

Prologue

The sound of her cry was the first thing he sensed. It was the cry of a very young baby, born no earlier than a day or two before. It did not take long for him to sense her spirit. It was fresh and new, fragile and tenuous like dew exposed to the bright morning sun, but with a firm hold on life. Her spirit tingled with magical talent. It was amazing how strong her emanation was, for him to be able to detect her from so far away.

The inky black dragon kept close to the water as he flew across the ocean. The foamy waves that rose in his wake sprayed the tip of his tail with icy droplets.

He could not believe he was chasing after a human baby on nothing other than Poli's word. After discovering that Kelita was not the one he was looking for, the young dragon had felt nothing but cynicism for this mission, this centuries-old cause he and his fellow Tueri were chosen for. There had been too many false alarms, too many failures. His faith in this task assigned to him and his peers was all but dead.

He flew higher to prevent his tail from icing over. He had truly believed that Kelita was his destined ward. She was a powerful sorceress, brave and loyal, his cherished companion. He had waited years before he finally told her what he was and why he was there, and she had been supportive and willing to do anything to help him. But when he tried to mark her, to create the special bond with her by giving her the branding scratch on her forehead, it did not work. Instead of the flash of light that should have bloomed out of the scratch, all that came out of Kelita was a scream. She eventually recovered, but the realization that she was not the one was devastating for both human and dragon. It was incomprehensible. If any human existed in this world with the courage and power to be one of the eight they were seeking, Kelita would be the one.

The dragon stretched his wings and let the strong wind currents carry him. He was well-hidden within the black of the sky and water in the moonless night. If any of the Draca Debellos were trailing him, they would have a hard time spotting his jet-black silhouette. However, just the thought of them made him pick up speed. If anything served to motivate him, it was to get one up on those horrid dragons.

He hated the Debellos. Their belief that dragons were a superior race disgusted him. The master race, with the right, no, the *duty*, to dominate and subjugate all other races to serve them; that's what the Draca were supposed to be, according to the Debellos. It was enraging to see his kind treat other races the way they did. Weren't they all made by the same Creator? What if dragons had to worry about some more evolved race doing something like that to them?

Stupid, unbelievably stupid. But the worst part was that the Debellos would try to rule the humans. They had tried before, thousands of years ago. But back then, the humans proved to be more than a match for the overconfident dragons. Using magic and their uncanny understanding of science, they decimated the army of dragons that invaded their world. Human evolution and technological advancement was so rapid that the dragons were intimidated enough to leave them alone and keep their existence a secret. Only obscure legends remained of the dragons that had once lived in the humans' world.

Then, as generations passed and humans progressed, the humans had abandoned their mysterious magic and supernatural powers to focus on science and technology. Science they could explain to themselves, magic and supernatural forces they could not. They advanced far enough to begin exploring beyond their planet. They even came very close to discovering how to reach other dimensions. The dragons called that time the Presage, the era of the threat of humans discovering the existence of other worlds and races, including dragons. At that point, humans with their vast knowledge of science could easily dominate dragons,

despite the Draca's powerful magic. Pure dragon magic was paramount, but it did have one big limitation.

And now, less than three thousand years after the fall of the great human civilization, just a few millennia since dragons feared for their own existence, these idiot Debellos were going to try to take over the human world once again. What kind of greed drove masses to ignore history?

His nightvision detected land on the horizon. He was almost there. He shook the ice off his tail and flew at top speed, hurtling across the sandy beach and into the nearby mountains, following the emanation of power he sensed.

How could a baby exude power like that? She was deep underground, inside a cave, no doubt. *I don't need to find the cave. I can feel her so clearly that I can just phase myself over to where she is.* His massive body circled once over the mountains and disappeared.

He found himself in a narrow cavern lit by an unknown source. To one side he spotted a man and a woman huddled in a corner. The woman held a squirming bundle in her arms. The dragon snorted in relief. He had found the baby. Before he could congratulate himself, however, movement to his other side made him whirl around.

His jaw dropped in surprise, but he recovered quickly. "I see I made it just in time," he said.

He stood between the couple and their baby and a blood-red dragon. The great red, not happy with the intrusion, gave a menacing snarl and took one step forward. The black dragon stood his ground, although it was an effort not to step away from the bigger dragon.

