WINGS OF FIRE
THE BRIGHTEST NIGHT
by
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It is nearly impossible to steal from a dragon, particularly a royal one with a palace and guards and very high walls.

At least, that’s what Queen Oasis kept telling herself as she hurried along the dark halls, breathing fire to light her way.

Nearly impossible and decidedly stupid.

And yet, she had this terrible feeling. . . .

Something was wrong. There was something scrabbling around in her palace. With her exceptionally sharp SandWing hearing, she was sure she could hear squeaking, like faraway mice, and perhaps the clinking of coins.

But mice didn’t steal treasure.

So what was it? Was she imagining it? She’d woken from a deep sleep with a start, as if someone had stabbed her in the chest with his venomous tail. It seemed unlikely, but . . . she was going to check on her treasure anyway.

The SandWing queen whirled around a corner and collided with two of her daughters, Blaze and Blister.
“Ow,” Blaze complained, hopping backward with a grimace. “Mother, you stepped on my foot.”

Blister said nothing, but sidestepped into a corner to get out of the queen’s way. Her dark eyes were fixed on every move Oasis made, in that unsettling way she had. Oasis had had a feeling from the moment Blister hatched: this was the daughter who was going to kill her. Her oldest daughter, Burn, was bigger and stronger, but Oasis and Burn actually got along, in a way. They understood each other, apart from Burn’s obsession with mutilating animals. And it was easy to distract Burn: give her something creepy-looking and she’d disappear into her rooms for days.

Blister, on the other talon, always seemed to be calculating the moments until her mother’s demise, and she’d been like that ever since she was a small dragonet — ever since she’d first realized that killing her mother would make her queen.

Go ahead and challenge me, Oasis thought scornfully, glaring down at Blister. I’d squash you like a bug and you know it.

“What’s the hurry?” Blister asked smoothly, as if she couldn’t sense the malevolence in her mother’s gaze. “Is there a royal crisis? Let me guess — Smolder tried to run off with his girlfriend again.”

“No, I took care of her,” Oasis said. “I’m just going to check the treasury.”

“Ooo, sparkly things.” Blaze yawned. “Good night, Mother.”
Dizzy Blaze, Oasis thought as she hurried on. She’d be a terrible queen, but she’s an acceptable daughter. I don’t have to worry about what she’ll do to me.

She heard claws click on the stone behind her and whirled around. Blister held up her talons and flared her wings, filling the narrow passageway.

“Sorry to startle you,” she said unconvincingly. “I just wondered if I could come with you.”

Oasis hesitated, but she knew if she said no, Blister would find a way to sneak along anyway. It was always better to keep her where you could see her. “Fine. But don’t touch anything.” I know what you want to see, you conniving viper. It won’t do you any good until I’m dead, though.

They whisked down the long passage that led to the four treasure rooms.

Everything looked in order — the torches flickered peacefully, the doors were closed and locked.

But there was a strange smell, something hairy and woodsy and flowery at the same time. Something had definitely been here.

Oasis crouched to peer under the doors. There was a large gap between the doors and the floor. . . . Not large enough for a dragon, of course, but . . .

“Do you smell scavenger?” she asked Blister.

“I wouldn’t know what those smell like,” Blister said, wrinkling her nose. “They’re too bulky and squishy for my taste.”

Queen Oasis selected the right keys from around
her neck and unlocked all the doors, then did a sweep through each room, leaving the doors open.

She came back out glowering with rage.

“That looks ominous,” Blister remarked.

“Scavengers,” spat the queen. “Robbed me. How dare they?” She lashed her tail, hissing. “They can’t have gone far. Wake up Burn and tell her to meet me outside.”

“Burn?” Blister echoed, glancing over her mother’s shoulder at the treasure rooms.

“Just in case there are a lot of them and we need to fight,” Oasis said. “I’ve seen what their tiny swords can do. I’m not such a fool as to go out there alone.”

