

A decorative border with a repeating floral and scrollwork pattern surrounds the entire text area.

WINGS OF FIRE

THE LOST HEIR

by
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PROLOGUE

Underwater, Webs couldn't hear the screams of dying dragons.

Underwater, the battle was as far away as the three moons. Fire couldn't touch him. Talons couldn't scar him. The blood washed away from his claws.

Underwater, he was safe.

Safe and a coward . . . still better than loyal, brave, and dead.

Webs shuddered awake.

A catfish was staring at him blankly. Its whiskery tendrils drifted in the current. The expression on its face said, "Why is there a dragon sleeping on my river stones?"

Webs ate it, and that made him feel a little better.

The Talons of Peace must know what's happened to the dragonets by now, he thought. They have spies in the SkyWing palace. They don't need to hear it from me.

The other Talons did not need him to stand up in front of them and say, "We failed."

But where could he go? He was already hiding from his own tribe, the SeaWings. Did he have to hide from the Talons of Peace for the rest of his life as well?

Webs paddled to the surface of the river and cautiously poked his head out. It was dark, with the

Claws of the Clouds Mountains blocking most of the moonlight like vast shadowy teeth. He'd been swimming downriver for days. The Sky Kingdom was far away now.

The Sky Kingdom, and the five dragonets he'd sworn to protect.

Webs dragged his long, aching body out of the water and took three steps into the forest before he noticed the dark shapes waiting for him.

He spun around, but a new dragon loomed out of the river to block his escape. Black spiral patterns marked his green scales, and his teeth gleamed in the moonlight.

"Webs," said the other SeaWing in a pleasant voice, "I thought you would never wake up."

Webs drew his talons through the riverbank mud. "Nautilus," he said. He hated the tremble of fear in his voice. "I have important news for the Talons."

"You don't say," said Nautilus. "I suppose you got lost on your way to the usual meeting place."

"So we thought we'd come find you," said one of the dark figures, in a voice like icicles dripping. *Cirrus*, Webs thought. It was never a good sign when *Cirrus* the IceWing appeared.

"The SkyWings found our cave," Webs said. *Just tell the truth. It's not your fault.* "And Queen Scarlet took the dragonets."

“Yes,” said Nautilus drily. “We gathered that much from how she’s practically been standing on the tallest mountain shouting, ‘I have the dragonets of destiny! They’re all mine!’”

“Tell us everything,” Cirrus hissed. “How did they find you?”

“Well,” Webs said slowly, “it started when two of the dragonets tried to run away.” *Maybe three.* He wasn’t sure where Glory had been on the night he could only find Starflight and Sunny. But he knew she couldn’t have gone into the river with Tsunami and Clay.

“Why would they run away?” Nautilus asked sharply. “What did you do to them?”

Webs felt his gills flare. “We kept them alive,” he snarled. *And trapped them underground. And chained Tsunami. And planned to kill Glory, because she wasn’t part of the prophecy. But what choice did we have?*

“Surely you caught the runaways and brought them back,” said a voice in the shadows. Webs recognized Crocodile, a MudWing new to the Talons of Peace. His hopes rose. In his few meetings with her, she’d been sympathetic. Perhaps he had one ally here.

“Er,” Webs said, “no. Not exactly. They kind of . . . came back on their own. To get the others.” He cleared his throat. “We weren’t expecting that.” *Kestrel thought they’d be long gone as soon as they hit the sky.*

"It sounds as if they felt like prisoners," Nautilus said in a soft hiss.

"*You* told us to keep them underground," Webs protested. "That was a decision made by all the Talons!"

"But we wanted them agreeable, not rebellious," said Nautilus. "That was the entire point, wasn't it?"

A murmur went around the circle of dragons. There were seven including Nautilus, as far as Webs could tell. He wondered if he could fight his way past seven dragons.

"It wasn't our fault," he muttered. "Maybe there's something wrong with them."

"What does this have to do with the SkyWings?" Cirrus hissed.

