



TUI T. SUTHERLAND

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# WINGS OF FIRE

THE DANGEROUS GIFT

A decorative border with intricate, repeating scrollwork patterns surrounds the central text. The border is composed of two parallel lines with a detailed, repeating motif between them. The corners of the border are reinforced with larger, stylized scrollwork designs.

WINGS  
OF  
FIRE



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THE DANGEROUS GIFT

by  
TUI T. SUTHERLAND

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For Benjamin — welcome to the family!

And for the Pyrrhia-Pantala AU, with hugs  
and awe for all your amazing dragons.



# PROLOGUE

Swordtail blinked awake in a haze of smoke. Smoke clung to the air and filled his nose; even the savanna grass seemed to still have wisps of smoke clinging to its blades. There were dragons all around him — hundreds, maybe thousands of dragons — but he didn't know any of them.

They were all lying in the tall grass, and on the other side of the smoky sky, he could see the blurred outline of the sun.

The last thing he remembered was falling asleep at night, in the jungle, next to Blue and Cricket and Sundew. Before that, he could remember lying there, listening to the carnivorous plants rustle and slither nearby, thinking about the battle to come. He remembered watching Blue rub his wrists nervously at the spots where his flamesilk glowed in the dark.

*Flamesilk. Fire. Blue was going to set the bonfire of heart of salvation aflame, and the smoke would be the antidote to the breath of evil. His fire was going to set all the HiveWings free from Wasp's mind control. If it worked, maybe there wouldn't be a battle at all.*

The smoke in the air suggested that there had definitely been a fire — a much bigger fire than one pile of roots could have produced, in fact.

But what had happened?

*How did I get here?*

He pushed himself up to standing and winced.

Everything hurt. His muscles ached as though he'd been flying for days. Even his claws felt bruised and sore.

From the sounds of the moaning and grumbling around him, many of these strange dragons felt the same way.

He suddenly realized that most of them were HiveWings. His enemies.

*Why am I lying in the savanna, surrounded by HiveWings?*

*Did they capture me?*

If so, they were doing a pathetic job of keeping him prisoner. No one was even looking at him. He wasn't tied up. He could fly away right now.

*Which way, though?*

Which way was Blue?

*Or Luna. If I could fly to Luna, I would.* So what if there was an entire ocean between them? He would find his way there, to her.

Juuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuust as soon as he figured out where in Pantala he was.

He squinted around, looking for a landmark. Even if there was nothing but savanna around him, that would be a clue.



But there was something: two Hives, visible in the distance, with glimmering webs stretching between them. Which meant the Poison Jungle should be in the other . . .

A cloud of black smoke covered the horizon behind him, reaching from ground to sky.

*Is that the jungle?*

And suddenly he had a memory — a memory of standing beside Blue as flamesilk spiraled out of Blue's wrists onto the pile of roots. Swordtail remembered his own claws clutching a spear with sharp thorns twisting from one end. He remembered staring at the rows of HiveWings, all of them eerily still and white-eyed. They hadn't moved as he and Blue approached the pyre. They hadn't swarmed forward to try to stop them. They hadn't even looked at him.

He remembered now how that had worried him.

But he'd put his faith in the antidote. He'd watched the green-tinged smoke rise and fill the air, drifting over the front ranks of the HiveWing army. Slinking around his own head, and Blue's.

And then he'd felt his claws twitch and sink into the ground. His wings opened, but he hadn't moved them. His head turned toward Blue, and his mouth moved, and something that wasn't him spoke through him.

“Two little SilkWings, all for me. Just what I always wanted. And one of them a flamesilk! So nice when a plan sprouts exactly the way it’s supposed to.”

Blue had stared back at him, his talons also firmly planted. The LeafWings flying down from the trees would not have been able to tell that there was anything wrong. Only Swordtail could see the panic in Blue’s eyes. Only the two of them knew that they were paralyzed inside their bodies, controlled by someone — or *something* else.

It felt like the toxin the HiveWings used on Misbehavior’s Way prisoners, but worse.

The rest of his memories came flooding back. The smoke spreading over the LeafWings. Sequoia and Belladonna and Nettle caught by the breath of evil, just as Swordtail was. Blue’s talons turning toward the jungle. His fire burning it all down.