“Oh, no, of course not,” Blister said. “But why Burn, when I’m here?”

Oasis gave her a withering look. “I need a real fighter,” she said. “Not someone who thinks she can use her brain to get herself out of anything, and isn’t even as smart as she thinks she is.”

“I see,” Blister said coldly. “I’ll wake her at once.” She took a step up the corridor, then turned back.

“What did they take?”

“Small things, for the most part,” Oasis growled. “But they also took the Eye of Onyx.”

That actually made Blister’s face twitch, as if a hint of a real emotion — worry? surprise? — was trying to come through.

“We’ll get it back,” Oasis promised. “And we’ll have roasted scavenger for breakfast.” She pushed
past Blister and stormed toward the nearest route to the sky. “I’m going out there. Wake Burn, and hurry.”

“Oh, yes. Right away,” Blister said.

As Oasis charged into the courtyard, spread her wings, and lifted into the sky, she thought for a moment that she saw Blister turn to look back at the treasure rooms instead. *I forgot to lock them up again,* Oasis thought uneasily. *But this will only take a minute. And if she’s stupid enough to take anything, I’ll have a good excuse to kill her. She’s smarter than that.*

She wheeled toward the outer walls, scanning the sands. A disturbing thought occurred to her: *What if she doesn’t wake Burn? What if I’m going to face the thieves alone, with no backup?*

Then she spotted them. Three scavengers — two of them waiting on the sand, the other climbing down from a window. None of them watching the sky. *Scab-infested idiot monkeys.* Oasis growled and folded her wings to drop down silently behind them. Maybe she could scare them to death; prey always tasted better when it died like that.

*Only three of them,* she thought. *I don’t need to wait for Burn, if Blister’s even getting her. I can certainly handle three annoying scavengers by myself.*

She narrowed her eyes, advancing up the dunes toward the sound of squeaking.

*After all . . . what’s the worst that could happen?*
PART ONE

THE SHIFTING SANDS
Sunny had always known that she was the right dragon for a Big Heroic Destiny.

She was going to save the world. She and her friends were going to swoop in on wings of fire, whatever that meant, and bring peace to every dragon in Pyrrhia. It was right there in the prophecy: five dragons born to end the fight. That was her fate. That was her purpose.

Besides, it explained everything. Why else was she so small and weird-looking? She wasn’t a normal SandWing. Her scales and eyes were the wrong color, and she had no venomous barb at the end of her tail. But that didn’t matter; in fact, it made sense. Of course a dragon hero with an epic noble quest would be a little different from everyone else. And who would care how strange she looked once she stopped the war?

Then there were her parents, the mysterious dragons who had left her egg buried in the sand in the desert, alone and unguarded. It didn’t matter that they obviously didn’t want her. It didn’t bother Sunny at all, because it was part of the prophecy: Hidden alone from the rival queens, the SandWing egg awaits unseen. That was all right; heroes in the scrolls
often had no parents. Their heroic destiny was more important than any family.

And her destiny *was* important. There was nothing more important than stopping the war between the dragon tribes. All her life, especially whenever she felt trapped or sad or worried about anything, Sunny had imagined fulfilling the prophecy — how many lives they would save and all the happy, reunited families and all the future dragonets who could grow up in peace, without the constant fear of war.

That was the entire point of her life.

And it was a lie.

Rock walls scraped against her wings as she scrambled away from the NightWing island. She could feel the rumbles of the volcano all the way through her claws. Her friends were behind her, still facing Morrowseer, but she had to get away from them, from him, from everything.

*He made up the prophecy. It was all a trick.*

*No. I don’t believe it. He’s a vindictive, cruel dragon who’s always manipulated us and everyone around him. He would say anything to hurt us.*

*The prophecy is real. It has to be.*

She burst out of the tunnel into the rainforest and immediately slammed into the side of a skinny black dragon. The NightWing grunted with surprise and glared at her. Sunny tried to turn and fly the other way, but a floundering wall of black wings and talons and tails drove her back.