"The SkyWings followed Clay and Tsunami back to the cave," Webs explained. "That's how Queen Scarlet found us. We tried to fight back, but she killed Dune and took Kestrel along with the dragonets."

"Will she make them fight in her arena?" asked Crocodile. "Can they win?"

"They're only dragonets," Cirrus growled. "Of course they won't survive the arena."

"Surely she'll spare the SkyWing, at least," Crocodile said.

Webs flinched. He had never been brave enough to confess to the Talons of Peace that they'd lost their

SkyWing dragonet and replaced it with a RainWing. But now that the dragonets were out in the world, everyone would know soon.

“You know what Queen Scarlet did to all the SkyWing dragonets who hatched on the brightest night,” Cirrus hissed. “Mercy is not exactly in her nature.”

Webs raised his head and looked around at the eyes that glittered in the dark. “Can’t we go get them?” he asked. “Maybe if all the Talons attacked at once . . .” His voice faltered. Who was he kidding? *He* wasn’t about to go rushing into the SkyWing palace to die. And he was closer to the dragonets than any of the Talons, who hadn’t even met them.

“All the Talons?” Cirrus hissed. “Forty dragons against the hundred SkyWing palace guards? A brilliant plan. No wonder we left the dragonets in your capable claws.” His diamond-shaped head darted up and snapped a bat out of the air. Tiny bones crunched in his teeth.

“A suicide mission may not be necessary,” Nautilus said. “Something happened in the SkyWing palace yesterday. We don’t have any clear reports yet, but one spy said he thought Queen Scarlet was dead — killed by the dragonets.”

Webs flared his wings in surprise. “By *my* dragonets?” he asked.

"Maybe they have a talent for escaping," Nautilus said. "Although another spy was sure they all died trying to fight their way out."

Webs's stomach felt as if it were full of poisonous jellyfish. The dragonets *couldn't* be dead. Not after all he'd given up for the sake of the prophecy. *And to save my own scales*, a small voice whispered inside him.

"If they are loose in Pyrrhia, how do you suggest we find them?" Nautilus asked. "Non-suicidal suggestions only, please. Well, for us. You may feel free to kill yourself whenever it's convenient."

"I don't know," Webs admitted. He had no idea where the dragonets might go. He didn't understand why they would *want* to be on their own, cut off from their protectors. The worst ten days of his life were the ones between the battle where he had abandoned his queen and the day the Talons had found him. Alone, with no tribe to support them and no Talons to protect them . . . how would the dragonets survive?

"If we can't get the dragonets back," Nautilus mused, "I suppose we'll have to consider our backup plan." He scratched his gills thoughtfully.

"What backup plan?" Webs asked.

"The one you don't get to know about," Cirrus said.

"But — but we have to get them back," Webs said. "They're *the* dragonets. They're the only ones who can stop the war."

"Have a little faith in the prophecy, Webs," Nautilus said.

"Yes, don't worry," Crocodile said reassuringly. "The Talons of Peace wouldn't put all their eggs in one nest. It's a good backup plan."

Webs looked from one shadowed face to the next. Apart from Crocodile, he saw nothing friendly in the eyes staring at him.

"I don't understand," he said. Was there another prophecy he didn't know about?

"Of course," Nautilus said, "that means you would be a problem."

Webs barely had time to say "What?" before Cirrus was suddenly on his back, pinning him to the ground. His wounds from the SkyWing soldiers flared up with bright new pain. One wing was twisted behind him, and he could feel the IceWing's serrated claws digging into his scales.

"What are you doing?" Webs yelped. "I'm one of you! I've been with the Talons of Peace for seven years!"

"And you failed us," Cirrus hissed.

"Now, now —" Nautilus said, then paused. "No, that's fair."

"I'm going to dig your heart out and feed it to the fish," Cirrus growled.

Won't that be ironic. Webs thought gloomily of the fish he'd just eaten. "But we're the dragons for peace,"

he said, his teeth gritted with pain. "If we kill each other, aren't we as bad as Burn and Blister and Blaze?"

"Sorry, Webs," Nautilus said. "Peace is more important than any one dragon. And you would disrupt our backup plan. We're doing this for your own good. For the prophecy. For peace."