"Step aside, Silx. You are not in time. I found the babe first," the red dragon snarled.

The black dragon felt his heart cringe at the intimidating voice, but he knew if he conceded a whisker, the baby was lost. He heard the woman behind him howl in fear, prompting the child in her arms to start crying.

“It is nice of you to try to get a nice present for your sweetheart, Gravesco, but I'm afraid I cannot let you take her. Find a nice little trinket for Humo instead.” Silx held his head high and steeled himself for the red dragon's reaction.

“And what exactly are you going to do to stop me?” Gravesco's tone was particularly terrorizing.

“That depends on you,” Silx replied, growing angry. Gravesco was scary, but did he really think that he could intimidate another dragon? Silx was young, but he was not a helpless little hatchling. “She does not have the powers you need to make her yours. All you can do is take her to Humo. And the fact is, I stand between you and the baby.” He looked around. Gravesco could not get around him, and the area was too small for the huge dragon to disappear and reappear behind him. The baby cried. “You will have to get through me if you want the child. Is it worth breaking the Pact?” He kept his gaze firmly on Gravesco's rusty eyes and waited.

Gravesco stared at Silx. Silx stood firm. He would not let Gravesco stare him down. The red dragon before him was a well-known bully, but he was also a natural dragon. Naturals always kept their word. Silx fervently hoped that Gravesco had not promised the baby to Humo.

Finally, Gravesco took a step back. “You are lucky, you insolent whelp! She was born less than a day ago, so there is plenty of time, and she might not even be the one we are looking for.” His big red muzzle swung up to point at the ceiling of the cavern. “Go ahead and play caretaker for Humo, Silx. I'm sure he will appreciate it.” Gravesco spread his wings and took to the air. The cavern ceiling

was very high, but the impact was still loud as the red dragon broke through the ceiling and flew away into the starry night sky.

Silx stepped back and shielded the humans from the falling rubble with his wing. Once the avalanche stopped, he pulled his wing back and looked down at them. The soft glow that had illuminated the cavern faded once Gravesco left. Silx conjured up a light of his own so that the humans could see. The man and woman hid their faces from him, trembling and whimpering. The baby was still crying, and the mother shook the tiny child almost frantically as she tried to quiet it down.

Silx shifted to his smaller two-legged dragon form to appear less intimidating. He stood before the couple and held his taloned forearms out. “Give me the child,” he said, calmly but firmly. He did not want to scare the humans, but he could not let them keep that baby.

“No, please, don't take her!” the mother cried out, clutching her child to her bosom. “Take me instead! Just leave her in peace!”

Silx hesitated. He had not expected bravery from the young woman. The fact that she was willing to sacrifice herself for her child made him stop and consider the situation.

The man stepped forward, emboldened by the woman's outburst. “What do you gain by killing children, monster?”

Silx tilted his head to the side. He was not used to confrontations with humans. Too bad Kelita was not with him. “I want to save her, not harm her. She is destined for greatness. She must be taken somewhere safe, where she can grow and thrive. That will not happen here. Give her to me, and I promise you your daughter will live.”

“Then take us, too. Let her grow up with her parents. We will take good care of her,” the father said, taking a step forward. The mother nodded in agreement, although she still looked terrified. The baby's cries died down.

It was not a bad idea. Who better to care for a child than its own natural parents? The black dragon touched the father's mind gently to see if he had any abilities he may be able to develop, and reeled away from the human in disgust.

“So you would just leave your other three children behind, abandoned, hoping to bask in the future glory of this one. Corrupted humans in a corrupted land.” His claws opened. The tiny form in the woman's arms disappeared, reappearing in Silx's clutches. Holding the child close to his hard scaly chest, he spread his wings and shot up through the gaping hole Gravesco had left. He did not want to waste another moment with those two.

His heart, cold and angry as it was, did wrench at the mother's anguished cry.

Silx stood perched upon a craggy outcropping, a tiny hill surrounded by infinite sea and sky. He was in full dragon form once more. He stared at the helpless baby he held. It was a girl. She would have had to be; dragons could only mark humans of opposite gender. He had delicately pulled her blankets and swaddling away to get a good look at her, and there she lay, a newborn female child, bare and completely at the mercy of a powerful dragon and the dangerous elements of nature.