In the moonlight, the entire rainforest seemed to be seething with dragons. Roars and hisses and growls drowned out the sound of the raindrops pattering on the leaves all
around them. It didn’t help that half of the dragons were
dark as the shadows and the other half were camouflaged, so
claws and corners of wings seemed to suddenly poke out of
nowhere. Sunny narrowly avoided a tail in her ear when two
NightWings got caught in a dangling vine and whipped
around violently as if they were being attacked.

“Everyone calm down!” Glory’s voice shouted.

“Listen!” bellowed Grandeur, the old royal RainWing.

“Your new queen is speaking!”

Several NightWings muttered under their breath, but
none loud enough to be heard, and even they fell silent as
others hissed at them.

Sunny ducked and wriggled through the crowd, but she
couldn’t get any farther than the stream. Several RainWings
stood by the water, in shades of blue and purple, holding
NightWing spears. Most of them were ruining the effect by
peering at the spears with mystified expressions, or holding
them upside down.

Still, Sunny decided not to try pushing past them. Those
spears would hurt just as much if they poked her by accident
as on purpose.

What she really wanted to do was crash away into the
rainforest and not come back. She wasn’t sure she could
face her friends — who acted as if they didn’t care about
the prophecy at all — and she couldn’t even look at the
NightWings.

Tsunami wants to believe Morrowseer. She’s never wanted
to fulfill the prophecy. She doesn’t understand how impor-
tant it is.
Clay would be just as happy if nobody ever noticed how wonderful he is. Then he could sleep and eat and take care of us instead of fighting.

Starflight would love to stop worrying about the prophecy. And Glory has enough to do here, now that she’s queen.

None of them will fight for our destiny. They certainly won’t listen to me if I try to explain that Morrowseer must have been lying. They’ll give me that look I always get, the one that says: “Oh, silly little Sunny and her crazy dreams, isn’t she cute and harmless.”

She gazed up at the mass of dark trees overhead, where the moonbeams and raindrops skittered in the wind. Even if she tried to run off, she’d probably get her tail stuck in a tree branch and need to be rescued, and then her friends would get to roll their eyes and pat her on the head again.

*It wouldn’t be like this in the desert,* she thought. She looked across the stream at the other tunnel, the one that led to the Kingdom of Sand. *There I could fly and fly and fly all the way to the horizon without ever stopping to think.*

Not thinking sounded pretty appealing right now.

“You’re just as ordinary as any other dragon.”

Morrowseer’s spiteful words kept going around and around in her head. “I made up the whole prophecy. . . . Now the war will drag on endlessly, and more dragons will die every day, probably for generations. All of them wondering what happened to the amazing dragonets who were supposed to save them, but obviously failed.”

Sunny clenched her talons and crouched low to the ground.
He was lying, he was lying, he was lying. She wouldn’t let these NightWings see her cry.

Glory climbed onto a boulder and flapped her wings loudly. Even up there, and even with her queenliest face on, Glory still looked like a dragonet, smaller than almost all the NightWings surrounding her.

If the prophecy is fake, then why was everyone so awful to Glory about not being in it? Sunny thought, feeling another surge of fury at Morrowseer. Why make her feel so useless — if we’re all useless?

Because it is real. It has to be.

But how can I prove it?

“NightWings,” Glory said firmly, speaking up to be heard over the shuffling dragons and the rainstorm. “Your home is gone. Your queen is dead. But this is your chance to start over. If you mess it up, you’ll lose this home, too.” She pointed to the RainWings. “You will treat these dragons with respect, and in return, because that’s the kind of dragons they are, they will be much kinder to you than you deserve.”

The RainWing across the stream from Sunny mustered an expression that looked almost fierce.

Rain splattered across Sunny’s snout and wings. The storm was picking up strength, ripping through the treetops way over their heads.