Webs heard the horrible echo of his own words — the same thing he'd said to the dragonets whenever they complained about life under the mountain. *It's for your own good. Peace is the most important thing.* He'd believed it when he said it. No doubt Nautilus did, too.

Nautilus gestured with one talon. "Cirrus, rip out his heart."

The jaws of the IceWing sprang open, and Cirrus flung Webs down onto his back. His icicle-sharp claws flexed, ready to tear into Webs's underbelly.

Suddenly Crocodile cannoned into him, knocking Cirrus into the undergrowth.

Webs didn't hesitate. He flipped upright and shot into the sky as fast as his wings could carry him. He heard shouts as Crocodile struck out at the dragons around her, and he felt a stab of guilt. Should he stay to help her fight?

But why go back for death when he had a chance at life?

He heard wingbeats behind him and flew harder. He imagined Cirrus breathing down his tail, or Nautilus hissing closer and closer.

But it was Crocodile's voice who called to him.

"Fly, Webs!" she cried. "I've knocked them out — they didn't see that coming. Ha!"

"Thank you," Webs called back, twisting to see her heavy brown shape soaring behind him.

"Where will you hide?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I have no idea. I've heard there's a dragon in Jade Mountain who might —"

"You should go home," she said, tilting her wings to swoop under him. "From what I hear, Queen Coral is in a merciful mood these days."

The thrill that ran through Webs from horns to tail nearly took his breath away. *Home? Back to the sea, after all these years? Is it possible?*

"She'll never forgive me, not after everything I did," he said. "It's not just that I deserted her during a battle. She must know I was the one who stole her egg for the prophecy."

"You might be surprised," said Crocodile. "Isn't she supposed to be one of the greatest queens in history? That's what all the SeaWing scrolls say. Perhaps she'll forgive you. Why not take the chance, if it means you can go home again?"

Webs was silent. One of the moons was rising, shimmering off his blue-green scales. From up here he could see the ocean, far off in the distance, but it seemed as unreachable as the moon itself.

"Up to you," Crocodile said, banking away from him. "I'm just telling you what I've heard. Good luck, either way."

"Good luck to you, too," Webs called. She vanished into the trees, and he wondered where she would go now.

He missed the sea with every scale on his body. He missed the palaces, the currents, the whale songs, the feasts, the gardens . . . the other SeaWings.

*If the Talons are done with me . . . if I promise her
I'll be brave this time . . .*

Maybe I can go home again.



CHAPTER 1

A wave roared onto the beach and crashed around Tsunami's talons. Her webbed claws sank into the wet sand. Her blue wings billowed in the wind.

She lifted her head, breathing in the wild sea air.

This was where she was supposed to be. This was her ocean.

"Let me guess," Glory said mockingly behind her. "You guys, that's the smell of *freedom*."

"Freedom smells a lot like fish," Starflight observed. "Which, to be clear, is kind of nose-curlingly awful."

"I love it," Tsunami said. This was what the Talons of Peace had stolen from her. They'd kept her trapped in the stale, dreary air under the mountain her whole life, when she was meant to be out here, flying and swimming and living like a real SeaWing.

Starflight glanced up at the sky and edged back toward the dark foliage that lined the beach. "Shouldn't we stay under the trees? What if a patrol spots us? I mean —" He stopped and took a deep breath. "We *must* stay

under the trees. All right. Yes. Everyone back into the trees right now.”

The others ignored him, although Sunny gave him a pitying glance.

Tsunami bent her head to study the waves washing over her talons. Small shapes, silver and green and yellow, darted through the shallows. The ocean smelled much more alive than the cave river.

Was it only a week since they’d run away from their guardians? It was hard to remember exactly how long they’d been trapped in the SkyWing prison.

But there was one thing Tsunami remembered clearly: the sound of bone snapping under her talons.