Silx was amazed. The baby slept peacefully, oblivious to the heat-sapping wind, the roar of the mighty sea with its waves crashing all about the outcropping, and the deadly talon hovering just above her hairless head. He looked up at the stars. *This little ball of warm human flesh has the power to control all of this. Amazing.*

The baby began to shiver. He could not stay here for very long. The child needed to keep warm, and soon would get hungry. His talon quivered over her head. Should he do it? She was too young, only adults should be marked; at least that is what everyone believed. But Silx did not want to waste his time again. After waiting all those years for Kelita to become old enough...

The power emanating from the newborn was so strong, though. Much stronger than Kelita's. Of course, emanation had nothing to do with actual strength, and neither emanation nor strength had anything to do with ability. He would either have to wait, or try to mark her now. If it didn't work, there was no doubt in Silx's mind that it would kill the baby.

The baby shuddered and began to make fussing noises. Silx steeled himself, and before he could think about it any further, dipped his talon down. It brushed against the newborn's forehead.

A bright flash of light washed out his nightvision and almost made him drop the baby. He blinked quickly to regain his vision. He watched the child, worried.

The newborn lay stunned in his hand, her arms splayed out and eyes and mouth wide open. After a nerve-wracking moment, she finally sucked in a breath of air and let out a loud, healthy wail.

Silx quickly wrapped her back up and held her close. Faith bloomed within him as if it were never gone. Drawing heat into his forearms to warm her up, he jumped to the air exultantly and flew off as fast as he could. He had to find her something to eat. There might be hope for this mission after all.

The sooty cauldron hit the floor with a bang as Kelita took the boiling stew off the fire. She pulled the top off and peered inside, taking a deep sniff. Delicious. The rabbit bones floating inside promised tender, tasty meat. She had made enough to last her several days. This should get her through that old witchcraft book she had been meaning to read for the longest time. It was the first collection of works she had seen that explained how physical magic and spiritual magic relate and why the author believed that both fields of magic could be used in conjunction. She could not wait to start experimenting.

A strange sound made her turn. It was unlike anything she had heard before, but none of the warning wards had set off. “Silx, is that you?” It had to be him.

The young dragon walked into the kitchen. He was in human form, and he carried something. A young, sad-looking girl followed him in. Kelita blinked at the excited look on his boyish face. He looked like an adolescent who had just been kissed for the first time.

“I found her, Keli. Look.” He held out the bundle he carried. Kelita stepped back as it moved.

He had found her. She knew this day would come, even when Silx had just about lost hope. She wasn’t resentful; thirty-two years was a long time to come to terms with things. She had hoped to be in Heaven when it did happen, though.

“How do you know? Don't you have to mark her?” She couldn't make herself take the bundle. She could feel the baby's power.

“I did.”

Kelita stared at the baby, stunned and a little awed. “You could have killed her!”

“But I didn't. Take her; just make sure you hold her head. It tends to flop back.”

Silx took a step toward her. “Look at her, Keli.”

She took the small bundle from him. She tried to cradle the baby wrapped inside in her arms.

“Here, let me. It's all right.” The girl stepped between her and Silx. She wrapped Kelita's arms around the child. “There. You won't hurt her holding her that way.”

Kelita rocked the baby back and forth. “How sweet,” she whispered. She had never really wanted a baby of her own; Silx and his eternal supply of books and knowledge had been more than enough for her. But now, holding the tiny baby in her arms, something warm began to grow inside her. She looked at the girl in front of her. “Are you her mother?”

The girl lowered her head and shook it as Silx said, “Rae lost her newborn daughter and her husband in a fire a few days ago. She agreed to become the baby's nurse if we gave her a place to stay. She is far from her parents and does not know how to reach them.”

“I am so sorry! Please have a seat,” Kelita said. “Silx, there is stew. Give her some,” she ordered.

Silx threw her a look as he searched for a bowl and spoon, but complied without a word. Kelita smiled down at the baby as her eyes opened sleepily. “What's her name?” she asked.

Silx was ladling stew into the bowl he had found. He stopped, dripping stew onto the floor as he pondered. “Her mother yelled something as I flew off with her. It might have been her name.”

