PROLOGUE

Two Years Ago . . .

It was one of those days so blue and sunny that you had to be flying. The sky reached in your window first thing in the morning and dragged you out, flinging you up and up and up into the beautiful wing-catching wind. You had to soar and spin and dive because a day this perfect might never come again.

And sometimes you had to take your little brother with you, and sometimes you had to hurl his cautious tail into wonderful danger, because the wind was roaring and the sky was glorious and the sunlight promised that nothing bad could possibly happen.

Hailstorm did a flip in the air, laughing. “The currents are mine to command!” he shouted. “Can you catch me? No, you cannot! No one can! I’m the commander of the sky!”

“I think the SkyWings would disagree,” Winter called. He twisted to scan the cloudless blue emptiness around them.

“Stop worrying!” Hailstorm said, spinning into a dive. There weren’t any dragons within flight-sight. It was a perfect day for Winter’s first expedition into SkyWing territory, especially if he really wanted to find a scavenger.
“This doesn’t feel safe,” Winter observed as they landed. His talons sank into a pile of leaves and he jumped back, eyeing them with suspicion. “Yikes! What are all these flappy things on the ground?”

“They come from the trees,” Hailstorm said, laughing. “No need to panic, little brother. We’re here for your weird little obsession. So get excited!” He took a deep breath, inhaling the smells of the forest, and sneezed loudly.

“SHHHHHHH,” Winter protested. “This is the Sky Kingdom! There could be enemy soldiers everywhere!”

“Lounging around in the woods near a scavenger den?” Hailstorm said skeptically. “Doubtful.” He flicked his brother’s wing with his tail. Winter was only three, but he was very amusing — a lot more fun to tease than their sister. He also tried so hard, and still had so much trouble with the rankings. Poor dragon. Hailstorm wished he could relax a little bit. Not everyone could be the best at everything, although it most likely didn’t help that his big brother actually was.

Despite his worry, Winter couldn’t hide the excitement spilling over his face. “Is there really a scavenger den here?” He blinked at the trees, as if hoping a scavenger would suddenly fall out of one of them.
“That’s what the patrol reported,” Hailstorm said with a shrug. “They said they saw at least five scavengers, and that many usually means a den nearby.”

Now that they were surrounded by trees, though, he had no idea how they were going to find one of the little creatures for Winter. Hailstorm had never actually seen one himself. There were hundreds of furry smells in the forest, but he couldn’t even figure out which ones were scavengers and which ones were squirrels. The only thing he was sure of was that none of them were polar bears.

“What are you going to do if we do catch one?” Hailstorm asked, turning over a fallen log and checking underneath. Nope. No scavengers there. “You know they can’t survive in the Ice Kingdom. You won’t be able to keep it.”

“I just want to look at it,” Winter said. “Have you ever seen a scavenger up close? I read that they wear other animals’ skins on top of their own skin. Isn’t that bizarre? Why would they do that?”

“Same reason Mother has that necklace of SkyWing teeth,” Hailstorm said authoritatively. “To make themselves seem more dangerous and scare off any possible predators. Obviously.”

Winter glanced at the sky. “Speaking of SkyWings . . .”
“We’re FINE,” Hailstorm insisted, tempted to jab Winter’s worrying snout with one of his claws. “We’re several mountains away from Queen Scarlet’s palace. No one is going to find us here.”

“But won’t Father be furious?” Winter asked, twitching slightly.

Hailstorm ruffled his wings as though he was trying to shake the idea of their parents right off his scales.

“Who cares?” he said. “I’m going to be second-in-command of the IceWing army one day. Queen Glacier already said so. Mother and Father can’t do anything to me.”

“They can do plenty to me,” Winter said.

“Not if you get high enough in the rankings,” Hailstorm said with a grin. “Which you do by being brave and strong and bold.”

“I thought it was by being smart and following orders,” Winter said.

Hailstorm dismissed this with a wave of his tail. “Dragons in the Third Circle and below can worry about following orders. First Circle dragons have to prepare to be leaders one day. Besides, I’m the best fighter in the Ice Kingdom. Even if we do get caught, I think I can take a couple of SkyWings.”

“Oh, really?” said a mocking voice behind them. “How about fourteen SkyWings?”
Hailstorm whirled around. Red and orange dragons were slithering between the trees, surrounding them. Their eyes glittered in the golden light and their enormous wings were tucked in close to avoid the snarling branches above.

