powerful... unafraid... ruthless..."

"Evil," Midnight finished.

"No." Azuran shook his head. "Serpents aren't evil. They can be, of course. But you misunderstand the power craving. It controls them. Now that I know what I am, I have found my peace, for I am both. Both dragon and serpent. And now I know it's my destiny to save them both. No one can get the stone."

Midnight looked at him curiously. "There might be a way to reverse the magic bond."

Azuran's blue eyes flashed. "I told Crimson at the lake I would never be one of them. I didn't know then how true the statement was. My mother told me the truth before she left with Crimson. I'm not turning into a serpent."

"Explain your tusks," Midnight said. Azuran couldn't be serious. Maybe the magic was messing with his mind as well.

"It's not a magic bond," Azuran said, tracing a talon along one of his tusks. "I was born both dragon and serpent. I can accept who I am. I belong in both worlds. There is no reversing it."

"Impossible!" Midnight managed to say. All his teachings of the war between serpent and dragon had never mentioned this possibility. For hundreds of years, the two species had been mortal enemies. What would this new information mean for the future of dragons? Did it even matter? Right now, the Underground mattered. The cave lizards killing Norterridane mattered. Still, if not all dragons and serpents hated each other, perhaps there would be an end to the war. And an end to dragon keeping.

"So, you will come to the Underground?"

"I can't."

"What are you doing here, then?"

"I'm not hiding in a cave, if that's what you thinking. I'm saving my strength for the battle to come."

Midnight thought for a moment, then said, "Yes, dragons should be fierce. They should be strong and courageous. But whatever battle you think is going to happen, might not happen. Your scales are invincible. Cave lizards can't even hurt you. Helping us would be a minor inconvenience."

Azuran lowered his head. "You don't know what I have seen."

"Crimson told me of your vision. It didn't happen. The serpents didn't get the stone."

"As long as the stone is in the lake, that future is possible."

This was going in circles, but Midnight had one more thing to try. Azuran had a bond with Crimson, his keeper. Maybe he still cared for her if not the Norterridane.

"Crimson would want you to help us."

"Crimson is gone, you said." Azuran turned and walked back toward his cave.

"Crimson saved your life. Does that mean nothing to you?"

Azuran snarled. "It was because of her, I needed saving. She weakened me by drawing on my power. If not for her, I could have saved the dragon egg. If you ask me, she is dangerous. Nothing else in this world can take the power from a dragon."

Azuran turned and walked into his cave.

Nothing except a serpent, Midnight thought.

"Leave, Midnight. There is nothing for you here," the dragon's voice called from inside. Midnight could sense a sadness in his voice he hadn't noticed earlier.

"Fine! Sit here and do nothing," Midnight growled.

With heavy steps, he trudged down the mountainside. He would have to tell the pack they were on their own.

He sniffed the air. The pack moved toward him as he approached.

Out of the snow-covered grasses, Torbern appeared first.

"Was it Azuran?" Torbern said.

"Yes," Midnight said, "and as far as the dragon knows, the serpents have left Genorrdia."

"You believe him?" Jade said as the rest of the pack joined them.



"There's no reason they would stay. Azuran killed their leader. Whatever kinship they had with Azuran died with him. I don't think they'd chance staying. Even if the serpent with Sardonyx tusks could get close enough to kill Azuran. He'd find easier prey elsewhere. Serpents don't openly attack Obsidian dragons," Midnight said.

"Scouts haven't reported any serpent sightings," Torbern said. "Seems like Azuran confirmed it."

"We still have the problem of the cave lizards," Jade said.

"We need to move the hatchlings out of the city as soon as possible," Labrad said. "Even though the serpents have gone. The hatchling scent just attracts more lizards. We don't have enough magic to fortify the walls."

"We can't keep fighting like we have. Too many warriors are wounded," Chato said and shook his head. "I really thought he'd help."