Swordtail crouched into the savanna grass, trying to breathe. It was morning now. They must have spent the whole previous day scorching the Poison Jungle. He remembered being in the squadron that was sent to gather all the breath of evil from its hidden lair, before the fire reached that area.

He also remembered searching for the rest of the LeafWings. The thing inside him had driven him relentlessly through the crackling, smoking trees,

looking for Sundew and Cricket and the young LeafWing princess. That was probably why he was so sore and singed and scratched-up. It was a miracle he hadn't been eaten by a frantic dying plant along the way.

But he didn't remember finding any LeafWings.

Swordtail jumped to his feet, ignoring the pain in his talons. He spun, searching the savanna around him.

Hundreds of HiveWings, a few LeafWings — but nobody he recognized. No Sundew. How had she escaped the smoke by the battlefield? Oh, wait . . . she hadn't been there when Blue went to burn the roots. He didn't know where she'd gone, but maybe that meant her mind hadn't been taken over.

And if they'd searched all day for her with no luck, maybe she'd really escaped, along with Cricket and the rest of the LeafWings who hadn't been near the smoke.

*Where could they be?*

He lifted one talon gingerly, then the other. He was controlling himself right now. His head felt curiously light, as if it had been caught in the grip of someone's talons all night and they'd just released him. Cautiously he started walking through the grass, toward a flicker of bright blue wings near one of the shrubs.

*Blue?* If he could find Blue, they could fly away together. Maybe the mind control had been temporary. Or maybe it didn't work over long distances; maybe

they could fly out over the ocean, as far as they could possibly get, and escape its clutches that way.

It was Blue. Swordtail could see soot smudged along Blue's face and limbs and wings, but it was unmistakably him, asleep, with his brow furrowed in worry.

Swordtail was a few steps away from his friend when his legs suddenly froze. He felt a chill sweep through him, all his scales shivering away from believing that they'd been taken over again.

"Nice try," his own voice whispered. His wings folded in and he dropped to the ground, stuck in place. Trapped. So close to Blue, but so far from himself.

*She has me in her claws, he thought. But she can't read my mind; she can't stop me from thinking. Or hoping.*

*Blue and I may be stuck here, but I believe Sundew and Cricket escaped. Maybe they went to find Luna.*

*And if they did, I know they'll come back for us. They'll find a way to set us free.*

*We just have to survive until they do.*



# PART ONE

BLIZZARDS & BURIED MAGIC



## CHAPTER 1

The youngest queen in the history of the Ice Kingdom was going to be the *very best* queen of the IceWings ever. Ever ever. THE BEST.

She was going to keep all her dragons safe. They were all going to be healthy and prosperous and safe and no one was going to die of any more evil magic plagues, like the one that killed the previous queen.

NO ONE.

NOT ON HER WATCH.

Queen Snowfall had a plan, or at least, she had a firm death grip on an idea that was kind of like a plan.

That plan was: STAY AWAY FROM OTHER DRAGONS.

No more getting involved in other tribes' stupid wars. No more summits with queens who talked down to her or eyed her as if *she* might be the one to start the next war. No more interactions with NightWings, *ever*.

None of this intertribal peace talk empathy-building drum circle nonsense!

IceWings were a GREAT tribe. They didn't NEED any other tribes. Those subjects of hers who wanted to go explore, to meet other dragons and study in their perilous, flammable schools? They needed to be STUFFED INTO IGLOOS until they came to their senses.

(Her council had talked her into letting a few IceWings go to Jade Mountain Academy, for now, instead of using her excellent igloo plan. There had been so much alarming enthusiasm for the idea of "connecting with the other tribes." WHY, was her question. How could anyone even *want* to be around strange dragons after what had happened to their tribe? She was hoping the students they'd sent would come back with stories about how terrible the academy was, and that by then all the other curious IceWings would have forgotten about ever wanting to leave.)

No, in Snowfall's vision of her reign, all IceWings would stay IN the kingdom, where she could keep an eye on them. Other dragons would stay OUT of the kingdom and there would be NO MORE dealing with tribes that weren't them.

It was a good plan, a straightforward plan, a nice, safe, brilliant plan.

Except for the problems.

Problems like queens who kept sending her messages about alliances and trade and building more schools like Jade Mountain Academy. (Shut UP, Queen Ruby; go AWAY, Queen Glory; deal with your OWN STUPID DRAGONS, Queen Thorn!)