“You snatched this baby away from her mother and flew away?” Kelita was aghast. To take a child away from her mother like that! Rae covered her mouth with both her hands as Kelita scowled at Silx. “How could you do such a thing?”

“I had my reasons, Keli.” He emptied the ladle into the bowl and dropped it back in the cauldron. “She would have died if she had stayed with her mother. Gravesco was there; he almost took her.” He handed the bowl to Rae, along with a spoon. The young girl dug into the steaming stew. “She has three other children, Kelita. Basically, it was a choice. Her other children need her. This one does not. Not anymore.” He searched for another bowl. “It sounded like she said Milina.” Pulling one out of the cupboard, he went to serve himself.

“Milina. I like that,” Kelita said.

“So do I, if that counts for anything,” Rae said in a shy voice.

“Sure it does. You are part of this family now.” Silx picked up a spoon and sat next to Rae, smiling. His human appearance made him look like he could be Rae's younger brother. “I like it, too,” he said.

“We're going to have to get a room ready for her and Rae. I'd better get started.” Kelita walked out of the kitchen, still holding Milina, her supper forgotten. She knew now why she was not Silx's ward. She had a more important job to do. Her head filled with plans and tasks that would need to be done for the two newcomers. Her book would just have to wait.

Chapter 1 - A Cry for Help

Rohen tried very hard not to cry as he watched his mother wash the black stripe off the entrance to their home. He wondered why she was taking off his father's mourning sign so soon. A month had not yet passed since he drowned.

His sister had tried to explain to him why so many changes were happening so fast. Mama needed to find someone to care of them. She was lucky to marry so soon. She wanted to make sure everything went back to normal, so they could all be happy once more. His sister had tried hard, but Rohen still could not understand. Papa was gone, nothing would be normal, and he would never be happy again. And why would Mama decide to end Papa's mourning period when she still cried at night, thinking no one could hear her?

“Rohen, are you ready yet? You need to meet your father at the mesa.” His mother turned to look at him. Her eyes were red and swollen.

He was eight; he should not cry. But he took one look at her sad face and could not help himself.

“He is not my Papa.” He quickly rubbed the tears off his face.

His mother turned and kept scrubbing the door. “Well, he is going to care for you and do all the things your father did before he drowned, so it would be nice if you saw him as your Papa.”

Rohen watched quietly as the sooty mark washed away under his mother's wet brush.

"But you don't have to call him anything you don't want," she added. "Everything will work out well, I promise. Now go find your sister and get to the mesa." She looked back at him and smiled.

Her smile made him feel better. She was so beautiful. At least he would always have her and Erria. He ran off to find his sister.

Rohen went to the side of the cottage and picked up his tiny bow and quiver. His father made them for him shortly before he died, and had given Rohen a few lessons. Erria was teaching him now. Rohen loved his bow and arrows. He took them everywhere he went. He threw the quiver over his shoulder and headed to the path leading to the mesa.

He saw his older sister up ahead and ran to catch up with her. "Errie!"

Erria stopped and waited for him. "Why did you bring your bow? We are not going to shoot quail."

Rohen shrugged. "Why does he want to meet us there anyway? He doesn't like us."

Erria ruffled his dark brown hair. "He wants to spend time with us," she said. "We are his children now, you know."

"I don't think he wants us to be his children, Errie."

"Nonsense. He would not have married Mama if he didn't want us."

"I don't like the way he looks at us."

"He's just trying to get to know us, Rowy." She put a comforting arm around him.

"I wish Papa were still here." He squeezed his bow.

"We all do, Rowy." She looked so sad Rohen almost started crying again. "But we still have Mama, and we have each other."

Rohen wrapped his arms around her waist and hugged her. “I’m so glad you are my big sister, Errie. You will always take care of me, right?” What would he do without her?

Erria laughed and hugged him back. “Soon you will not want me around. Look at you, four years younger than me, and you are already better with the bow than I. You will not need me watching out for you for very long.”

“Sure I will. I will always need you.”

She ruffled his hair again. “Come on, we are wasting time.” She pulled him along.

As they walked, the foliage began to thicken, and the trees became bigger. The path sloped upward for a short distance before leveling off. Soon they walked through a row of trees into a clearing.

The clearing opened up to a stone plateau. The plateau stopped before a wide river, which poured over the side in a huge curtain of water. The sound of splashing water and singing birds made the area calm and peaceful. People usually crowded the popular mesa, but that day there was only one person there. He had his back to them.