“Tonight you’ll stay right here,” Glory went on. “I don’t want any NightWings wandering off until we can count you and write you all down. You will each be assigned two RainWings to keep an eye on you. And yes, if you’re feeling
like perhaps we don’t trust you very much, it’s because we
don’t. None of you are welcome in the RainWing village
until you earn that trust. We will find you somewhere else
to live.”

“We’ll get wet out here,” one of the burler NightWings
complained.

Glory gave him a steely glare. “Feel free to go back and
sleep on your nice dry island instead,” she snapped. “I hear
it’s quite warm there.”

Sunny glanced around at the NightWings. Even in the
moonlight, she could see that most of them looked badly
shaken and subdued. Seeing their home buried by the
volcano — even if they knew it would happen eventually,
and even though the island had been a terrible place to
live — it still must have been an awful shock.

*Something like being told your whole life is a lie, I imagine.*

A roar suddenly erupted from the crowd behind her. Black
dragons surged toward Sunny, flapping their wings in alarm,
as two deep-red RainWings dove into their midst and dragged
a yowling, petrified NightWing in front of Queen Glory.

“This one!” growled one of the RainWings. “He can’t stay
here! He’s the worst of all of them.”

“He’s the one who did all the venom experiments on us,”
said the other. She lashed her tail and hissed at him. Sunny
had never seen any RainWings look so angry before, besides
Glory. She craned her neck to peer at the NightWing and
realized it was Starflight’s father, Mastermind, the head sci-
entist of the NightWing tribe. From the look on Glory’s face,
the queen was probably guessing exactly who it was, too.
The NightWings had been kidnapping RainWings for the last year, imprisoning them and doing experiments to understand their venom-shooting abilities. They’d been planning to invade the rainforest to steal it from the RainWings — either by killing or enslaving all the peaceful rainforest dragons who already lived here.

Sunny had seen the lava-riddled wasteland of an island where the NightWings lived. She knew they were desperate for a new home, and at first, she’d thought Starflight was brilliant for offering to let them come through to the rainforest as long as they pledged their loyalty to Queen Glory — along with a promise to behave peacefully. She liked the idea of dragons from different tribes learning to live together, she felt sorry for the sick and starving black dragons, and she loved the poetic justice of a RainWing becoming the new queen of the NightWings.

But looking at the muttering dragons around her — the NightWings who didn’t look as sorry as they should, and the hissing RainWings who were only beginning to realize what their friends had been through — Sunny wondered if this had been a huge mistake. Maybe they should have let the NightWings be swallowed up by the volcano. Maybe it wasn’t possible to forgive them. Maybe we shouldn’t even try.

If they could lie about something as huge and important as the prophecy and stopping the war, what else would they lie about? How could Glory ever trust them?

“I’m sorry,” Mastermind croaked weakly. “It was . . . I was just . . . for science . . .” His voice sputtered out, and he cringed away from the RainWings beside him.
Glory flared her wings and several colors rippled quickly through her scales. “Tie him up. We’ll figure out what to —”

“Look out!” a dragon by the tunnel roared. “Stand clear!”

Fatespeaker shot out of the hole and a moment later, Tsunami hurtled after her. “Everyone get down!” the SeaWing yelled.

The NightWings by the tunnel all threw themselves to the ground. A blast of scorching heat crackled out of the hole, turning the raindrops around it to hissing steam. Sunny was one of the few still standing, looking at the tunnel, when two more dragons burst out of it.

It was Clay, with his wings shielding Starflight. Starflight’s front talons were covering his eyes and long burns were blistering along his scales. As soon as they reached the open air, he collapsed to the ground.

“Stay back!” Tsunami shouted ferociously at the dragons who were flapping around them.

“Starflight!” Sunny cried, feeling a stab of guilt. He’s hurt. I never should have left my friends with Morrowseer. She jumped forward, trying to squeeze through the crowd of frantic dragons to get to him.

But suddenly talons wrapped around her snout and shoulders, and she was yanked backward into the dark trees.