His heart sank. This couldn’t be happening. Bad luck wasn’t a thing that ever wandered into Hailstorm’s life, and this was the worst luck he could have imagined.

Fourteen SkyWing warriors were more than he could fight alone. Definitely more than he could fight and still keep his little brother safe.

“Second-in-command of the IceWing army?” said the one who’d spoken, a dark red female dragon with an unusually long neck and tail. Small rubies glittered from between the scales around her eyes; larger ones clicked together on spiky silver rings around her claws. “Then you are a prize, aren’t you? Mother will be so interested to meet you.”

“Let us go,” Winter said fiercely. “Queen Glacier will have your heads on spikes by morning if you dare touch us.”

“Oh, very attached to you, is she?” the dragon said, arching her brows. “That’s absolutely our favorite kind of prisoner. Seize them,” she ordered the other SkyWings.

“Perhaps you can take us,” Hailstorm said, drawing
in a hissing breath. “But how many of you are going
to die first? Do you know what happens when frost-
breath touches your eyes? Do you know what it feels
like to watch your leg snap like a broken icicle? Or
how long it takes frozen ears to turn black and fall
off?” His voice was cold, his threats slicing the air
between them like a freezing wind.

Winter raised his tail and inhaled, working up a
gust of frostbreath of his own.

“So a few dragons die,” said the female SkyWing
with a shrug. The other SkyWings exchanged uneasy
looks. “You’ll be our prisoners in the end, either way.”

“Here’s another idea,” said Hailstorm. “Take me
and let Winter go, and nobody has to die.”

“What?” Winter cried.

“You don’t need him,” Hailstorm said, ignoring
his brother. “He’s completely useless. Queen Glacier
won’t trade any prisoners for him — nobody back in
the Ice Kingdom would care whether they ever saw
him again. And he wouldn’t even be interesting in
your queen’s arena. He can barely fight. He’d be dead
in two heartbeats.”

Winter looked as though the world was crumbling
beneath his talons. “Is that true?” he whispered.
“Hailstorm, is that really what you think?”

“If he’s so useless,” the SkyWing asked, “why do
you care if we let him go?”
Hailstorm lifted and settled his wings again. “Call me sentimental. He’s my little brother and I quite like him, even if I wouldn’t want him beside me in a battle. Besides, I know I’m worth trading, whereas he’ll be bones in your arena sands before the month is up.”

“Ouch,” said the SkyWing, giving Winter an amused, pitying look. “I think I’d probably rather die in battle than listen to my brother talk about me that way.”

“I’m not useless,” Winter said furiously. “Fight me and you’ll see!”

“Oh, go *home*,” Hailstorm said, swatting Winter’s wing. “You want to be useful? Fine. Get out of here. Go tell our parents where I am.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Winter protested in a half-choked voice. “I’m not going to hand you over to them without even *trying* to save you —”

“Yes, you are,” Hailstorm said. “This is the real war, little brother. Go away and let the true warriors fight it. Nobody wants to watch you pathetically flail around and then die pointlessly.”

“Oh, my, I can’t even listen to this anymore,” said the SkyWing. “IceWing, I’m going to be more merciful than your heartless brother and let you go. You can tell Queen Glacier that Queen Scarlet will consider a trade, if she’d like to send a messenger to open negotiations.”
Trade for who? Hailstorm wondered. The IceWings didn’t have any political prisoners of importance. Where would they even keep them? The Ice Palace was too cold for dragons from any other tribe to survive it for long.

He shoved Winter away, trying to ignore the anguished look in his brother’s eyes. “Fly away,” he growled. “Right now.” He could see that the only way to make Winter leave was to be as cruel as possible. He lowered his voice and shoved in the last blade. “Don’t be a mewling RainWing in front of our enemies.”

Winter stepped back, tense, like a wolf about to spring. He stared into Hailstorm’s eyes for one long, final moment, and then he suddenly pivoted and leaped into the air. His pale blue scales glinted orange-red as they caught the sun, and then he swooped into the wide sky, heading west.

He’s safe, Hailstorm thought with relief. Even if he hates me now, at least he’s alive. Winter wasn’t useless, but it was true that his current ranking wouldn’t make him worth rescuing — and it was also true that Hailstorm didn’t want to see his brother die in Scarlet’s notorious arena.

