



WINGS OF FIRE

THE HIDDEN KINGDOM

by
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PROLOGUE

The five dragonets were fighting. Again.

Bright scales in green and red and gold caught the rising sun as the young dragons darted between the rocks, claws and teeth flashing. Five forked tongues hissed with fury. Beyond them, below the cliff, the sea crashed against the sand with a muffled rushing sound, as if it didn't want to compete with the shouts of the dragons.

It was embarrassing, was what it was. Nautilus glanced up uneasily at the massive black dragon beside him. The dragonets were so busy yelling at one another that they hadn't even noticed him yet. Nautilus wished he could read Morrowseer's mind the way Morrowseer was undoubtedly reading his.

He also wished there were more Talons of Peace around, but when word spread that the NightWing was coming, most of them suddenly found urgent missions elsewhere. The peace movement's hideout in the seaside cliffs was virtually deserted this morning. Occasionally a dragon snout would emerge from one of the caves, spot Morrowseer, and instantly vanish again.

The five dragonets were the only ones on top of the cliffs; although there were several other young

dragons living with the Talons of Peace, they'd all been whisked out of sight.

But apparently no one had seen fit to warn the objects of Morrowseer's scrutiny that he was coming, or that they were going to be inspected.

"Well," Morrowseer said. "They are . . . energetic."

"They were just a backup plan," Nautilus said defensively. "Nobody thought we'd need them. Especially not all of them; we thought maybe one, or two, if something went wrong with the originals. We haven't spent a lot of time training them."

"I can see that." Morrowseer's dark eyes narrowed as Viper, the SandWing, fell into a crevice and the MudWing promptly tripped and landed on top of her. With a hiss, Viper whipped around and bit Ochre's tail, setting off a yowling whine.

"Excuse me," Nautilus said. He could see where this was going. He stepped forward, cuffed Viper's ears, and snatched Squid, the little green SeaWing, out of the way before the others could set his tail on fire.

"Stop this!" he hissed. "You are being watched!"

Flame, the red SkyWing dragonet, snapped his mouth shut and whipped his head around, scanning the twisted rocks of the sea cliff. Morrowseer stepped into the light of the sunrise and looked down his snout majestically.

"I knew it!" crowed the little NightWing dragonet. Fatespeaker leaped off a stone pillar, flapping her

wings proudly. "I knew a NightWing was coming to see us! Didn't I tell you guys this would happen?"

"Did you?" Ochre scratched his large brown head.

"No," said Viper.

"Don't think so," piped up Squid from behind Nautilus's back.

"Even if you did, you also predicted an earthquake, a new Talon of Peace, and that we'd have something besides seagulls for breakfast this week," said Flame. "And since none of those have happened, you can see why we might have stopped listening."

"Well, I knew," Fatespeaker said blithely. "I *saw* it with my *powers*! And I foresee that he brought us something *great* for breakfast. Didn't you?" She beamed up at Morrowseer.

He blinked slowly. "Hmmm. Nautilus, a word, please."

"Can I come, too?" the black dragonet asked, bouncing closer to Morrowseer. "I've never met another NightWing before. Although, of course, I feel a very strong psychic connection with our whole tribe."

"Stay. Here." Morrowseer pressed one claw into her chest and moved her back to the other dragonets. She sat down and curled her tail around her talons with a huffing snort.

Morrowseer stepped down the rocks, out of earshot. When he turned, he found Nautilus right behind

him. But clinging to his tail was the SeaWing dragonet. Morrowseer gazed at Squid disapprovingly.

"I can't leave him alone with them," Nautilus said apologetically. "Whenever I'm not watching, one of them bites him."

"Or they *all* do," sniffed the small green dragon.

Morrowseer flicked his tongue out and in, considering. "It is clear to me," said the enormous NightWing after a moment, "that leaving the dragonets of the prophecy in the care of the Talons of Peace was a mistake. Both the real ones and the false ones."

"Who?" asked the dragonet.

"Hush," said Nautilus, covering the dragonet's snout with one talon. He saw the look on Morrowseer's face and added hastily, "You remember, Squid. We taught you about the prophecy. You know the war that all the dragon tribes are fighting?"

"The one you want to stop," Squid said. "Because we're the good guys! We want peace!"

"Right," said Nautilus. "Basically right. So the prophecy says that five dragonets were hatched about six years ago — a SeaWing, a SkyWing, a MudWing, a SandWing, and a NightWing — who are going to end the war. They get to choose which sister should be the new SandWing queen: Burn, Blister, or Blaze."

"Oh," said Squid. "Hey, I hatched about six years ago."