Problems like the IceWings on her own council who wanted to meet with the NightWings and try to “build a bridge” over “centuries of violence and hatred” after the blast of magic empathy that had ended their last battle.

Problems like not knowing exactly where everyone was, and having to wonder whether the missing dragons in question had left the Ice Kingdom or were still lurking around somewhere, maybe plotting some cold-blooded murder.

Most urgent, though, was the problem that *hundreds* of strange dragons were apparently flying toward her shores at that very moment.

“You’re *sure* they aren’t NightWings?” she demanded again.

Her scout managed not to sigh, but she could tell that he *wanted* to, which was VERY DISRESPECTFUL and maybe she should have him punished. Wasn’t that what a fierce, powerful very-best-queen-ever would do? Punish dragons for disobeying her, or thinking about disobeying her, or making faces as if they were trying not to make faces?

“I could see flashes of different colors from their scales,” he repeated. “I promise you, my queen. Mostly green, but many, many other colors as well. No black dragons. They’re not NightWings.”

Snowfall paced from one corner of the balcony to the other. They were high on one of the tallest spires of the palace, with the wind whisking pellets of ice all around them. The sun was low in the sky off to the west, painting the



clouds gold and orange as it sank into the sea. She knew they were out there, but no matter how fiercely Snowfall glared at it, she couldn't see any dragons flying out of the sunset.

She wondered if NightWings had found a way to disguise their scales. Maybe Darkstalker wasn't really gone, even though all those not-IceWings at the Jade Mountain Academy promised he was. Maybe he was still out there, and he'd come up with a way to turn NightWings into multi-colored rainbow dragons, and then he'd sent them far out into the ocean to fly in an enormous arc so they could come at the Ice Kingdom from the west and avoid the Great Ice Cliff and soon they would be here to kill her and her entire tribe.

This was not far-fetched freaking out! This was completely reasonable, justified freaking out!

Her scout was looking at her as if he thought she might be losing her mind, though. She had to put her queen face back on and act as if an invasion of alarming rainbow dragons was the sort of thing excellent queens such as herself could easily handle, no problem.

"Well, if they're *not* NightWings, what *are* they?" she asked. He hesitated, and she answered her own question. "RainWings? I mean, RainWings. Of course. That's the only tribe with many colors, so . . . perhaps with SeaWings; those can be green. It's probably a group of RainWings and SeaWings." *Why would RainWings and SeaWings form an alliance to invade my kingdom from the west? her brain screamed. Coral and Glory have betrayed me! They decided*

*I'm too young to be queen and they're coming for my throne!  
Which is very unfair because Glory is the same age as I am and  
she's queen of TWO tribes!*

All right, Queen Glory probably wasn't coming to depose Snowfall because of her age. See, her brain could figure that out, and so it was, ipso facto, working perfectly reasonably, and that meant all these other worries were entirely legitimate.

Also, the RainWing tribe hadn't invaded another kingdom in literally hundreds of years. They hadn't even participated in the War of SandWing Succession. All they wanted to do was snooze around the rainforest eating papayas. They would be an utterly useless invasion force. If Glory did want to invade another kingdom, she'd have to do it with her NightWings, who liked attacking and killing and stabbing and violence and lying and destroying things.

*So maybe Glory found a way to turn NightWings into rainbow dragons and sent them this way and so they ARE NightWings after all!*

Snowfall rubbed her head, which was throbbing as though someone had shoved icicles through her temples.

"I don't . . . *think* . . . the RainWings and SeaWings would attack us," the scout said cautiously.

"Is your job thinking?" Snowfall shouted, making him jump. "ARE YOU AN EXPERT THINKER? Did we accidentally assign you to scouting because we missed your GIANT AMAZING BRAIN and all the AMAZING THINKS it could

have shared with us?! DOES IT SEEM LIKELY THAT YOUR *THINKING* WOULD INTEREST ME?"

"N-n-no, Your Majesty," he stammered.

"No," she agreed. "You are a scout. Go scout again and come back with real, actual information."