The SkyWing smiled as Hailstorm turned back to her. “Aren’t we civilized?” she said. “Somebody club
this IceWing over the head and let’s drag him off to prison.”

“That’s not necess —” Hailstorm started to protest, but suddenly a sharp bolt of pain cleaved through his head and everything went dark.

He woke up in a bright throne room, so bright he instantly got a headache, although the brightness of the sun on ice had never bothered him. But here the sun reflected hotly in all corners of the room and every surface seemed to be plastered with gold, loud and gaudy and yellow and way, way too shiny.

“Oh, finally,” said an impatient voice nearby. “You’ve been so horribly boring. I hope you intend to be exceptionally thrilling now to make up for it.”

Hailstorm gathered his wings and stood up slowly, rubbing his head. Chains weighed down his talons and strange metal bands prevented his wings from unfurling all the way. But there were no guards around him; only one other dragon was in the room. He lifted his eyes to the throne.

Orange scales. Glittering rubies. A circlet of gold and diamonds. Yellow eyes peered down at him through veils of smoke. He’d only seen the SkyWing queen from a distance once, during a battle, but there was no doubt this was her.
“Greetings, Your Majesty,” he said. “I’m sorry we have to meet this way.”

She studied him for a moment, and then an unexpected smile quirked the corners of her mouth. “Instead of in combat?” she guessed.

He gave her a similarly small smile in return. “Yes. The battlefield is where I prefer to meet all my enemies. Although then the acquaintance doesn’t last very long.”

“Arrogant,” Queen Scarlet mused. “Like all IceWings. Take a note of that,” she said over her shoulder.

Hailstorm saw the shadows move behind the queen, as if something were pushing itself slowly out of the wall. He blinked, feeling a strange shiver of eerie fear, but when he looked again, an ordinary SkyWing soldier was standing beside Queen Scarlet, writing on a small scroll.

He hadn’t seen her come in — but maybe all the gold had dazzled his eyes so he’d just missed her before. She was an orange color very close to the golden yellow of the room, with warm amber eyes. She looked young, and quiet. Her voice when she finally spoke was soft.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Your Majesty?” she asked.

“Yes,” Queen Scarlet said with a hiss. “He’s dangerous the way he is — anyone can see that. I can’t use
him in my arena if I want to trade him later, and I
don’t want to deal with any messy escape or rescue
attempts."

“You understand I’m not sure what the conse-
quences will be,” said the soldier. “If we stick to
your . . . unusual specifications, I mean.”

“I told you I’d only use you for special cases.” The
queen lashed her tail. “This is one.”

“Very well. Then he’s gone,” said the other
SkyWing. “No one will ever be able to find him.
Trust me.”

Queen Scarlet snorted. “Not one of my favorite
activities, trusting other dragons,” she said. “But I’ll
give it a whirl just this once. He’s all yours.”

The dragon smiled sideways at Hailstorm, and for
the first time in his life he felt cold — cold all the way
through his bones and claws.

She stepped toward him, reaching for something
around her neck, but he was too hypnotized by her
eyes to run or fight or even scream.

Her eyes were not normal SkyWing eyes anymore.
They were dark black, black as the darkest abyss in
the ocean, and they were coming to swallow him whole.
CHAPTER 1

The first time Winter disappointed his family, he was two years old.

Or at least, the first time he knew he’d disappointed them. Perhaps it had been happening all along, and they’d hidden it behind the stern, demanding faces they showed all the royal dragonets.

He could remember the dawn that day, the morning of his eleventh hunt — the subzero chill in the air, the paling purple of the sky, two moons still high overhead while the third slid its thin crescent sliver down below the horizon. A snowy owl was perched on one of the palace outcroppings, its talons digging into the ice. It glowered beadily at Winter as if it saw his disgrace coming.

His sister, Icicle, was in the hunting party, and his brother, Hailstorm, too, along with two of Glacier’s dragonets, one of Winter’s royal uncles, three attendants, and Winter’s parents, Tundra and Narwhal. They gathered in the courtyard of the ice palace, stamping their feet and beating their wings as the glorious freezing air filled their lungs. The sharp
crunch of snow beneath their claws broke the stillness of the morning.

Winter remembered looking up at his mother as she hissed for attention.

“This hunt is for the table of the queen herself,” Tundra growled. “Whoever brings down the first polar bear will be invited to sit at her side this evening.” She shot a glittering look at Icicle, coiled beside Winter.