“Really,” said Morrowseer. “You’re barely the size of a three-year-old dragonet.”

“I have a big personality,” Squid informed him, as if he had been told this enough times that he was certain everyone knew it.

“And your friends are about six years old, too,” Nautilus said quickly.

“They’re not my friends,” Squid grumbled. “They’re all bullies, except for Fatespeaker, who is plain crazy.”

Morrowseer glanced back at Fatespeaker, the NightWing dragonet. She was sitting on top of a twisted stone column, leaning so far toward them that she looked in imminent danger of overbalancing and toppling off.

“Well, Squid,” Nautilus said. “What if you were one of the dragonets in the prophecy? What would you think about that?”

The SeaWing gave Morrowseer a canny look. “Would I get treasure?”

“You’d get fame and power,” said Morrowseer. “If you did what you were told, that is.”

“How about treasure?” Squid insisted.

Morrowseer gave Nautilus an incredulous look. “Is this dragonet bargaining with me?”

“I like treasure,” Squid pointed out. “The Talons of Peace are so lame because none of them have any treasure.”

“We gave up worldly things to fight for a higher cause,” Nautilus said. “Peace is more important than jewels or gold.”

“Eh,” said Squid. “I’d rather have gold.”

“Would you be willing to choose whichever SandWing queen we told you to?” Morrowseer asked. “If so, we could perhaps talk about gold.”

“All right,” Squid said with a gleam in his eye. “But I don’t want Flame to be part of it. He has to stay here.”

“Why? What’s wrong with your SkyWing?” Morrowseer asked Nautilus.

“Nothing,” Nautilus said. “They’re just having a fight today.”

“And every day!” Squid said. “Because he’s mean!”

“The SkyWing is nonnegotiable,” said Morrowseer.

“*You’re* nonagoshabibble,” Squid said.

“Squid, be polite,” said Nautilus tiredly.

“I foresee that I am going to regret this,” said Morrowseer, frowning down at the SeaWings. “But I will be taking over the training of the prophecy dragonets. They have been mishandled for too long. Obviously they need clearer guidance.”

“What does that mean?” Nautilus asked. A sense of dread was starting to creep across his scales. He glanced at Squid. Perhaps they should have chosen a different SeaWing to be the fake dragonet of the prophecy. *If Morrowseer hurts Squid . . . if anything*

happens to him . . . his mother is going to kill me, Nautilus thought.

"It means they're coming with me," Morrowseer said with a flick of his tail.

"Where?" Squid demanded.

"You'll find out when we get there," said Morrowseer. "And if you know what's good for you, you'll stop asking nosy questions and do what you're told."

"I can do that," Squid said, "but good luck with Flame and Viper." He thought for a moment. "And Fatespeaker, for that matter."

"Wait, no," said Nautilus. He tried to fill his mind with noise so the NightWing couldn't read his thoughts. "You can't *take* them. Except for Fatespeaker, who came from you, all their parents are Talons — that's how we got their eggs in the first place. They won't want them to leave."

"Except Ochre," Squid offered. "His mum won't care. It's a MudWing thing."

"Shut up," said Morrowseer. He studied Nautilus with narrow black eyes.

Don't think it, don't think it, don't think it, Nautilus repeated to himself.

"Three moons," Morrowseer said with disgust. "This dragonet is your son."

Nautilus stared down at his claws. It had seemed like a good idea when the Talons first decided to have

backup dragonets. Squid hatched *around* the right time, if not exactly *on* the brightest night. And it meant that everyone in the movement treated the dragonet like the precious creature Nautilus knew he was.

“Of course I am,” said Squid. “Isn’t that a funny coincidence? Wow. I’m the son of the leader of the Talons of Peace *and* a dragonet of destiny.” He puffed out his chest. “I’m even more important than I thought I was.” He strutted off toward the other dragonets, having forgotten, as he often did, that none of them liked hearing about how important he was and that he would almost certainly end up with a singed snout before long.

Nautilus watched him go, wondering how everything had gone so wrong. Why had the Talons agreed to work with Morrowseer? Why had they decided to get involved with the prophecy in the first place? And how had they lost the real dragonets? That was the question that drove him crazy.

Kestrel, Dune, and Webs should have been able to keep a handle on five dragonets, especially when they were conveniently trapped in a secret cave. Instead the five had escaped, then possibly killed Queen Scarlet of the SkyWings, thrown the Sky Kingdom into upheaval, turned Queen Coral against her allies, wrecked the SeaWing palace, and disappeared once more into the wilds of Pyrrhia.