He flew away immediately, and then she spent seven minutes worrying about whether she'd been too harsh with him and whether an excellent queen would have said any of that, and whether a certain sister of hers would have been more serene and therefore more excellent, and then another twelve minutes growling at herself about how excellent queens didn't second-guess themselves and how she needed to be more decisive, and then she realized that she was accidentally thinking about murderous black dragons trying to murder her again, and she had to lie down and cover her face for a moment.

When she finally sat up, her aunt Tundra was standing in the doorway of the balcony, watching her with impassive raised eyebrows.

"Hello," Snowfall said haughtily. *I was definitely not panicking. I was resting my eyes in a very normal queenly fashion. I do not need to explain myself. I am the queen and therefore whatever I do is queenly, no matter what her eyebrows think!*

"Good evening," said her aunt. "It is time for the wall."

"Of course it is," Snowfall said. "How MARVELOUS. My FAVORITE PART OF THE DAY."

Tundra had a face that repelled sarcasm. No matter what Snowfall said, no matter her tone of voice, it all slid right off

that frozen expression. Tundra inclined her head slightly and held out the jeweled box that contained the IceWing crown.

As a little dragonet princess, Snowfall had looked forward to wearing the crown her entire life. Diamonds! Sparkles! Power! Everything she'd always wanted!

Until the moment it officially became hers, when it became clear what Queen Snowfall had had to lose to get it.

And now it was her least favorite thing in the world.

Well . . . maybe Tundra's face was her least favorite thing in the world. But they usually came together, so she could hate them both simultaneously.

Snowfall opened the box with an irritated sigh and lifted out the glittering, diamond-encrusted monstrosity. Spiraling spikes like icicles jutted up into the air, around a cluster of crystalline jewels and twisted silver arches. It weighed as much as a small polar bear and made her neck hurt the moment she put it on.

But she couldn't let Tundra see that. She tipped her chin up and flared her wings to usher her aunt ahead of her.

*Everyone says the war is over. Everyone says Darkstalker is gone. Everyone says the NightWings won't attack us again.*

*But everyone could be wrong. THE NIGHTWINGS CAN'T BE TRUSTED. They want me dead. They want all of us dead. If I could find a way to wipe them all out first, I should.*

Tundra's necklace of SkyWing teeth clicked noisily as they strode through the palace. Snowfall pressed her talons to her eyes for a moment, trying to drive the headache away.

Being the queen, it turned out, was like living inside a snowstorm that never ended. She tried so hard to start each day all new, with a list and a plan and energy. She'd get so much done! Each new problem was a mere snowflake. She could tackle them one by one. Little sparkly quick-melting problems.

Except the snowflakes piled up faster than she could fly, sparkles on sparkles on fluff on ice on cold on heavy wet layers of slush and freezing clumps, and by night she was buried far below them.

And then, every night, just when it was all too much, her aunt Tundra would appear with her cold marble face, and that meant it was time for the wall.

According to the ancient tradition of the tribe, every night the queen of the IceWings had to consider the wall that listed every important dragon in the tribe, and then she had to adjust the rankings of all the dragons in the aristocracy.

*Every. Night.*

*Whose idea WAS this?*

Snowfall had always considered the wall, known as the gift of order, to be one of the best magic things in the kingdom. She used to wake up before the sun and soar down to the courtyard to see where her name was each morning. She loved watching the word *Snowfall* climb higher and higher as she worked and trained and studied, until she was at the very top of the dragonets' side of the rankings. And there it

stayed, moon after moon — apart from that unfortunate blip when her cousins messed everything up for a few days.

But then Winter was gone, and Hailstorm moved over to the adult wall, and Snowfall was in her proper place at the top again, and it was excellent to look at. BEST DRAGONET IN THE WHOLE KINGDOM, the wall reassured her, morning after morning. YOU'RE DOING GREAT. EVEN YOUR MOTHER THINKS SO. SHE PUT YOU RIGHT HERE AT THE TOP BECAUSE SHE SEES HOW UNDENIABLY GREAT YOU ARE.

Sometimes it felt like a secret message from Queen Glacier. Like, *don't worry, I remember you, even though we haven't been in the same room in a while. I am quite pleased to have a daughter like you. I appreciate that you are not embarrassing me.*

It wasn't like that now.

The wall did not tell Snowfall she was undeniably great anymore. It said WELL? and MAKE SOME DECISIONS and STOP DITHERING and A GOOD QUEEN WOULD HAVE NO TROUBLE WITH THIS and WHAT HAPPENED TO BEING THE BEST QUEEN EVER? WHY ARE YOU SUCH A DISASTER?

