

PROLOGUE

Four Years Ago . . .

The volcano was restless, and so were the dragons in the NightWing fortress.

Secretkeeper felt the mountain rumble under her talons as she hurried through the stone halls. There were too many dragons awake — too many witnesses who might wonder where she was going in the middle of the night. She kept her head down, but she felt the curious looks sliding under her scales with each dragon she passed.

How many of them knew what tonight should have been? Did anyone remember?

She didn't need to count days to know. Her bones ached with knowing. It was like a voice in her head screaming, *Tonight! It's hatching! Hurry! Don't get caught! Hurry!*

Because if it happened and she wasn't there . . .

She imagined hungry panthers prowling the undergrowth, dangerous crocodiles with gleaming teeth, or unpredictable curious idiot dragons who might do anything with a mysterious abandoned egg.

But she couldn't run, not with other NightWings still awake and watching her. Why tonight, of all

nights? Usually everyone in the tribe slept like sloths from dusk to dawn.

Just before she reached the ledge, she passed Mastermind and Farsight. Mastermind gave her a hard stare. *He knows*, she thought with a stab of panic.

But it was Farsight who stopped and spoke to her. "Oh, Secretkeeper, poor dear," she said, folding her wings.

Secretkeeper winced; her name had never sounded more appropriate. Sometimes she wondered if her name had made her this way — if she was unconsciously trying to live up to it with the biggest, most unforgivable secret a NightWing could have.

"The egg you lost was due to hatch tonight, wasn't it? Are you all right?" Farsight went on. "Do you want someone to sit with you?"

NO! Secretkeeper curled her claws in and shook her head. "I'm fine," she said. "Just . . . going to get some air."

"Do you want company?" Farsight asked. Behind her, Mastermind frowned irritably. "I know it's not the same, but when Morrowseer took my egg —"

Secretkeeper could only think of one way to stop her, and it was harsh, but she had to, because she *had* to go, *right now*.

"It's not the same at all!" she snapped, shooting a burst of flame out her nose. "You have *two* surviving

dragonets, and one of them is off on the continent being pampered and overfed and worshipped by the Talons of Peace. So don't try to act like you understand me!"

Farsight recoiled as if Secretkeeper had bitten her. Mastermind looked startled, perhaps a bit impressed . . . maybe a little suspicious. Secretkeeper whirled and fled up the corridor before either of them could say anything else.

I'll apologize tomorrow. She'll forgive me. Farsight is like that.

She took a running leap off the ledge and soared down toward the black sand beach. Behind her, the volcano rumbled again; the dark clouds overhead glowed with an ominous red light. The air was heavy and suffocating, smelling of death and rotten eggs and burning rocks. Secretkeeper swooped low over the red-gold lava river, the brightest spot on the island, and then veered toward the cave.

Only one guard tonight. Nobody really believed any of the rainforest dragons would find their secret tunnel. The guards were often asleep when she came, and Secretkeeper had frequently been able to sneak past without waking them.

But not tonight. Preyhunter was sitting out on the ledge overlooking the beach, watching the volcano and fidgeting nervously.

“Do you think it’ll be tonight?” he asked her as she landed beside him. It took her a frightening, disoriented moment to realize he hadn’t guessed her secret. He probably didn’t even remember that she’d lost her egg — she was only one of many dragons who had in the last few years after all. He was talking about the volcano.

“No,” Secretkeeper said, looking back at the hulking shape that loomed over all their lives. “It can’t be. Mastermind said we have more time before it erupts.”

Preyhunter snorted. “Right. And I’ll remember why we trust him any minute now.”

She knew what he meant. If Mastermind was wrong . . . well, that was why she’d made her choice, wasn’t it? That was the whole reason for her dangerous secret.

“Where are you going at this hour?” Preyhunter asked, eyeing her up and down. “Shouldn’t you have backup for night hunting?”

“I’ll be all right,” Secretkeeper said. “I just — can’t sleep and I thought — maybe I’d bring back a sloth or a boar for Greatness to give the queen. . . .”

“Ah.” Preyhunter nodded slyly. “Keeping the queen happy. Always a good idea. Right, see you soon, then.”

Secretkeeper edged past him, her heart pounding. She bolted through the cave and into the tunnel that

led to the rainforest. *Hurry! Hurry! It's happening now! You have to be there!*

She fell through into the clearest, most brightly lit night she'd ever seen in the rainforest. The worst luck; she'd have to hope that no RainWings were out for a moonlit stroll tonight. Even through the thick canopy of the treetops overhead, she could see that two of the three moons were full.

