

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 skin. 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 Woodline called to him. He moved underneath the 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. The white and black bark grew smooth and shiny. The small green leaves rounded yet jagged fanned out above the serpents catching the rain. Unlike the broadleaf trees of Alannador that had thick hard bark and grew wide and tall. 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 Schorl knows 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 they wanted us to think that. 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 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 lessened, and the pair crouched down 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 scaly skin. 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 with 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 across the lake to where those creatures live. 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.