Worse yet, there was no one to punish. Kestrel and Dune were dead, while Webs had wriggled away from the Talons and vanished. And who knew where the dragonets were or when they'd turn up again with their spectacular talent for trouble and chaos.

"Quite a coincidence," Morrowseer echoed Squid's remark, sounding rather unimpressed.

"Well," said Nautilus. "I thought, why not? Of course, none of these five actually hatched on the brightest night, or else they'd be the real dragonets of the prophecy, wouldn't they? But they're about the right age, and nobody has to know the rest."

"Except anyone who was at their hatching," Morrowseer mused. "It would be tidier if we could kill any witnesses."

Nautilus blanched. *Do their parents count as "witnesses"?* he wondered before he could squelch the thought.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Morrowseer said briskly. "Since we can't be sure yet which of these we'll use and which we'll discard." He frowned at Fatespeaker, who was eagerly interrogating Squid.

Nautilus felt properly faint now. "Discard?" he echoed.

Morrowseer snorted. "Very well. I'll try to bring yours back in one piece." He wrinkled his snout, looking as close to amused as Nautilus had ever seen

him. "But isn't *peace* the most important thing, SeaWing? Don't you tell your Talons all the time that any sacrifice must be made to end this war?"

"Yes, but —"

"The alternate dragonets were your idea in the first place. A good idea, as it turns out, since the real ones have proven to be so unsatisfactory." Morrowseer hissed softly. "So we get rid of the most dangerous ones. I train their replacements myself."

He smiled in a way that made Nautilus feel queasy right down to his claws.

"And then we make sure the prophecy is fulfilled the way it was supposed to be."



CHAPTER 1

It had been raining for five days.

Glory officially hated it.

She also was not enjoying the comments from the other dragonets about how, “as a RainWing,” she should love this weather.

She most certainly did *not* love this weather. In the caves under the mountain, the dragonets had never, ever been rained on. This downpour felt unnatural and unstoppable and horribly, unpleasantly *wet*.

I don't care if a “real” RainWing is supposed to like this, she thought as droplets rolled off her snout, seeped through her scales, and soaked her wings until they dragged heavily behind her. If they do, there's something wrong with them. No sensible dragon should enjoy weather that makes it so hard to fly.

Three moons, please let them be sensible dragons. Let them be nothing like the stories.

Everyone said RainWings were useless and lazy. But the tribe lived off by themselves in the rainforest where no one

ever saw them, so everyone might be wrong. Glory was really hoping they were wrong.

She shook her whole body and glared at the fog-shrouded sky. What she wanted was more sun. She'd missed the sun her whole life and hadn't known it until it hit her scales the day they left the caves. More long sunny days would be fine by her.

Instead there was this. Rain. Mud. More rain. More mud.

Plus one moaning, groaning, dripping slowpoke of a wounded SeaWing.

"Can we stop?" Webs gasped. "I need to rest." He floundered through the mud to a slightly drier spot under a tree.

Glory narrowed her eyes at him as the blue-green dragon flopped to the ground. The other dragonets stopped, too, exchanging glances. They were walking today instead of flying because Webs said it was easier on his injury. And yet he still asked to stop nearly every ten steps. Glory was starting to suspect he didn't really *want* them to get to the rainforest.

But why? she wondered. *Is he hiding something? Does it have to do with my parents?*

As the guardian who had stolen her from the RainWing tribe in the first place, Webs should have been a helpful fount of knowledge about where she came from. Instead, he got all mumbly and forgetful whenever they asked about the rainforest dragons.

Clay paced over to Webs and peered down at his wound. They'd wrapped it with seaweed soaked in ocean water for as long as they could, but now they were too far inland to get

any more. The poisoned scratch near Webs's tail had become an ugly gash surrounded by blackened scales, and the black seemed to spread a bit more each day. None of them had any idea what to do to combat SandWing poison.

Not to mention we have no idea why Blister wanted Webs dead so badly. I mean, I think he's awful, but she doesn't even know him. Glory glanced at Starflight, the black NightWing who was the smartest dragonet she knew — and probably still would be even if she knew more than four dragons. She wondered if he had any theories about Blister and Webs.

Clay swept his tail through the mud, looking worried. "I hope the RainWings can help him," he said. "This isn't exactly like their venom. But maybe they'll have more ideas than we do."

Glory shook out her wings and looked away. She didn't care. The other dragonets felt some kind of misguided loyalty to their old guardian, as if it was their responsibility to save him.

She was the only one who seemed to remember how he'd been willing to stand by and let someone kill her.