Just like they were the night I left her here.

Secretkeeper stopped. Her heart seemed to be doing some kind of painful aerial loops in her chest.

Her. Suddenly she just knew. She was certain. It would be female.

She flew through the trees, following the small signs she'd left for herself. There wasn't time to travel quietly and cautiously. If a RainWing heard and followed her . . . well, it wouldn't be a good night for that RainWing.

Plunging down, down toward the fallen tree, the artful pile of leaves, the curving ferns. Finally she was here, finally —

Her egg was gone.

Secretkeeper scrabbled frantically in the dark hollow. It couldn't be, it couldn't be gone. One black egg in the darkest hiding place in this gigantic rainforest — who could have found it? Where did they take it?

I should have kept her with me.

I shouldn't have lied to my tribe.

I only wanted to protect her from that island — from the smoke and the smell and the rules and the misery, and from the constant fear that the earth will swallow us in fire at any moment.

And now she's gone.

This is my punishment for deceiving everyone.

She whirled around, hissing, and her eye caught on something.

Not far away there was a clearing — a clearing where the moons broke through the trees and illuminated the forest floor.

In the center of the moonbeams was her egg.

At least, it had to be her egg — but it wasn't black anymore. The last time she'd been able to sneak out and check on it, three days ago, it had been ebony black, like every NightWing egg. Now it was an eerie silver color, as polished and glimmering as if a piece of full moon had fallen from the sky.

Secretkeeper approached it warily. Was this a trick? Was someone watching, waiting to catch her? *Mastermind? Greatness?*

Or was there something wrong with her egg?

Five starburst-shaped cracks already marked the smooth curve of the silver shell.

Secretkeeper circled it, inhaling the scents around it. *How did it roll over here? Why did it change color?*

There were no clues in the mossy hollow where the egg now lay, bathed in moonlight.

The egg rocked suddenly, and a long crack splintered across the top of it. Secretkeeper felt a burst of panic.

Was she supposed to help somehow? Should she crack the shell herself? Or try to keep the egg warm?

She'd never seen a hatching before. There were so few hatchings on the NightWing island, and hardly anyone was allowed to attend them, for fear of contaminating the precious new dragonets.

If she hadn't lied to everyone — about having stomach cramps during a hunt in the rainforest, about the egg coming out cracked, about burying the pieces alone — if she'd had her egg on the island, then she would probably have gotten to see a hatching in the last year. There had only been one, a dragonet called Mightyclaws. An expecting dragon would have been welcome to see how a hatching worked.

But not a dragon who'd lost an egg. There were several dragons on the island whose eggs had cracked before they hatched, and it was considered a kindness to keep them apart from the healthy eggs and dragonets.

So Secretkeeper had no idea what to do. She'd never heard of an egg turning silver. Had she done something wrong when she laid the egg all alone?

Had she hidden it in a place that was bad for it? Maybe she was supposed to be turning it every night or something like that. Maybe she'd already ruined the dragonet's life before it even hatched.

And what would happen now? What if her dragonet was broken? After all the lying and worrying, she wasn't sure she could survive if there was something wrong.

I will love her anyway, she thought fiercely, hoping that was true.

Secretkeeper brushed away tears, trying to focus. No matter what, there was a living dragonet in that egg trying to get out. She crouched and gently wrapped her talons around the eggshell.

The shell instantly splintered into a thousand pieces, showering the ground with glittering shards.

Sitting in between Secretkeeper's claws, blinking, was a tiny black dragonet.

"Oh!" Secretkeeper gasped.

The dragonet looked up, up, up at her mother's head and wings towering over her. She squeaked once, softly, and then stood up and shook herself, unfurling her own small wings.

Secretkeeper stared at her in awe. She was perfect, perfect in every way. Her scales gleamed as though they'd been polished; her claws were miniature curved crescents; her tail was the most perfect tail Secretkeeper

had ever seen. She already looked healthier than every NightWing Secretkeeper knew, and that was enough — that was *exactly* why Secretkeeper had risked so much.

She wished she could share this moment with the dragonet's father . . . but he couldn't be trusted. He would almost certainly tell the tribe and insist she be raised on the island. If that meant he would never learn he had a daughter, then too bad.

The dragonet tilted her head back to stare up at the two full moons. Their silvery light reflected in her eyes, and Secretkeeper realized there was one odd thing about her. A silver scale shone on the outside corner of each eye, like a teardrop about to fall. Odd, but beautiful.

