

*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 terrifying.

"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.

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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-racking 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.

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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 towards 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.