



CHAPTER 1

“I don’t want you to leave me here,” Moon said. She fit perfectly under her mother’s wing, as if that spot had been shaped by the universe just for her. Like a sign: This is where you should be. Stay here for always.

Certainly do not let your mother abandon you on a windy mountaintop positively swarming with strange dragons.

They’d found a spot under a tree where they could watch the main arrival area for the school, which perhaps hadn’t been the best idea, as now Moon was fairly sure she’d seen about a thousand different kinds of dragon, all of them entirely too loud. She shied away as two MudWings galloped past her, shouting and laughing. They looked so *big*. And *rowdy*. How was she supposed to learn anything when she might get trampled at any moment by her fellow students?

And what if they hated her? She wouldn’t even have to do anything wrong (although that seemed awfully likely to happen anyway). They’d hate her just for being a NightWing;

everybody did, except the NightWings, who hated her for not being enough of a NightWing.

“I really, really don’t want to stay here,” Moon said again.

“I know,” her mother said kindly. “But you have to. And it’ll be good for you. I think you’ll like it better than the NightWing village, you’ll see.” *At least Jade Mountain won’t be full of NightWings*, her mind went on.

“I like being wherever you are,” Moon said. “And I don’t mind the other NightWings that much.”

“Most of them are awful and you know it,” Secretkeeper pointed out. They were both thinking of the stares, the whispers, the open jealousy and hostility when Secretkeeper brought her healthy, well-fed dragonet back into the tribe. That was six months ago, after the volcano destroyed their island and all the NightWings had moved into the rainforest. Queen Glory had officially forgiven her for breaking tribe rules, but that didn’t mean anyone else had. “Here you’ll be with much nicer dragons. Like Sunny and Starflight. Remember you met them and liked them?”

“I want to be with you,” Moon replied simply. It wasn’t fair, to finally be given all the time she wanted with her mother — to be with her every moment of the day, instead of stolen hours a few times a week — and then to have it all taken away again.

“I’ll visit,” her mother promised. “You’ll see me all the time. And you’ll make friends here, I’m sure you will.” *Well, I hope you will, my weird little diamond.*

"I'm not a weird little diamond," Moon protested.

Secretkeeper crouched and put her face right in front of Moon's. "You need to stop doing that, remember?" she whispered. "If you only hear it in your head, don't respond. No one can know about your curse. Everybody thinks NightWings don't have powers anymore — they won't know what to do with you if they find out." *And how will you make friends that way, her mind worried, if you keep guessing their thoughts and making them uncomfortable?* "Or they might not believe you, and then they'll hate you for lying. So don't let them find out, all right?"

"I know," Moon answered. "Stay secret. Stay hidden. Stay safe." All the years of pretending to have mind reading powers had made the NightWings truly fear the idea of any dragon reading *their* minds.

She paused. "So isn't this really dangerous? What if I make a mistake here, with all these different kinds of dragons around?"

"You won't. You'll be careful," Secretkeeper said firmly. "I know it's terrible to be the way you are, but if you keep it a secret, you can have a normal life. No one needs to know that you're not a normal dragon. Understand? Are you ready to go inside?"

"Not yet," Moon said. "Can we watch for a little longer?"

Secretkeeper sighed. "Sure." *She's so nervous all the time. I'm sure I was never that nervous when I was a dragonet.*

Moon frowned up at her mother. She was glad the mind

listening only went one way, but sometimes, like now, she wished her own mind could shout back, *Don't you think maybe there's a reason I'm like this?*

"Oh, look," Secretkeeper said obliviously, her eyes lighting up. She pointed to the sky, where blue and green wings were sailing down toward them. "SeaWings! Do you see the one with the ropes of pearls? I think that's their queen!"

"Queen Coral," Moon recited. One thing she *could* do — that didn't involve being stared at by other dragons or accidentally saying the wrong thing — was study, and so she'd done a lot of that to prepare for Jade Mountain Academy. "Those two must be her daughters, since she never lets them out of her sight. I don't know who the other one is."

"Remember not to show off," her mother said. "I mean, thank you for telling me, but the other dragons might not like you if you always know all the answers."

Moon stared down at her claws. It was pretty clear from Secretkeeper's thoughts that her mother was a lot more worried about whether other dragons would like Moon than she was about whether Moon would like them. That, in fact, didn't seem to be among her concerns at all.

A deep blue SeaWing came barreling out of the entrance cave as the other SeaWings landed. "You came!" she called happily. Her wings flared out and wrapped around the older daughter, who was a pale white-pink, like the inside of seashells. The smaller daughter, who had to be less than a year old, bounced around their hug, yelping and trying to

get in. She was attached to the queen by a long harness, which kept getting tangled under her talons and tripping her.

“I’m really not sure about this,” Queen Coral said in a rumbly voice. She was the same shade of blue as the SeaWing who was now being tackled by the little dragonet. In fact, Moon guessed they might be mother and daughter.