“Papa!” Erria called out. She ran over to him.

Rohen made a face. He was not their Papa. He followed his sister slowly, clutching his bow tightly.

Erria jumped into her stepfather’s arms. He hugged her and pointed to a small rise where a person could look over the waterfall. Rohen was too far to hear what he told her. The girl jogged toward the rise.

Rohen turned to join Erria. He noticed his stepfather pick up his bow and some arrows, which were lying on the ground. He took one of the arrows and notched it.

Rohen looked around. There were no birds to shoot at. *What is he going to shoot?* He stopped walking and watched his sister go up the rise and look over. She

was very close to the edge. He looked back at his stepfather. The man aimed straight up at the sky, then lowered the bow and pointed it at Erria.

Rohen suddenly realized what was about to happen.

He had to stop him, before he shot his sister. He whipped out an arrow and fired.

The small arrow lodged into his stepfather's hand, but not before his own arrow loosed. It streaked toward Erria.

“Errie!”

The young girl turned, and the arrow pierced her neck. The momentum threw her off the rise, and she vanished over the waterfall. She was gone before Rohen could finish his scream.

Rohen notched another arrow, but he was crying so hard he could barely see. He tried to get a clear view of his sister's killer. “Why? Why did you do that?” He blinked the tears out of his eyes and shot again.

His stepfather dodged the arrow. He did not answer Rohen's question. Pulling the first arrow out of his hand with a grunt, he stood up and growled, “Come here, pup. You're next!” He drew a long knife and approached the boy.

Help! Someone help my sister! Rohen turned and ran into the forest.

Vitalia stared wearily into her tea. The search for the boy was draining her. Trying to keep one step ahead of Sanguis made it even worse. Three years of fruitless searching had her on the verge of collapse.

The fact that Sanguis did not have any idea where the child was either brought only a little comfort. Up until about a year ago, Vitalia would have been able to confront her if she managed to find the boy first. Now, the constant searching and years of lack of sleep had weakened her to the point of near-exhaustion. She would need months of rest to regain her strength. At this point, she was too afraid to take a nap.

She took a deep breath. She could smell the salt in the air. The sea air always seemed to energize her a bit, somehow. She very much liked the Northern Islands. Poli had said that except for the youngest, all the children were located in the western lands of the planet. Vitalia had assumed that they would all be on the mainland. She had not considered the five-island archipelago. Could he be this far north? This would be the last place to look. She could not continue searching for much longer.

Vitalia took a sip of her tea, and almost choked as a flash of energy shot through her head. What in the world was *that*?

“Lady, would you care for more tea?”

She smiled warmly at the woman standing in front of her, teapot in hand. She found the accent the Northerners spoke with charming. It was rather fun speaking like them, as well. “No, kind woman. I must be leaving now.” She gave the woman a silver coin and stood up. “Good day, and thank you for the delicious meal.”

Once outside, she stopped and looked around. The public house and adjoining stable faced a large open area between the main street and the fishing docks. She was able to see the ocean from where she stood. People milled about. Vitalia walked around the side of the building where she would not be seen.

The narrow walkway between the pub and the stables was deserted. Vitalia quickly prepared herself for the next flash. As weak as she was, she could not afford to make any mistakes.

Silx had tried to mark the wrong human before he found Milina. Other dragons had several false alarms as well. Vitalia hoped this was not one of those cases.

She had to take the risk. If Sanguis got her claws on the boy before she did...

She felt the flash again. It seemed like a cry for help. She could not waste any more time. She closed her eyes and placed herself as close to the source of the flash as she could.

When she opened her eyes, she found herself surrounded by trees. She saw no one around, but now she could feel power emanating from someone. The emanation was so very strong. And it was completely undeveloped. How can such raw ability be so strong? This was no false alarm!

Vitalia reached out with her mind. It was a small boy, tired and distraught. He was in trouble. Sanguis? No, she would try to make him go to her willingly. Vitalia hurried to find him.

It was very difficult; he kept moving around erratically, circling and turning back constantly. Soon she sensed another presence in the woods. Vitalia pieced together the story as she sensed both minds while she tried to meet up with the boy. When she realized what was going on, she growled with anger.

