

Dawn of the Dragons

By Mari Mancusi

A New Dragon City Prequel Novel

The world that you live in was not always like it is today. Once it was a wild planet of vast oceans and very little land. Dragons ruled both air and sea. Living in harmony with nature and enjoying its gifts. And everyone thought it would be this way forever.

But then the ice came. The ground grew hard. Food became scarce.

And so, under the order of the Great Council, the dragons went to ground to save their species, burrowing deep into the earth's crust where the temperatures were still warm. There, they fell into a dreamless sleep as they waited for the earth to become livable again.

And so they slept. And as they slept, the world moved on. And everyone forgot about the dragons.

Until one day. When the earth let out a great rumble.

And the dragons woke up.

--- An excerpt from ***Dawn of the Dragons***

By Diana Miller

Prologue

Cinder

“Wake up, Cinder! Wake up!”

Cinder snorted sleepily, a puff of smoke escaping her snout. She lifted her head and blinked her large amber eyes, a little annoyed at being awoken so abruptly. What time was it? It felt like the middle of the night!

She’d been having such a lovely dream, too. Soaring through the sky, happy and free, the bright sun bouncing off her silver scales and scattering rainbows of light across the green earth below. The gentle breeze tickled her ears, making her laugh as her clutch-mate Flare flew up to her side. Though they were basically twins, born from the same clutch of eggs, Flare was larger than Cinder and sported a swatch of tiny golden scales, running down his spine like a flicker of fire.

“Faster!” he’d begged as he flew in circles around her. “Go faster, Cinder!”

“Cinder!”

The voice came again. Sharper this time. More urgent. Cinder squinted to see into the dark, cramped cave they’d made their temporary home. Quite the contrast, she thought, a little bitterly, from the beautiful, open skies of her dreams.

Then again, open skies were dangerous this far south. Especially for dragons.

Her eyes fell upon her mother who was standing at the mouth of the cave. Cinder frowned as she caught the worried look in the older dragon’s eyes. Her heart panged. Oh no. What now?

“They’ve found us,” her mother said in a chilling voice that Cinder had never heard her use before. “They’ve found us, and we must leave. Now. Before it’s too late.”

Fear spun down Cinder’s spine. She scrambled to her feet, trying to ignore the cramping in her four legs from lying still for so long. She shook out her leathery wings, one by one, then craned her long neck to try to see around her mother’s massive body which was blocking the cave’s exit. While dragons didn’t have the best eyesight, especially in the dark, her ears could pick up the sounds of battle nearby and her snout twitched at the strong scent of smoke in the air.

“Who found us, Mother?” she asked, hating how thin and high-pitched her voice sounded when she was scared. She was already six moons old; she should have been braver by now. Flare was the same age—hatched only moments before her—and he wasn’t afraid of anything! Why couldn’t Cinder be more like her brother?

But then even her mother looked frightened now. And she was the bravest dragon Cinder knew. The queen of their herd.

And she looked absolutely terrified.

“Come, little one,” she said, plodding over to nudge Cinder with her snout. “The others are already outside. We cannot waste any more time.”

Cinder nodded obediently, trying to get her body to stop shaking—her heart to stop pounding. Taking in a steadying breath, she padded after her mother, toward the cave’s exit.

Be brave, she told herself. You must be brave—

But all thoughts of bravery fled her mind as she stepped out of the cave, leaving her beautiful dreams behind and finding herself in the middle of a horrific nightmare. A forest engulfed by flames. Giant trees crashing to the ground like mere twigs. Animals fleeing the

scene, their anxious cries of alarm echoing across the land. And then there was the smoke, rising from below and choking the once clean and crisp air while making it nearly impossible to see.

Cinder cringed. This was the worst kind of fire. The kind of fire her parents always warned she and her brother about.

A careless dragon could burn down the world, her father would tell her. With great flame comes great responsibility.

Had someone in her herd accidentally started this blaze? But no. Her mother's dragons were more careful than that. It had to be the others. The ones who had found them.

"What's happening, Mother?" she asked, having to yell to be heard over the crackling fire.

"It's the rebels. Father says they want to take our territory!"

Cinder turned to find Flare standing not far off. She was somewhat relieved to note that even he looked a bit frightened now.

"The rebels?" she repeated, trying to understand. "You mean—"

SCREECH!

Cinder startled at the sudden sound. She looked up into the sky, just in time to spot a large male dragon she'd never seen before pop out from behind the thick smoke. His beady eyes locked on Cinder just before he started dive-bombing in her direction. Cinder cried out in horror, frozen in place, as the dragon's jaw hinged open to reveal a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth. Sparks began to dance on his black tongue seconds before he released his full flame, fire blasting toward her with full force.

Cinder's mother leapt in front of her, just in time, taking the brunt of the flame. Dragons were fireproof—sort of. But it still hurt a lot to be burned. And a young dragon's scales were softer than those of a full-grown adult's. Which left them more vulnerable to attack.