There were no more messages, unspoken or otherwise, from her mother.

Now the word SNOWFALL was set apart, in its own little queen corner, off by itself. Now the task of reordering the

rankings every night was *her* job, and Snowfall had begun to suspect that the gift of order was less a gift and more an act of twisted revenge. Some queen must have angered her animus somehow, and he or she had responded by crafting this torture device, perfectly designed to drive IceWing queens insane for the rest of time.

Once upon a time, Snowfall had thought she would love this part of being queen. The fate of all her dragons in her own talons! The power to lift up those most loyal and knock down her enemies!

But it didn't feel like power. It felt like work, pinning her down like the weight of the crown.

Icy rain drizzled down as Snowfall stared up at the wall of rankings. The light globe floating over her shoulder lit up the names in front of her. Behind her, the three moons illuminated the snowy courtyard. Silver, empty, cold, and wet, speckled with weird shadows from the light tree.

*Empty.*

Only twenty IceWings had died of the plague (*only*), plus thirteen more in the battle with the NightWings, but since Snowfall became queen, the palace had felt as empty as if the entire tribe had vanished into thin air the day Queen Glacier died.

The entire tribe, that is, in addition to the one sister who had actually vanished.

Maybe the rest of the IceWings deliberately made themselves scarce whenever they saw her coming. Maybe that was always what it was like for a queen.

“Well?” Tundra asked smoothly. “Who are you going to move?”

YEAH, agreed the wall. YOUR MOTHER NEVER TOOK THIS LONG.

Snowfall’s head hurt. Her *teeth* hurt. Why did her *teeth* hurt? *Every night* she had to do this.

Even when she had much more urgent crises to deal with than the hierarchy of palace dragons. Such as the dragons that were coming across the ocean right at this moment, preparing to tramp their dangerous talons all over her snowy kingdom.

She wished she had a list of *their* names, and an entire history of their tribes, and an explanation for their behavior and an outline of what they were planning to do when they got here, plus a battle strategy for getting rid of them.

Tundra cleared her throat.

Right. The wall.

Snowfall adjusted the heavy crown on her aching head. She couldn’t remember even seeing half these dragons today. How was she supposed to know whether they deserved to move up or down?

When everyone avoided her, or spoke to her in polite monosyllables, where was she supposed to hear about the squabbles, mistakes, outrages, or triumphs in their freezing little aristocratic world?

*How did Mother always know everything?*

Snowfall glanced sideways at her aunt. Tundra had lost her husband, Narwhal, in the IceWing-NightWing battle.



One of her children lived in exile and another was in prison awaiting trial, while the third was recovering from a very bizarre magic spell. Snowfall didn't know quite what to think of Hailstorm these days. He seemed rigidly perfect on the outside and all melted together on the inside.

Tundra looked exactly the same, though. Snowfall never saw a hint of sadness or rage or resentment in her face. Even though they both knew perfectly well that Tundra had always hoped her daughter, Icicle, would take the throne from Glacier before Snowfall could.

*Never going to happen now, Snowfall thought. After all those years of competing, suddenly I'm the queen and Icicle's locked in the dungeon for being a traitor, and none of it was up to me in the end.*

She lifted her chin. *Act like a queen. All the time. No matter how much your teeth hurt.*

Hailstorm could go up a notch. He hadn't annoyed her at all today, and it would please Tundra, so perhaps she'd let Snowfall cut this short without too many more changes.

Snowfall stabbed her claws into Hailstorm's name and dragged him up a spot. She left Tundra's name where it was — safely in the First Circle, ever since Narwhal sacrificed himself to save the new queen.

She also left Crystal up among the top ten names, even though she could feel Tundra glaring at it intently every night. Wherever Crystal was, she was still a princess. She hadn't done anything terrible that Snowfall knew of. She wasn't

*definitely* out there trying to raise an army to steal Snowfall's throne, and she wasn't *certainly* hiding in the palace trying to poison Snowfall's food. She was only *maybe* doing those things. Snowfall couldn't knock her down the list for maybe crimes, even if the maybeness of them was terrifying enough.

If she left Crystal's name in place, she hoped it would look as though she wasn't afraid of her sister at all.