Stealing her egg had been his idea, too. The prophecy called for a SkyWing, but when the Talons lost their SkyWing egg before it hatched, Webs had decided to replace it with a RainWing. It was his fault Glory had been forced to grow up under the mountain, far from her home and family, learning about a prophecy that didn't even have a place for her in it.

It was easy for the others. There was no question about their destiny. But Glory . . . if she was meant to help save the

world, then why hadn't the prophecy called for a RainWing? And if she wasn't necessary for this big grand destiny, then what was the point of her life at all?

Maybe it was all one big mistake, but when she thought like that, she ended up having violent dreams about ripping Webs apart. So, better not to think about it. Destiny would have to sort itself out.

Right now she was going home.

The branch above Glory suddenly dipped and dumped a lake's worth of water onto her head. She leaped back with a hiss and glared up into the tree.

"Shhh," Tsunami said from above. She dropped down to the ground and peered around at the gloomy swamp. "There's a pair of MudWings headed this way, but they'll never see us in this weather."

Rolls of thick gray fog hung over the mud, wreathing the stunted trees like smoke around a dragon's horns. It was hard to tell what time of day it was. The sky was gray in every direction and the rain drizzled down unrelentingly. Glory agreed with Tsunami; a dragon could barely see her own wing tips in this, let alone another dragon.

"We should still hide," Starflight said anxiously. "We're only a day's flight from Queen Moorhen's palace right now. If we get caught —"

"More prison," Clay said with a sigh.

Every queen they'd met so far seemed determined to keep the dragonets trapped under her claws. They'd escaped Queen Scarlet's prison in the Sky Kingdom only because of Glory's

venom — a secret weapon even she hadn't known about until she'd needed it.

She touched her forked tongue to her fangs and glanced at the sky. They still had no idea if Queen Scarlet had survived Glory's attack. Given their luck, Glory was pretty sure Scarlet was alive and planning some horrible revenge.

After that escape they'd gone looking for safety with Tsunami's mother, Queen Coral of the SeaWings. Of course Coral had decided to lock them up as well. Glory hadn't been surprised. Not even family could be trusted when it came to the prophecy. Everyone had their own plans for how this war should end.

So if Queen Moorhen of the MudWings found them in her territory, she *probably* wasn't going to give them tea and send them on their way.

The MudWing queen held court beside a large lake on the southern edge of the Mud Kingdom. Glory remembered the map of Pyrrhia and a shiver of realization ran down her spine. If Starflight was right and they were only a day's flight from there, then they must be only a day's flight from the rainforest as well. From the rainforest . . . and Glory's tribe.

And then I'll belong somewhere. The RainWings won't care that I'm not in some prophecy.

"Glory," Tsunami scolded. "Bright yellow scales are the one thing they *might* see. Go back to camouflage."

Glory glanced down and saw the starbursts of gold that had appeared all across her scales. Those meant happiness or

excitement, as far as she knew, since she'd seen them pretty rarely in her life. It drove her crazy when her scales changed color without her telling them to. They did that way too often. She had to squash every big emotion before it splashed all over her.

She concentrated on the steady *drip-drip* of the swamp around them, staring down at the thick brown mud oozing through her claws. She imagined the fog winding around her wings, slipping into the cracks in her scales, and spreading like gray clouds rolling across the sky.

"Aaaand she's gone," Tsunami said.

"She's still there," Sunny piped up. She edged closer to Glory and bumped into one of her wings. "See? Right there." She stretched out a talon, but Glory moved out of reach. Sunny felt around in the air for a moment and then gave up.

The little SandWing had been unusually quiet for the last few days. Glory guessed Sunny hated the rain, too — the desert dragons were designed for searing heat, blazing sun, and endless clear-sky days. Even an odd-looking SandWing like Sunny still had the instincts of her tribe.

Really, Clay was the only one happy about the weather. Only a MudWing could appreciate the squishing and squashing under their claws as they traveled through the swamp.

Starflight swiveled his head suddenly. "I think I smell someone coming," he whispered. He shuddered from horns to claws.

"Don't panic," Tsunami whispered back. "Clay, you hide me and Sunny. Starflight, find a shadow and do your invisible petrified-NightWing thing. Glory, you can shield Webs."

“No, thanks,” Glory said immediately. She wasn’t going anywhere near Webs, certainly not to save his life. “I’ll take Sunny.” She didn’t like touching other dragons, but Sunny was better than Webs.

“But —” Tsunami started, stamping her foot.

Glory ignored her. She lifted one wing and tugged the little gold dragon in close to her side. When she lowered her wing again, Sunny was hidden by Glory’s gray-brown camouflage.