She poked a hole in the sand with her claw. *I had to kill that SeaWing. Queen Scarlet forced us to fight. There was no other way out of the arena. He was crazy. It was him or me.*

The same thoughts kept circling in her head like lame-winged dragons. She shook her head and flared her wings. This was ridiculous. Was she a dragon or a scavenger? Dragons were meant to be fierce warriors; one little death shouldn’t rattle her so much.

Besides, Glory had done worse with her deadly venom, and she didn’t seem bothered at all.

“You know what I love?” Clay said mournfully. “Fish. Lots of fish. Big fish I can eat, not these little wriggle-scraps.”

The MudWing sat down on the sand beside Tsunami. His stomach growled loud enough for all of them to hear.

Sunny giggled. "Clay, it's only been a day since you caught that enormous pig for all of us."

"Wasn't enormous," Clay said. He sighed, his wings drooping. "That was the smallest pig in the *whole world*."

"You should have eaten my carrots." Sunny clambered up to sit on his back and peer out at the ocean. The sun was just rising in a peach-pale sky, casting broken paths of light across the water. Two of the moons, barely slivers like thin claws, were vanishing behind the mountains.

"I'm serious, everybody," Starflight said. "It's not safe out on the beach, not with all the MudWings and SkyWings looking for us." The NightWing was standing well out of reach of the waves, trying to shake sand off his talons.

As far as Tsunami was concerned, they'd already wasted a day flying south of the Diamond Spray Delta, basically because Starflight had worried and complained until everyone agreed. Yes, the SkyWings were after them. Yes, they were probably mad about the dragonets' escape from SkyWing prison. And they were pretty definitely mad about the part where Glory maybe killed their queen on the way out.

But Tsunami didn't want to keep running. She wanted to find her family. Once they knew who she was, she was sure the SeaWings would protect her and her friends.

Most of all, she really wanted Starflight to stop fretting, complaining, and bossing. It made the others nervous and harder to organize. She almost wished the NightWings hadn't given him back.

"Why are *you* so worried?" Tsunami asked him. "If they do recapture us, won't your NightWing friends come swooping in to rescue you again?"

Starflight fluttered his wings indignantly. "I'm not worried for *me*," he said. "I'm trying to keep all of us safe." He glanced at Sunny and ducked his head.

"I'm keeping us safe just fine!" Tsunami protested. "When have I ever led us wrong?"

"Well," Glory pointed out, "there was that one time we got captured by SkyWings and their queen nearly killed us all. . . ."

Tsunami smacked her tail into the water to send a cold wave over Glory. The RainWing hissed and jumped away from the sea.

"Stop it!" Sunny said. "Stop fighting, all of you. Clay, stop them." She patted the top of his head to pull his attention back from the tiny fish swimming around his feet.

"Oh, yes, let's hear from our bigwings," Glory teased. Her scales this morning were gold like Sunny's, but with drifting splashes of ocean blue. She sat down and yawned at Tsunami, displaying her venom-spitting teeth.

"Hey," Clay said, nudging Tsunami's wing with his own.

"It's all right for Starflight to worry. We don't even know if Queen Scarlet is alive or dead. But," he added quickly, "I know you want to find the SeaWings as fast as possible. So let's find them instead of fighting about it, and then we can get to safety sooner."

Tsunami shot one more narrow-eyed look at Starflight, then turned back to the ocean. Clay was right; the important thing was to find her family and a safe place for them all to hide.

"Aww," Glory said. "So wise and big."

"I think he is," Sunny said, wrapping her forearms around Clay's neck. Starflight sat down, flipping his tail around his talons unhappily.

Glory settled her sun-colored wings. "So now what? Should we shout 'Hey, SeaWings, we've got your missing princess!' and wait for dragons to bound joyfully out of the ocean?"

"With a feast!" Clay cried, startling a seagull into the air. "There was a feast at the end of the story! When the missing SeaWing princess got home, her parents were so happy they made a feast. I remember the feast. They ate a whole whale. That was a good feast. I bet *I* could eat a whale. Do you think we'll get a feast?"

"*The Missing Princess* was just a story in a scroll," Starflight said. "We have no idea what we'll actually find in the Kingdom of the Sea."