Her small talons reached toward the moons, as if she wanted to pull them out of the sky and roll them around.

Secretkeeper picked her up, feeling large and unwieldy with something so small and delicate. She lifted the dragonet up to see the moons and then brought her in close, cuddling her to her chest.

"I'm your mother, little one," she whispered. "I'm going to call you Moonwatcher. You're going to have the happiest life any dragon has ever had, and you're going to live forever and ever, and the volcano will never have you."

Moonwatcher squeaked again and leaned into her mother's warmth.

Secretkeeper let go of the worrying and the guilt. She stopped thinking about what had happened or what was going to happen. She was right where she needed to be.

A long, quiet time passed, and then . . .

"SECRETKEEPER!" a voice bellowed from the treetops.

Secretkeeper jolted awake. Her dragonet was curled in the curve of her wing, sleeping soundly. They were both brightly lit by the full moons overhead. And someone was shouting her name through the rainforest.

Preyhunter! she thought. *Idiot!* What if the RainWings heard him?

Then she came fully awake and realized what would happen if he found her like this — with a secret NightWing dragonet. Moonwatcher would be taken straight back to the island, and Secretkeeper would be punished for lying about her. She wasn't sure how, but she knew anything that involved being separated from Moonwatcher would be unbearable.

"Moonwatcher," she whispered urgently. The dragonet opened sleepy eyes. "We have to hide you."

"Awrk?" her daughter answered.

"Come here." Secretkeeper scooped her up and hurried back into the darker shadows of the forest.

Moonwatcher squeaked sadly and reached for the moonlight again. “No, you can’t go out there. You have to stay hidden, do you understand? You must not let any dragon find you except Mommy.”

Secretkeeper crouched beside her hollow, where the fallen log and thick ferns created a hidden space. She tucked Moonwatcher into the shadows and started pulling foliage over her to conceal her.

“Rrrrk?” Moonwatcher asked. She reached out and caught one of her mother’s claws in her small front talons. “Arrwrk?”

“No, I can’t stay,” Secretkeeper said. “I’m sorry. You’ll be safer if I go.” Terrifying images flashed through her head — NightWing hunters finding Moonwatcher by accident, or RainWings stumbling on her and taking her back to their own village. She couldn’t, she *mustn’t* be seen by any other dragons. What had Secretkeeper been thinking? Hiding an egg was one thing — hiding a dragonet who could move and squeak and call for help was quite another. How could Moonwatcher possibly understand something like this?

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Secretkeeper promised. “Please, please don’t leave this spot until I come. All right?”

She realized that Moonwatcher was staring intently into her eyes — almost as if she was reading the images flashing through her mother’s mind.

Is it possible? The scrolls say NightWings once had mind reading powers . . . but I thought that was just the lie we tell the rest of the tribes so they'll fear us.

If it was ever true, it certainly hasn't been for the last several generations.

Still, there was something about the way Moonwatcher was looking at her. . . .

Not quite knowing what she was doing, Secretkeeper put her front talons gently on either side of Moonwatcher's head and whispered, "Stay secret. Stay hidden. Stay safe." She thought as hard as she could about the dangers of the rainforest, and especially the dangers of other dragons. She pictured Moonwatcher curling into the ferns and not moving until her mother returned.

Moonwatcher blinked and then nodded, slowly. She backed into the hollow and scratched leaves around herself.

"SECRETKEEPER!" Preyhunter shouted again. He sounded chillingly close.

"See you soon, little one," Secretkeeper whispered. Her claws wanted to clutch the earth, to stay right here with her dragonet and never ever leave. It was harder than anything she'd ever had to do before, but she made herself turn and fly off into the trees. The tears came, and she let them. Perhaps if he saw her crying, Preyhunter would be too embarrassed to grill

her about where she'd been for so long and why she was coming back with no prey.

Her wingbeats faded into the darkness, replaced by the chirping of crickets, the scurrying of lizards, and the stranger, more unidentifiable noises of the rainforest at night. Somewhere not too far away, a jaguar roared.

Several moments passed.

"Awrk?" said a small voice from the fern hollow.

Nobody answered her.

"Awrk?" she said again, softly.

She was alone, with the shadows firmly wrapped around her and no company except the frightening pictures her mother had left trailing through her mind.

Two hours old, and all she knew so far was that the world was a dangerous, terrifying place without her mother.

"Awrk?" Moonwatcher tried again.

Rainforest noises. The small drip-drop of rain starting to fall.

A long pause. And then, barely a whisper:

"Mommy?"