

PROLOGUE

The ice dragons came out of nowhere.

It should have been a quiet night; they shouldn't have seen anyone but SkyWings and other MudWings on their patrol along the mountainous border between their kingdoms. There hadn't been a battle near their village since the one where they lost Crane, sixteen days ago.

Reed still couldn't think about that battle without feeling a huge pit open inside his chest. Sometimes he wanted to close his eyes and fall into that pit and never come out. But he couldn't: he had four other brothers and sisters who depended on him. He was their leader, their bigwings — even though he knew now that he wasn't supposed to be. It should have been their brother Clay, whose egg was stolen before they all hatched.

“Did you hear that?” Umber whispered, darting up to fly beside him. The smallest dragon in their MudWing troop of siblings, Umber was also the most observant. Reed knew by now that it was always worth listening to him.

“What?” Reed whispered back, tilting his head and straining his ears. His wings caught the air currents as they both soared higher, and he studied the dark, jagged shapes of the Claws of the Clouds

Mountains. He couldn't see any movement or hear any wingbeats.

Still, he twisted around to check on his brothers and sisters, calling them closer with a flick of his tail. In a moment, Pheasant, Sora, and Marsh were flying in a close formation behind him.

"I thought I heard hissing," Umber said. "Somewhere close by."

Reed glanced down uneasily at the shadowy trees that covered the mountain slope below them. Anything could be hiding in there.

But the only sound he heard was the SandWing general up ahead, calling at top volume as if "stealth patrol" were only a funny name for what they were doing.

"Move it, MudWings!" bellowed the sand dragon. His squadron of seven SandWings, all fiercely loyal to Queen Burn, hovered behind him, grunting. "I want to wrap up this patrol and get some sleep tonight!"

"It was probably nothing," Umber said to Reed.

And that was when the nine ice dragons suddenly shot out of the forest and attacked the SandWings.

It was so fast, so calculated and swift and sudden, that two SandWings were sent spiraling toward the ground with shredded wings and blood pouring from their throats before Reed could even process that this was a real attack.

Marsh shrieked with terror and grabbed Reed, nearly tumbling the bigwings out of the sky. Marsh had never really recovered from their first battle, where he'd seen their sister Crane die in front of him. *I need to do something about that*, Reed thought, *but not right now.*

“Marsh, keep it together!” he shouted, pulling his wing free. “Come on, quick, we have to help!”

He saw the hesitation on all their faces and caught himself wondering — *again* — what Clay would have done in this situation, and whether the others would have been happier and safer following him . . . and also wondering whether *they* were wondering that, too.

But no one said what they must be thinking — *it's a suicide mission; what help can we be; I don't want to lose another sibling.* Instead they formed up behind him and dove toward the writhing dragons.

Reed hated fighting IceWings. Their serrated claws seemed ten times sharper than normal claws, and their whip-thin tails left stinging marks across his snout and wings. Worst of all, they could just *breathe* on you and kill you.

He shot a burst of fire at the biggest IceWing, who was grappling with the SandWing general. Her teeth snapped shut and she hissed at him, but she was too busy with the SandWing to come after Reed. He spun

in the air, lashing out at silvery white scales as another IceWing attacked his flank. They clutched each other with fierce talons for a moment, the wind buffeting their wings. Finally Reed managed to cough out another bolt of flames and the IceWing jerked away, narrowly avoiding a singed nose.

Reed spotted an IceWing diving toward Umber and leaped to knock his brother aside, catching the brunt of the white dragon's momentum against his chest. As he staggered back, he saw another IceWing wrap her dangerous claws around Sora's neck, and he roared with fury. Pheasant was there in an instant, throwing the IceWing off Sora, but the ice dragon came back at them with her mouth open to shoot her frostbreath.

I can't lose anyone else, Reed thought. It'll kill me. He smashed into the IceWing's side and sliced his claws across her throat while she was twisting to breathe on him. Her eyes went wide and she made an agonized, gargling noise as blood bubbled from the wounds. When he let go of her, the IceWing soldier fell toward the dark forest, her wings twitching feebly like a dying grasshopper.

"Retreat!" a voice suddenly howled. Reed's heart jumped hopefully, thinking the IceWings were giving up — but then he realized it was the SandWing general. "Retreat!" the sand dragon yelled again.