"I didn't expect him to," Torbern said, his lips curled into a snarl. "He lived with serpents too long."

"And he is not bound to help us like the other dragons," Midnight said, shaking snow off his paws.

"Labrad is right. With the serpents gone," Torbern said, "we can move the hatchlings out of the Underground, and hopefully, the lizards will not be so eager to break through our walls. The lizards would follow the dragons and their keepers away from the..." Torbern stopped talking and looked closely at Midnight. "I know that look. What's wrong?"

"Azuran said he was born... with serpent blood."

Torbern's look mirrored the one Midnight had had earlier.

"Impossible."

The pack stared at him, stunned.

"Something isn't right. The stories we have been told about dragons and serpents are wrong."

## Chapter 2

Azuran lay on a snow-covered cliff on Mt. Xenoti. To animals passing by, he seemed nothing more than a solid black rock amongst the trees and snow.

The frozen ground chilled everything around, but the warmth of the dragon's body thawed the top layer of snow. Azuran rolled over. He left the puddle of water beneath him from the heat of his body. The heat created from his Obsidian dragon side. Obsidian dragons got their power from the volcanic rocks. Obsidian, pumice, and other volcanic rocks kept an inferno burning underneath their scales.

Azuran looked toward the lake and grassland beyond. He watched the pack of Norterridane head home. From his viewpoint, he could see most of Genorrdia, though the pack looked like small moving specks instead of dogs.

There was truth in what Midnight said. A part of him that wanted to fly to Alannador and see what his life could be like with other dragons. But another part of him feared leaving Genorrdia. This was his home. It was the only home he had ever known. The dragons expected him to fly to a continent he didn't know and join with dragons he had never met. No, this was his home and always would be.

Months ago, Azuran had heard telepathic dragon voices in his mind. First the voice of his sister, Chalcedony, then the voice of the sea dragon, Covelli. Those dragons had gone to Alannador.

After Malachite died, Azuran had snuck to the walls of the Underground to hear the voices of his kin. But the dragon hatchlings had been too deep in the tunnels for him to hear their thoughts. Azuran's heart ached and his mind filled with thoughts of dragons, of the serpents, and of the dragon egg he'd lost.

He had felt such a bond with the dragon egg. A connection beyond anything he had ever felt. He had only taken the egg to get the power to stop his vision. He hadn't meant for the dragon to die.

Now Azuran was alone.

Onixian was gone, possibly dead, and whatever magic bond they had shared faded with the distance. Like all connections, Azuran thought. And now Midnight claimed he owed them something because, for a short few months of his life, they had cared for him. He thought about what Midnight had said, and maybe he was right. Crimson had saved his life, and he had promised one day to repay her. Maybe by helping Midnight with the cave lizards, he would pay his debt.

How annoying those Norterridane creatures could be. But they did protect dragons, and even though he wouldn't admit it out loud, he was grateful they did.

The cool wind blew over his scales. A hunger stirred within his body. A hunger that started shortly after he had eaten the Crystalline Sardonyx stone and killed Malachite. The power in the stone allowed him to breathe so hot, it had turned the serpent king to ash. It had also filled his veins with power, a power like he had never known.

Azuran stood and stretched his legs. He looked over the cliff and across Genorrdia once again. Then he dropped off the cliff, letting the frigid air cool his scales. He opened his wings and glided down to his cave. Azuran slunk back into his cave and picked up one of the stones he had collected.

He turned the small stone between his talons. Such a small thing, yet so healing. The yearning for magic began shortly after his near-death experience. A hunger for the magic in this stone. He placed the stone in his mouth and bit down, crushing it between his teeth. Within seconds, he felt the magical pulse running through his veins.

Soon, he no longer craved the connection. The loneliness was gone. All that remained was this satisfying warmth of magic. It covered him like the warm waters of a hot spring. He closed his eyes to sleep, to dream.

When he woke, he did not remember his dreams. What he knew was he wanted to feel that way again.