

BOOK 1

**BATTLE
DRAGONS**
CITY OF THIEVES

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SCHOLASTIC PRESS

NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data available

ISBN 978-1-338-71654-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

21 22 23 24 25

First edition, September 2021

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

Book design by Maeve Norton

AT MIDNIGHT THEY'D LIGHT THE sky on fire. Abel stayed up to watch, keeping himself awake by reorganizing DrakoTek cards on his bed.

Frostspitter with alloy armor: +2 against Firemouths

Wyvern with tail flamethrower: +2 attack, -1 speed

Ugh.

He already had three of those wyverns, and they were too slow to do any good in a game. They were fast in close combat but slow in straightaways. Their poison breath couldn't hurt other dragons, only the riders, and the flamethrower at the tail wasn't all that useful. Anyone with a booster card or just a faster dragon from a premium deck could outrun and outfight a wyvern like that. Abel had no premium decks.

He rearranged the grid of cards on the bed so that the Frostspitter got the flamethrower and the wyvern got the alloy armor. In a real dragon battle, a wyvern could have both, but the game only let you mod your dragon once, unless you had bonus storage cards. Abel did not. Those came with the premium decks too, and his parents couldn't afford to buy them. He could've won some off another player, but he only ever played with Roa, and he never won against his best friend. They were a way better player than he was.

He wished he hadn't lost his Green Frost dragon with

diamond blades to Roa last week. He'd have to plan for a rematch, though he doubted he'd win that either. Sometimes, while they were playing, Roa would try to keep him from losing by offering advice or reminding him about a dragon's special skills, but he was reckless. Play first and ask questions later, that was Abel's philosophy.

"And that's why I always lose," he told himself, yawning. It was 11:57. He could do this. He could stay awake.

Percy snored in a ball at his feet. The pangolin's warm scales rested on his ankles. Somehow, his cuddly, scaled pet could curl into a ball and take up more of the bed than when he was stretched out with his long tail and claws extended. He never should have let the pangolin share the bed with him, but now, after all these years, it was too late. Percy wouldn't sleep anywhere but at Abel's feet.

He tried to nudge the sleeping ball off, but the only thing harder than moving a sleeping pangolin was moving an awake pangolin, and he didn't want to risk waking Percy. So he slipped his feet out from underneath the snoring ball of scales and sat with his knees pulled up to his chest. He rested his chin on his knees and yawned again.

It was still 11:57. Why did waiting for something always make time slow down?

He had the shades wide open so the glow from the billboards and the lane lights and the landing platforms filled his room. A cheerful ad for Firebreather Soda blinked from the roof across the way, soaking him in vibrant red and yellow light. He didn't need a flashlight to see his cards, and in three minutes, when the cleaning dragons came, it'd be bright as noon on a cloudless day.

Cleaning night happened six times a year, and in his entire thirteen years, Abel had never managed to stay awake for it even once. His mother insisted he was awake for it when he was a baby, because he was *always* awake when he was a baby, but he didn't think that counted. He couldn't remember and wouldn't have known what he was seeing anyway. Babies didn't know what dragons were and definitely didn't know what the Department of Sanitation was.

Now that he was thirteen, he knew. Every two months, all the buildings in the city put their big bales of garbage on the roof, and a team of long-wing Infernals flew over each neighborhood to burn up the trash with their fiery breath. Then a team of Goatmouth short-wing dragons followed and ate up all the ashes. The fire from the Infernals stayed overhead and couldn't hurt you unless you were standing on the roof of a skyscraper at midnight for some reason, but Goatmouth dragons would eat *anything* they saw: ashes or metal or food scraps . . . or pets. Or people.

In preschool, everyone watched a video about the dangers of being outside on cleaning nights, and they'd watched it at the start of every school year since. The video hadn't been updated since before Abel was born. He didn't know the star's name, though she'd been a famous actor when his parents were younger. She'd also famously lost her teenaged son when he snuck out on a cleaning night and got eaten by a Goatmouth.

That was not the kind of fame anyone wanted.

So it was a pretty big surprise when Abel looked out the window and saw a person in all black leaping across the balconies outside his building, with two minutes until midnight.

He looked up at the silhouettes of the dragons circling in a wide V formation, preparing for the big burn. Infernals were bright red from nose to tail, and they had the longest flame range of any dragon, but they flew slowly. The shadows of Goatmouths swarmed around them like flies around a light bulb. These “dragonflies” were fast as lightning when they dove and weighed five tons each. A Goatmouth dragon could swallow the small person leaping along the balconies without even slowing down to chew.

Ninety seconds left.

The Infernals made a wide turn, circling for their approach to Abel’s neighborhood.

The figure outside scurried along a landing platform, midway up the next-door apartments. They ducked the security cameras and then leapt into open air, catching a balcony ledge on Abel’s building with their fingertips, then hoisted themselves up.

Could it be a tagger? There was already a graffiti mural on this side of the building. Someone had painted a blazing sun, which held the silhouette of a roaring dragon inside it. It was the symbol of the Red Talons kin, the gang who ran this neighborhood. No one would dare tag over their symbol. Then again, no one would dare climb the side of his building on cleaning night with . . . oh no . . . only sixty seconds to go!

The figure didn’t stop at the graffiti. Instead, they jumped like a dancer from one balcony railing to the next. They leapt fearlessly, and there was something familiar in their movements, something Abel couldn’t quite place.

He looked up toward the cleaning dragons, just above the

skyline now. He saw the first hint of flame from their lips, and then, FWOOSH!

The sky ignited. A wall of blazing orange fire filled his view from one end to the other, and spilled toward his building like a sheet being pulled over the neighborhood.

Twenty seconds.

He had to lean his head against the glass to see the figure now: scurrying from above, two stories up and three apartments over from his.

Why did they look so familiar?

It didn't matter. They were about to be burned to a crisp, or eaten by Goatmouths, or both.

Ten seconds.

Now the figure was just above his window. The dragons were across the street, flames nearly blue with heat as they incinerated the rooftop garbage around the Firebreather soda ad. The glass of his window warmed his forehead.

And then Percy uncurled at the foot the bed.

"Percy, what are you doing?"

Percy never uncurled for strangers.

And that's when the figure outside dropped down to Abel's window. The climber had on clawgloves, one of which held the window frame. Good thing too, as his room was on the sixty-seventh floor. The other pulled the mask off her face.

"Lina!" Abel shouted.

His sister clung by one hand to his windowsill, as the long-wings lit the sky on fire.

Ashes rained into her dark hair, and two dozen ravenous dragons dove from above.