“Yikes,” Clay said. “That was so weird. Like Sunny just got eaten by the fog.” His stomach grumbled woefully at the word *eaten*, and the MudWing shuffled his big feet in embarrassment.

Starflight peered at the spot where Sunny had just been, twisting his claws in the mud.

“She’s fine,” Glory said. “Go follow orders like a good dragonet, or Tsunami might fling you to the eels.”

Tsunami frowned in her direction, but Starflight slunk away and found a dark tree hollow where his black scales melted into the shadows.

Now Glory could hear it, too: the *tramp-squelch-tramp-squelch* of enormous claws marching through the swamp toward them. The heat from Sunny’s scales was uncomfortably warm against her side.

Webs hadn’t moved while they talked. He lay curled against the tree roots, snout resting on his tail, looking miserable.

Clay shepherded Tsunami up next to Webs and spread his mud-colored wings to hide them both. It wasn’t a perfect

solution — a blue tail stuck out on one side, the edge of blue-green wings on the other. But in this fog, they looked mostly like a blobby mound of mud, which should be good enough.

Tramp. Squelch. Tramp. Squelch.

“I don’t like this patrol,” a deep voice grumbled. Glory nearly jumped. It sounded like it was coming from two trees away. “Too close to that creepy rainforest, if you ask me.”

“It’s not really haunted,” said a second voice. “You know the only things that live there are birds and lazy RainWings.”

Years of learning self-control kept Glory from flinching. She’d heard “lazy RainWings” thrown around often enough by the guardians, under the mountain. But it felt like an extra stab in the eye to hear it from a total stranger.

“If that were true,” said the first voice, “then Her Majesty would let us hunt in there. But she knows it’s not safe. And you’ve heard the noises at night. Are you telling me it’s the RainWings screaming like that?”

Screaming? Under Glory’s wing, Sunny turned her head a little, as if she were trying to hear better.

“Not to mention the dead bodies,” the first voice muttered.

“That’s not some kind of rainforest monster,” said the second guard, but there was a tilt in her tone that sounded unsure. “That’s the war. Some kind of guerilla attacks to scare us.”

“All the way down here? Why would the SeaWings or the IceWings come all this way to kill one or two MudWings

here and there? There are bigger battles going on everywhere else.”

“Let’s go a bit faster,” said the second voice uneasily. “They should really let us patrol in threes or fours instead of in pairs.”

“Tell me about it.” *Tramp-squelch-tramp-squelch.* “So what do you think about the SkyWing situation? Are you for Ruby, or do you think . . .”

Glory strained her ears, but their voices faded into the mist as the two MudWing soldiers splashed away. She badly wanted to know what “the SkyWing situation” was. Maybe her friends wouldn’t notice if she slipped away for a moment.

“Be right back,” she whispered to Sunny, lifting her wing and stepping away.

Sunny caught her tail, wide-eyed. “Don’t go!” she whispered. “It’s not safe! You heard what they said.”

“About rainforest monsters?” Glory rolled her eyes. “Can’t say I’m terribly worried about that. I won’t go far.” She shook Sunny off and slipped after the soldiers, carefully stepping only on the dry patches so her claws wouldn’t splash in the mud.

It was weirdly quiet in the swamp, especially with the fog muffling most sounds. She tried to follow the distant rumble of voices and what she thought might be the sound of marching MudWing talons. But after a few moments, even those became impossible to hear.

She stopped, listening. The trees dripped. Rain drizzled

moodily through the branches. Small gurgles bubbled out of the mud here and there, as if the swamp were hiccupping.

And then a scream tore through the air.

Glory's ruff flared in fear and pale green stripes zigzagged through her scales. She fought back her terror, focusing her colors back to gray and brown.

"Glory!" Sunny yelled, behind her somewhere.

Shut up, Glory thought furiously. Don't draw attention. Don't let anything know we're here.

The other dragonets must have had the same thought and stopped her, because Sunny didn't call out again.

Unless it was one of them who screamed. But it couldn't have been. The scream had come from somewhere up ahead.

Glory checked her scales again to make sure she was well hidden and then sped up, hurrying through the trees toward the scream.

The fog was so dense, she nearly missed the two dark lumps that looked like fallen logs. But her claws came down on something that was decidedly a dragon tail, and she leaped back.

Two brown dragons were sprawled in the mud, surrounded by pools of blood that were already being washed away by the rain. Their throats had been ripped out so viciously that their heads were nearly severed from their bodies.

Glory stared into the rolling gray fog, but nothing moved out there except the rain.

The MudWing soldiers were dead, and there was no sign of what had killed them.