Icicle was only two years old as well, but she already knew the future her parents had planned for her. So did Winter, although he suspected he wasn’t supposed to.

He couldn’t remember how he knew. Had he overheard his parents whispering when they thought he was too young to understand? Or had he figured it out from their behavior over the years?

But he did know. One day Icicle would challenge their aunt, Queen Glacier, for the throne. That was the reason she was hatched, and the destiny she was trained for: to kill Glacier and become queen herself. The only question was when.

Glacier grew older and larger and stronger each year. And Icicle had to strike before one of Glacier’s own daughters seized the queenship. Daughters, sisters, or nieces could try for the throne; cousins could not. Neither could sisters-in-law, or Tundra surely would have thrown down the challenge herself.
So Winter’s parents couldn’t wait forever — but they also needed to be sure Icicle was ready. She’d have only one chance. Kill or die, that was how it worked.

Icicle lifted her snout and returned her mother’s arch, calculating look. “It’ll be me,” she said, sounding almost bored. “Find a polar bear? Easy. I have a much better nose than these two.” She flicked her tail dismissively at Hailstorm and Winter.

“We’ll see about that!” Hailstorm said. He grinned and hopped from foot to foot, full of energy the way he always was. Winter often wished some of his brother’s confidence would spill over onto him.

The five dragonets set out first, flying away from the palace in five different directions. At their age, every hunt was still a test — a chance to prove your worth and climb higher in the rankings. Not that Hailstorm needed to climb any higher; he’d been at the very top since he was not quite two years old himself. He made the top of the list the same day Icicle and Winter hatched, in fact.

Winter knew it was risky, but he decided to try flying out to sea to hunt. Sometimes polar bears could be found on the islands off the coast, or drifting on the icebergs, or swimming from one to another. He had yet to catch a polar bear after ten hunts, and as a result his place in the rankings was lower than anyone in their family had ever been. (“Hailstorm killed a polar bear the first time we took him out hunting,”
his mother would observe coldly during their tense family meals, sliding a bowl of dripping meat down the table. “Icicle has killed three so far. You obviously need to try harder.”

He scanned the waves for a long time, hoping to see a bobbing white head. Nothing moved except the sea itself and the shifting reflections of the rising sun.

Finally he swerved down toward one of the larger islands, not much bigger than the ice palace, but studded with caves where bears might hide.

And suddenly — there!

Standing at the edge of the water, staring south. She was huge, with a yellowish tinge to her dingy white fur. The wind was blowing his scent away from her, and he was gliding; she hadn’t heard him or smelled him yet. In a few heartbeats he could be down there, sinking his claws into her shoulders. She’d put up a fight, but he would win.

He’d bring home a polar bear at last, and if he hurried, it might even be him sitting next to the queen at dinner tonight, while Queen Glacier ate his polar bear.

He wheeled upward, ready to dive . . . and then a movement caught at the corner of his eye, and he tilted his head toward the caves.

A pair of tiny cubs was wobbling out onto the snow. One of them tripped and sprawled out, paws flopping every which way, and the other growled with delight and tackled
him. They rolled, wrestling playfully, and their mother swung her head around to grunt at them.

Winter hesitated. *Don’t be a fool,* he told himself. *Just kill them, too; that’s the way to impress Mother and Father.*

But there was something else watching the bears. It was well hidden, higher up among the rocks above the cave, but Winter’s sharp IceWing eyes spotted it when it moved.

*A scavenger! A scavenger here, this far north?*

The creature was wrapped in so many furs, at first Winter almost thought it was another polar bear cub. But there was no mistaking those clever, thin brown paws for the great clumsy paws of bears. The scavenger was carrying a kind of rough spear and its eyes were fixed on the polar bears, so it hadn’t noticed the dragon overhead yet either.

Winter scanned the island and spotted a wooden canoe that had been hauled onto the pebbly beach. How far had this scavenger traveled through the rough arctic waters? Was it hunting the bears for prey, just like Winter was?

If so, why wasn’t it moving? Why had it lowered its spear as if it was already giving up?

Winter stared intently, tracking the scavenger’s gaze. The way it was watching the cubs . . . was it hesitating, the way he had? Did it feel sorry for them, too?

Surely that was ridiculous. Scavengers couldn’t feel pity. A hungry scavenger wouldn’t spare the life of a bear just to protect her cubs. Would it?
He wished he could scoop up the scavenger and study it more closely.