She reordered a few other names, trying to keep her eyebrows arched in a bored, haughty way. *So easy, this boring task*, her eyebrows yawned. *Easiest task in the world, definitely not frying all my brain cells.*

"Really?" Tundra said once, as Snowfall slid her uncle Permafrost down a notch (for pointing out, again, how easy it would be for SeaWings to invade from the northern ocean side of the Ice Kingdom, a reminder that Snowfall really DID NOT NEED right now, thanks very much). Tundra snapped her jaw shut as Snowfall glared at her.

Finally Snowfall stepped back, shaking her talons. Her claws felt as if they might shiver into a million pieces in a moment. The wall always made them feel that way, and they were always fine after a while, but it was unpleasant.

"That's your . . . final decision?" Tundra said with *just* a hint of skepticism in her voice, easily denied if Snowfall had snapped at her.

"Yes." Snowfall couldn't take another moment of this. She had to figure out what to do about the approaching dragons. The only other IceWing who knew was the scout who'd

reported it to her. That animus SandWing, Jerboa, knew, too. Snowfall had gone to her for a spell to protect them, but it hadn't been any help because animus magic was BROKEN, or Jerboa was lying to her, and either way she was useless.

So Snowfall needed to deal with the invasion by herself, somehow, although so far her strategy of pacing around her throne room all night hadn't been particularly effective.

Even so. Alone. That was what she wanted to be. Or, specifically, somewhere far away from Tundra.

She wrestled the giant crown off her head and shoved it into her aunt's talons. Her headache eased a little.

"Go away," she snapped. "Now."

Tundra bowed and swept off, leaving only a faint vibration of disapproval in the air behind her. She never said anything obvious to remind Snowfall that, only a few months ago, Tundra and Narwhal had been practically second-in-command to Queen Glacier. She never even hinted at memories of their former relationship. Back then, Snowfall had been so careful about every word she said, afraid of offending her aunt and falling down the ranks as a result.

Snowfall knew Tundra must hate the fact that she had to bow to her niece now. And *probably* Snowfall wasn't helping the situation by barking at her and ordering her around. She couldn't help it, though; she was too overwhelmed by everything else to add "be more polite to Aunt Tundra" to her list.

If there was *one* upside to being queen, surely it was

that she could finally snap at dragons who deserved it. Couldn't she?

Maybe she couldn't. Maybe that was *worst* queen behavior, not best queen. Maybe she was messing this all up every time she opened her mouth.

She glanced up at the wall again.

The wall didn't say anything (of course it didn't; it was a wall). But it was clearly thinking about how civil Queen Glacier always was, and it was definitely judging her.

*This is sane. It is normal to feel judged by magic walls. I am a perfectly sane queen with a well-functioning brain and everything is fine.*

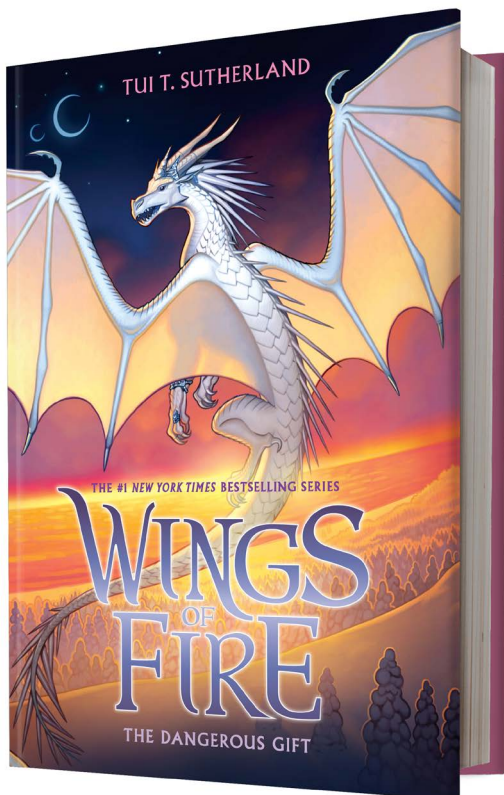
Something snapped in the courtyard behind her.

Snowfall whirled around and stared through the icy raindrops. It all looked the same: pale, icy, wet, weird shadows.

But it wasn't empty.

Someone was there. Someone was watching her.

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