The boy finally became too tired to continue. He stopped, but his pursuer was close, too close. Vitalia placed herself next to the boy. He was nearby, so her phase would be easier, faster and much more accurate. She blinked...

And looked down at the child she had been searching for. He sat quietly with his back against a tree, his face streaked with tears. Vitalia was shocked at the look on his face. He was ready to die. Vitalia clenched her human jaw until it ached. She was not about to allow that to happen.

He did not notice her until she took a step toward him. He looked up at her and began to cry.

Vitalia crouched down to bring her face level with his. He had to be about eight years old. He had big gray eyes, chestnut brown hair, and very pale skin. In one hand he held a bow, in the other, an arrow. "I can take you far away from here, where that man cannot reach you. Do you want to come with me?"

The boy blinked. He wiped his eyes and nodded.

She smiled at him. “Everything is going to be just fine. Don’t cry.” She put her arms around him and held him close. She thought of her home, and they both vanished.

Vitalia reappeared with her charge inside a cave on another island some distance away. Relieved, she took in the familiar stalactites decorating the cavern and the underground lake nearby. She let go of the child and sat down on the ground. She leaned back against the cave wall. “You are safe now. He will never find you here.”

The boy did not answer. He looked at his surroundings, then faced Vitalia.

“Please help my sister,” he pleaded.

She had not sensed a third presence nearby. And by what she had seen in the boy’s mind... “It’s too late. There’s nothing I can do for her.”

She expected him to cry, but he didn’t. Vitalia was able to see the innocence, the sense of wonder and open trust that young children always seemed to have, fade from his eyes. What kind of effect did something like that have on a child?

“I am Vitalia. What is your name?”

“My name is Rohen. Thank you for saving me, but I must go see my Mama.”

She was going to have to deliver yet another traumatic blow. She hoped she could make him understand. “Rohen, your stepfather will be waiting for you to return to your mother. If you go back, he will kill you. You cannot go back to her.”

Rohen stared at his bow, taking in what she had said. His gray eyes darkened, and he threw his bow to the ground angrily.

“No!” He looked around, and ran toward one of the many cavern openings. “I have to warn Mama, before he kills her, too!”

Vitalia caught up with him and grabbed his arm. “Rohen, you don’t understand. He does not want to kill your mother.”

Rohen's head whirled around to face her, and his eyes flashed with a silvery light. Vitalia shielded herself just in time to block off a blasting mind attack. Even with her shield, she could feel the power of the attack. *Already he is stronger than any human I have ever known. And he did not even realize what he did.*

“Rohen, that man did a terrible thing. But your mother is safe. He will not hurt her.”

He stopped trying to pull away from her. Vitalia held him close as he began to cry again. “It will be all right. I will take care of you. I promise.”

“I just want my sister back,” he sobbed. “I want to see my Mama!”

Vitalia picked Rohen up and let him cry on her shoulder. She wanted very much to take a nap. How was she going to get the boy through something like this? What kind of man would he turn out to be now, especially with the gifts he had?

She had found her ward, but Vitalia realized her problems were only just beginning. Pondering what to do next, she carried the crying boy through one of the cavern openings.

Sanguis waited for the Northern man to approach. As he walked by her, she stepped into view, blocked his path and slapped his face hard. Her fingers tingled painfully from the blow; human hands were so very sensitive.

“You were not supposed to play cat-and-mouse with him, you idiot! Why did you let him get away from you?”

“That little brat shot me!” He showed Sanguis the hole in his hand. “The pain slowed me down.”

Sanguis resisted the urge to kill him. She might still need this human. “Well, use that as an excuse for what happened to the children.” She could not remember the ape's name.

“You know, if the villagers find out what I did, I will be lynched.”

“You will need to come up with a good story, then.” Sanguis raised her hand, and the man flew back into a tree. The trunk cracked from the impact. “There, that should make whatever you come up with seem believable.”

“What do I do with the mother?” the Northerner groaned.

“Whatever you wish,” Sanguis replied, walking off. The man called out to her as she walked away, but she ignored him. She thought of what to do next.

Sanguis smiled. She would wait and see. If the boy showed promise, she would make her move and take him. Vitalia might decide to mark him, but there were ways around that. The boy was young. She had plenty of time.