“What is wrong with you?” Tundra’s voice suddenly shrieked across the sky. Winter nearly leaped out of his scales. “Are you hunting or sightseeing? Are you an IceWing or a RainWing? Kill that bear!”

Winter twisted around and saw, to his horror, that his mother, father, and uncle were all winging toward him with disgusted expressions. Right behind them was Icicle, with a polar bear carcass dangling from her claws.

He dove frantically toward the bear, but the noise had alerted her to the danger, and she was already charging up the slope and bundling her cubs back into the cave. Winter beat his wings and lunged with his talons outstretched — but they closed on empty air as the three polar bears vanished into a narrow, stony passageway where dragons would never be able to follow.

Winter scrabbled at the cave entrance for a moment, but there was nothing he could do. The bears were gone.

He carefully forced himself not to look up at the scavenger. If his parents knew it was there, they’d make him kill it for the dinner feast, and for some reason he didn’t want to. He couldn’t imagine anyone eating those little paws, or the scavenger’s head with its wide dark eyes. A shiver went through his wings.

“How could you let it get away?” Narwhal roared, landing beside him. Winter’s father slammed one talon into the
side of the cliff and a small avalanche of snow crashed over Winter’s head. “It was right there! No kill could be easier!”

“Maybe he was worried about the little baby bears,” Icicle offered, coming down with a thump and a splattering of bear blood. “Maybe he didn’t want to leave them all alone with no mummy to take care of them, poor wittle furballs.” Her voice was sneering and triumphant.

“No!” Winter cried. “That wasn’t it! I was — I was just watching for a minute. I would have gotten it if —”

“If you hadn’t been wasting time mooning around,” Narwhal hissed. “We have to report this, you know. Your uncle saw the whole thing.”

Winter stared miserably at his talons. He knew his parents would have reported it anyway, even with no other witnesses. They believed in the strict IceWing codes of behavior. They agreed that the only way to make him strong was to expose all his weaknesses. Shame and fear were powerful weapons for teaching young dragonets. If everyone was disappointed in him, surely he would fight harder to prove himself.

I will, he thought fiercely. I will be better. I will claw my way up the rankings. I won’t make a mistake like this again.

But he still did not tell his parents about the scavenger hiding nearby. He glanced back only once, as they were all swooping away, to make sure it was all right.

That incident sent him down into the Fifth Circle, above only one-year-old dragonets in families that barely counted
as aristocrats. For months, his mother had made him memo-
rlize long sagas about dragons who’d attempted the Diamond
Trial to get back into the First Circle, including about a hun-
dred verses speculating how gruesomely they might have
died. The Trial was a last resort, rarely used, but she made
it clear that no dragonet of hers would reach his seventh
hatching day any lower than Second Circle, even if it meant
turning to an ancient, mysterious, most likely deadly ritual.

With that threat hanging over him, he had struggled to
claw his way back up through the rankings, bit by bit, and
he had tried as hard as he could for so long.

And then losing Hailstorm — actually, leaving Hailstorm,
abandoning him to his fate without a fight — had wiped out
all that work, and he’d had to start all over from the Sixth
Circle.

Which I deserved, he thought. It was my fault we were on
that mountain; my fault he got caught. My stupid, cowardly
decision to leave him there.

But everything was different now. Now he knew
Hailstorm was alive, not dead as they’d all thought. Queen
Scarlet still held him prisoner, hidden somewhere secret.
And Icicle had been bargaining for Hailstorm’s life, before
Winter had ruined her plan. She’d agreed to kill the dragon-
ets of destiny in exchange for Hailstorm . . . but Winter had
stopped her.

Which meant if Scarlet killed Hailstorm now, it would be
even more Winter’s fault.
He clenched his talons.

But maybe he could get to her before that happened. If he could find Scarlet, maybe there was still a chance to save his brother.

He swiped raindrops off his face, inhaling. The downpour was incessant and repulsive; he’d take a howling snowstorm over this dripping soggy horribleness any day. The forest floor squashed between his claws and the wet tree branches lashed his wings as they swayed in the storm.

Below him, his pet scavenger stood in the open doorway of the cage Winter had built. Bandit squinted up at the dragon and the thunderstorm.

“I’m letting you go,” Winter said impatiently. “Don’t just stand there. I can’t carry a pet with me while I’m searching for Hailstorm, especially not one that flops around moping all the time.” He rattled the cage and the scavenger flinched.

