

# 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."