"That's true." Clay's wings drooped. "It might not be what you're hoping for, Tsunami. Like finding out my mother sold me for a cow."

"Hey," said Glory. "It was at least *two* cows."

"Hmmm. Comforting," said Clay.

It wouldn't be like that for Tsunami. She was sure of it. Maybe Clay's dreams of his family had turned out all wrong, but hers would be perfect. Especially now that she knew her egg had been stolen from the Royal Hatchery.

She was the daughter of the SeaWing queen.

Not only that, but according to Starflight, none of the queen's other female dragonets had survived to adulthood. Tsunami was the only living heir to the SeaWing kingdom. One day, she would be queen of the SeaWings.

True, that meant one day she'd have to fight her own mother to the death to become queen. But that day could be as far off as she wanted it to be. Not something she had to think about now.

She spread her wings and breathed in the salt-spray air again. Out of the corner of her eyes she kept seeing tiny creatures pop out of the speckled sand and then vanish again.

"I could just dive in and look for the SeaWing palace," Tsunami suggested.

"Out there?" Starflight sounded alarmed. He spread his wings and shook sand off them, blinking anxiously.

"Where else do you suggest I find the SeaWings?" she asked.

“Swimming in the ocean is not like swimming in an underground cave river,” Starflight lectured. “There are strong currents and unpredictable waves and, and big things with teeth —”

“I’m a big thing with teeth.” Tsunami grinned at him.

He didn’t laugh. “It’s not safe,” he said. “What if we lose you?” Tsunami wanted to poke his wrinkled-up worried snout with her sharpest claw.

“Starflight, cheer up,” Sunny interjected. “Tsunami can do anything. And how is she supposed to get home to her family if she can’t go into the sea?”

“Oh, no!” Clay heaved himself to his feet, scattering sand and nearly dislodging Sunny, who grabbed his neck with a yelp. Sand and seashells and tiny, astonished crabs flew through the air as he lashed his tail.

“Ow! Stop that!” Glory commanded, covering her eyes.

“What about us?” Clay’s big brown wings flapped. “I didn’t think of that! Tsunami, we can’t go with you to the SeaWing palace. We can’t breathe down there! How can we stick together if you’re underwater?” He clawed at the water, leaving deep gouges in the wet sand. “What are we going to do?”

Tsunami kind of adored Clay when he was in a tizzy. She also adored that it had taken an entire day for it to occur to him that the Kingdom of the Sea was underwater.

“Seriously?” Glory said to Clay. “All of those geography lessons, and not a single one sunk in?”

Clay turned in a confused circle. Crabs scurried out of the way of his giant talons. "What?"

"The SeaWings have an above-water palace, too," Starflight said in his "see, you should have studied more" voice. "So they can receive guests, like their SandWing ally Blister. It's on an island somewhere in the Bay of a Thousand Scales."

"Oh." Clay sat down with a whooshing sigh.

Sunny patted his shoulder. "I didn't remember that either," she offered. "So we go there, right?"

"Not easily," Starflight said. "Both SeaWing palaces — underwater and on land — are well hidden. That's how they've lasted so long in this war, even though they don't have fire like the other tribes. Nobody can find them to attack their homes."

"Sounds like the NightWings," Glory sniped.

"It's nothing like the NightWings!" Tsunami cried. "SeaWings aren't trying to act all mysterious and pretentious. They're just being sensible about guarding their home."

"There are over a thousand islands to search, but it's still probably —" Starflight stopped midsentence and glanced at the sky again. "Does anyone else smell fire?"

"Three moons, Starflight. I'm not hiding in the trees every time some little thing spooks you," Tsunami said.

"Wait, I think he's right," Sunny said, lifting her head. "I hear wingbeats."

"I do, too," Starflight said. The spiny ridge along his back stood up in alarm, and he bolted for the trees, running as fast as he could.

"From this far away?" Tsunami said skeptically. "I don't see anything up there." But just as she said it, she spotted a cluster of red specks like spattered blood in the sky, winging down from the mountains in the northwest.

A SkyWing patrol was coming their way.