Winter had spent days and days on planning and constructing this cage, making it beautiful for his very first pet scavenger. And then Bandit hadn’t appreciated it at all. He’d never used the swing or the running wheel. Mostly he’d cowered under the furs and squeaked, or he’d tried to run away.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” Winter demanded.

Bandit was the most disappointing pet of all time, but Winter couldn’t help it; he still cared about him. Otherwise he could have abandoned Bandit to be someone’s dinner back at Jade Mountain.
Winter still remembered the expression on that first hunter-scavenger’s face, all these years later. The curiosity and the dragonlike sympathy in its eyes. He’d hoped to see something like that in Bandit one day . . . but it didn’t matter now. Nothing mattered except finding Hailstorm.

“Go on, get out of here,” Winter grumbled. He poked at Bandit with one claw, but the scavenger dodged and retreated farther into the cage, covering his head. Winter felt a flash of pity for the creature, and then felt furious with himself for caring, when there were more important things to worry about. “I know it’s raining, but it’s better than the Ice Kingdom, trust me.”

*If I take him with me to the Ice Kingdom, he’ll either freeze to death or be eaten within the first day.* Queen Glacier had granted him permission to have an exotic pet while at the academy, but where he saw an exotic pet, his parents were likely to see a delicious snack.

“Winter!” he heard a voice yell, somewhere off in the trees.

A plume of fire lit up the faces of four dragons, hurrying toward him through the forest. To his astonishment, it was the rest of his winglet from the Jade Mountain Academy: Qibli, Turtle, Kinkajou . . . and Moon.

He pushed back against the little jump that his heart made when he saw her.

*Just what I need right now — a bunch of glaciers slowing me down.*
"By all the snow monsters, what are you doing here?" Winter demanded. How had they even found him? And why?

"Looking for you," Moon said simply. Her eyes caught on his, shining in the bits of moonlight that fought through the storm clouds. She always looked at him as if she could see more of him than anyone else. As if she saw dazzling mountain peaks where his parents saw nothing but a lump of gray ice.

"And we found you!" Kinkajou added. "We're amazing!" She flapped her wings as Qibli sent out another burst of flame, and Winter could see that she had turned bright yellow with purple spots. Ridiculous, that's what RainWings were, all of them. Flamboyant and ridiculous, with their feelings splattered all over their scales like that. It was embarrassing to be around.

Winter glanced down at Bandit. He couldn't let these dragons distract him. "I'm not going back to Jade Mountain," he said firmly. No matter what they said, they wouldn't change his mind. "I'm going to look for my brother."

"I thought so," Moon said, her voice quiet but as determined as his. "We want to help you."

"We do?" Turtle said, stamping his feet.

"Yes!" Kinkajou said. "I didn't know we did but now I totally do!"

No way. Absolutely not. I can't be around them — not even Moon. I mean, especially Moon.
He saw Qibli staring intently at him, as though the SandWing was figuring out his next move. Qibli had done that all the time in the cave they shared on Jade Mountain, and it had been very unsettling to live with. Winter could just imagine what it would be like to have the SandWing’s black eyes inspecting everything he did on the path to finding Hailstorm.

“You can’t come with me,” he said. “I’m going to Queen Glacier. I need to explain it all to her and get her to help me find Hailstorm.” Perhaps she would give him a wing of soldiers of his own to command. Or perhaps she would send out all her warrior dragons to search for Hailstorm. Regardless, he knew he needed the power of the IceWing queen to save his brother. That was the smart thing to do. Wasn’t it?

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to go to the Sky Kingdom?” Kinkajou asked. “Your brother must be imprisoned there somewhere, right? We could all look for him in, like, all the mountain caves, or something.”

“Or you could go after Icicle,” Qibli said. “Try to find out more about what Scarlet told her.”

This was exactly what he didn’t want: more options. More doubt. Qibli was right; Icicle was the only one who knew anything about Hailstorm and Scarlet. Following Icicle would make sense, except . . .

“I don’t know where she’s gone,” Winter said bitterly. Back to the Ice Kingdom, he hoped, although she had to
know Queen Glacier would be furious about her breaking the Jade Mountain truce.

“I have a guess,” Qibli said. Of course he did. “You won’t like it, though,” he added, nodding at Kinkajou. “I think she’s gone to the rainforest. She knows the one Scarlet hates the most is Glory — everyone knows that, if they know the story of what Glory did to her face. So I think Icicle might think that if she kills Glory, Scarlet will forgive her for failing to kill the others.”