Cinder winced as her mother took the direct hit. The queen writhed in pain, roaring furiously as she attempted to lash out at her attacker with her own sharp talons and teeth. But the rebel dragon swept back into the sky, out of reach, before the queen could make contact.

“Mother! Are you all right?” Cinder asked, tears leaking from her eyes. Her mother's once beautiful silver scales were now blackened with burns.

“Watch out!” Flare cried suddenly. “He's coming back for more!”

Cinder's gaze snapped to the sky. Sure enough, the dragon had turned again. He was barreling toward them, his eyes locked on her mother. He wouldn't have any flame left, she knew—it took a while to recharge after that large of a blast. But that didn't make him powerless. He still had his claws. He still had his fangs.

And her mother was still in his path.

Suddenly, another dragon swooped into view, diving straight at the enemy. Cinder's heart leapt as she realized it was her father, the biggest dragon in their herd. She watched, excited, as his mighty jaws clamped down onto the enemy dragon's neck, yanking him from his path of destruction.

The dragon roared in fury, writhing and fighting to get away. But her father held firm and together they flew through the sky, wrestling in what looked like a bizarre and deadly dragon dance.

Cinder turned back to her mother. The queen was panting heavily to catch her breath. She was very burned, but she was alive. At this point Cinder would take what she could get.

“Why are they doing this?” she asked her mother. “Why won’t they follow the Dragon Council’s rules? It’s not fair!”

“They don’t care about being fair,” her mother explained in a gravelly voice. “This is good land. It’s high up in the mountains with lots of caves for shelter, plenty of prey and a dependable water supply. And so instead of being content with the territory they were given by the Council, these dragons have decided to take ours as well.”

“But won’t that make the Council angry?” Flare asked, looking indignant.

Her mother gave him a pitying look. “Yes,” she agreed. “But these dragons feel they know better.”

She lifted her wing and Cinder and Flare scrambled beneath it. Cinder felt safer and warmer pressed up against her mother’s flank, but still she worried. If the rebel dragons won this battle and took their land, where would they go? It had taken them so long to journey even here-- to this haven and she really didn’t want to have to go back to the place she and Flare had been born. A dead world far to the north. A freezing cold tundra sheeted in ice and rock. A place barely habitable for dragons.

She glanced up at her mother, seeing the pain in her eyes, even as she tried to hide it. Cinder felt her fear morph into anger.

It wasn’t fair. These dragons took what was not theirs to take. Because they could. Because they were bigger and stronger, and her herd was so small. If they lost even more dragons today, would they be able to defend any territory at all?

Her father reappeared then. Landing on the cliffside with a heavy thump. He padded over to her mother, sniffing at her charred chest.

“Are you all right?” he asked in his deep, rumbling voice. The voice that always told the best bedtime stories about the time before the ice. When dragons ruled the world. And everyone had plenty to eat. Stories that would lull Cinder into a deep sleep and make her feel so very safe.

But she didn’t feel safe now.

“I’ll be fine,” her mother reassured him. “But we need to get the others out of the line of fire. These dragons clearly have no respect. For nature or their elders.”

“Agreed,” her father said. “You take them. I’ll try to hold off the invaders. My team will join you when we can.”

“Be careful,” her mother warned, pressing her silver snout against her father’s own. For a moment, they just looked at one another, as if something unsaid was passing between them. Then, reluctantly, her mother gave a small snort and pulled away.

Her father turned to Cinder and Flare. “Take care of your mother,” he said gruffly.

Something in his tone sent another wave of fear through Cinder. She looked up at him with pleading eyes. “Father,” she said. “Please don’t leave us!”

He gave her a regretful look. “I cannot abandon my soldiers,” he apologized. “But I promise I will find you again as soon as I am able.” He lifted his talons, patting Cinder on the head. “Stay strong, Mouse.”

Mouse. His nickname for her since she was born. It wasn’t meant to be insulting. She’d just been so small when she’d hatched. Like a little mouse from the stories he would tell. And somehow the name had stuck.

But she hated it now, more than ever. Because a mouse was helpless and useless. Unable to fight for those she loved.

She watched as her father raised his giant wings, pushing off the ground with his muscular hindquarters and leaping into the sky. Soon he had vanished into the thick smoke.

Be safe, Father, she thought. Please be safe.

She felt her mother's snout, nudging her impatiently. "Come, little one," she said. "We need to go. Try not to worry about your father. He's strong. He will be all right."

Cinder forced herself to nod. She and Flare scrambled onto their mother's back, their tiny claws digging into her scales to lock themselves in place. Once certain they were secure, her mother took flight and soon they had joined the other dragons from their herd, who snorted in relief to see their queen and her children appear.

As her mother led the herd through the smoke-choked sky, Cinder took one last look back at the devastation they'd left behind. A land once filled with dreams, now nothing more than a burned-out nightmare.

And she wondered if anything would truly be all right, ever again.