Oh, I’m a snail-brain, she realized. That must be Tsunami. The famous SeaWing princess from the prophecy had been in the rainforest for a while, but Moon hadn’t met her before Tsunami left to work on getting the Jade Mountain Academy ready.

“It’ll be great,” Tsunami promised the queen. “I’ll take care of Anemone, I promise.” She grinned at her sister.

“Me too, me too!” yelled the small dragonet. “I want to go to school, too!” She pounced on her harness and wrestled it to the ground, growling at it.

“You are much too young,” Coral said sternly. She tugged the little princess upright. “I can’t risk anything happening to you, especially while Anemone is this far away.”

“Maybe next year, Auklet,” Tsunami said. The little dragon beamed hopefully.

The queen frowned at Tsunami. “And I’m only letting this happen because Anemone has been badgering me about it every day since she got your message about the school. But you can come home *anytime*, you understand? If you feel threatened, or lonely, or overworked, or tired —”

"I'll be fine," Anemone said, wriggling away from her mother's hug.

Moon felt her own wings drooping. Why didn't Secretkeeper want to keep her close like that? Why wasn't *she* getting a speech about coming home the moment she got lonely?

Was it because her mother thought she was cursed? Maybe Secretkeeper really wanted to keep Moon as far away from her as possible. Her thoughts never quite said that, but she'd learned to block some of them over the last four years . . . and she did worry all the time about Moon's mind reading.

Moon wasn't sure she wanted to be normal if it meant grumping around thinking only her own thoughts and mostly all about herself, the way most NightWings did. But her mother seemed very sure that she'd be happier that way. Maybe acting normal was something she could learn here.

"Who's this?" Tsunami asked, turning to the last SeaWing dragonet, who sat behind Queen Coral with a patient expression on his face. He looked about Moon's age, and he was dark green, like an emerald hidden in a cave, with flashes of brighter green underscales and hints of gold in his eyes. He was a little plump, with a sweet extra curve to his snout and upper arms, and his webbed talons were splayed out like he was worried the wind would shove him off the mountain. Unlike Anemone and Auklet, he was not adorned with pearls and jewels; his only accessory was a kind of gold armband studded with glittering black rocks.

“This is one of your brothers,” Queen Coral said. “He heard about this and really wanted to come, too. Which one are you again?”

“Turtle,” he said, shooting Tsunami a friendly smile.

“*One* of my brothers?” Tsunami echoed. “I didn’t realize — I mean, I guess I knew the male eggs were surviving every time your female eggs were destroyed by the Orca statue — but I didn’t even think about having brothers.”

“There are about thirty of us,” Turtle said with a shrug.

“THIRTY?” Tsunami shouted. “I have THIRTY BROTHERS?”

“Well, thirty-two,” he said. His gaze caught Moon watching, and he wrinkled his snout in an amused way.

“Why didn’t you mention this before?” Tsunami demanded, whipping toward her mother.

“Who cares about them?” Coral asked. “They can’t inherit the throne.”

Moon tilted her head at Turtle, expecting a reaction, and realized she wasn’t hearing any thoughts from him. Nothing at all; just a quiet hum, almost a soothing blankness.

That was strange. Moon had only met a few dragons who could block her reading at all, and then only sometimes, and they didn’t even seem to know they could do it. A couple of NightWings had prickly mental shields around some of their secrets, but Queen Glory was the best at it. The RainWing queen clearly wasn’t intentionally shielding her thoughts from

mind readers, but whenever she got uncomfortable, some kind of instinctive wall went up around her mind. She did the same thing with her scales, keeping them from showing her emotions.

It was unsettling, but in a way that always made Moon really curious. What were they hiding? Was their shielding ability something they inherited or something they instinctively developed?

Turtle wasn't like Glory or those NightWings, though; his mind didn't feel like a thorny wall radiating *I've got secrets, keep out*. It was just . . . serenely still. How was he hiding his thoughts so absolutely? He looked so placid and ordinary.

On the other talon, one thing Moon had been able to figure out so far was that nobody was ordinary on the inside.

Tsunami rolled her eyes. "Well, *I'm* happy to meet you, Turtle," she said. "And I'm glad you're joining our school so I can get to know you better."

"I want to see everything before I leave," said Queen Coral. Moon caught twin threads of annoyance from Tsunami and Anemone, but Tsunami just nodded.

"Of course. Come inside."

As the SeaWings disappeared into the cave, Turtle looked back at Moon one more time, and Moon suddenly had a dizzy, tilting feeling that the mountain was sliding down toward her. Darkness flashed before her eyes, and then a strange image, in bits and pieces like a puzzle whirling together.

A beach.

Sunlight.

And Turtle pinning Anemone to the sand as the white-pink dragon writhed in pain.

Then it was gone, and when she blinked, so was the SeaWing family.