Nobody spoke for a long moment.

Thrice-cursed moons, Winter thought. He’s right. That’s exactly what she would think. Icicle is brilliant, dangerous, and prefers to hunt alone. She would find a way to solve this problem, instead of running for help.

Thunder rumbled overhead.

“Then I’m going to the rainforest,” Kinkajou said fiercely. “I’m not letting her kill my awesome queen.”

Suddenly Moon let out a yell of pain and crumpled forward, her wings collapsing around her.

Winter stepped toward her, but Kinkajou was faster, catching the NightWing in her wings.

“Moon?” she cried, staggering sideways.

A flash of lightning lit up Moon’s face as the black dragon lifted her snout to the sky. Something blank and weird had taken over her eyes, like frost on a lake.

And then she began to speak in a voice nothing like her own.
“Beware the darkness of dragons,  
Beware the stalker of dreams,  
Beware the talons of power and fire,  
Beware one who is not what she seems.

Something is coming to shake the earth,  
Something is coming to scorch the ground,  
Jade Mountain will fall beneath thunder and ice  
Unless . . . unless the lost city of night . . . can be found.”

The voice lurched to a stop and Moon closed her eyes, releasing all the tension out of her wings.

Everyone stared at her. Winter’s heart was hammering like the pelting raindrops. Those words — that couldn’t be what it sounded like, could it?

“By all the snakes,” Qibli said at last. Winter met his eyes in the next flash of lightning. Qibli looked as terrified as he felt — as shaken as he’d been the day of the explosion in their history class. “What was that?”

“That’s what you’ve been muttering in your sleep,” Kinkajou said to Moon.

“It sounded like a prophecy,” Winter said slowly. But it couldn’t be. The NightWings had sworn to everyone that their powers were gone. Tsunami, Sunny, Starflight, Clay, and Glory had confirmed it. No more mind reading. No more prophecies. Ever again. That was what they’d said, exactly.

So someone was lying, but who?
Moon shook her head and pressed herself upright, her wings unsteady. “Turtle,” she said, “please give him one of the rocks.”

The SeaWing fumbled with the armband he always wore. Winter could see that a couple of the black stones were missing from it, and as he watched, Turtle pried out another one and passed it to Winter.

The stone was small, about the size of a dragon’s tooth, and had a strange sheen to it, although that might have been the effect of the rain and the lightning. It was jagged around the edges, but not sharp. It looked fairly ordinary.

“What’s this?” he asked. *What does this have to do with prophecies?*

“I have a lot to explain,” Moon said. She sounded nervous, as though he might stab her with his tail spikes any moment. Which he’d refrained from doing to anyone so far, so he thought that was rather unfair. “Everything, the whole truth. I’m going to tell you everything.”

“That sounds ominous,” Winter said.

“No more ominous than *Jade Mountain will fall beneath thunder and ice,*” Qibli said. “I hope we’re all planning to talk about that, because I’m extremely unsettled right now.”

“She said we have to find the lost city of night,” Kinkajou said. “That’s all, and then everything will be fine. Right? Isn’t that what everyone else heard?”

“I’m pretty sure I heard that we’re all going to die,” Turtle said. “Death, death, monsters everywhere, death.”
“Is that it?” Qibli asked Moon. “Is that what you saw? Jade Mountain is going to fall on us all?”

“I don’t know,” Moon said. “I’ve had visions, but none of them ever came out in words like that before. I don’t know what it means.”

Visions? Winter didn’t like the sound of that. He closed his claws around the rock, frowning at her, but Moon had gone quiet, staring into the dark as though she were hearing something else.

A few moments passed, and then she seemed to snap back into herself. “Winter,” she said. “There are a few things you need to know about me.”

“I’m listening,” he said. “Not that I have a choice, apparently.”

“It’s true what you’ve heard about the NightWings,” she said. “They really have lost their powers. There hasn’t been a NightWing who could read minds or see the future in . . . well, a very long time.” She took a deep breath. “Until me.”

Winter’s tail twitched. His heart felt like the rock in his talons, small and hard.

“Because I hatched in the rainforest,” she went on, “under two full moons, I can do both.”

“Both what?” he forced out past the claws that seemed to be closing around his throat.

“See visions of the future,” she said, then hesitated. “And . . . read minds.”