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THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

# WINGS OF FIRE

THE LOST CONTINENT





## CHAPTER 1

Blue was a dragon who liked things the way they were.

That is, if he didn't exactly like *everything* about life as a SilkWing, he had to admit that at least he was safe, and, you know, things were fine, really. It wasn't perfect, but at least his tribe and the HiveWings coexisted peacefully. The HiveWings protected them from outside threats. And everyone followed the rules and the Hives were beautiful and spotless and there were always enough yams and okra to eat, so wasn't that the kind of world everyone wanted to live in?

Blue wasn't sure how everyone else felt, but he wondered about it all the time. He often tried to imagine himself as other dragons — were they all as content as he was, or was he luckier than most? Did they want the same things he did? What did they worry about; what did they hope for? If they seemed unhappy, why was that?

His guesses were probably mostly wrong, he was sure, but Blue couldn't stop thinking about it. It felt like a constant tugging on his imagination.

What was the fidgety dragonet next to him in math class thinking while she drew hexagons in the margins of her test? What did their rose-pink neighbor worry about while he cleaned the dead bugs from his webs? What about the HiveWings — how were their lives and hopes and lunches and morning aches and nightmares different from his?

The other lives drew him like a flame, or the scent of nectarines.

He spent the night before his sister's Metamorphosis as her, winding himself deep into the dream of being Luna.

Perhaps her wingbuds had started to flutter open as she fell asleep. Perhaps she lay awake for a while, gazing up at the shrouded stars, thinking of the moment she could leap from the top of the Hive and race the skylarks to the sea. He thought she might also be looking forward to the moonsilk dark she would spin herself and the days of emerald-tinted sleep inside the Cocoon. No one could yell at her or assign her extra work while she was in there, growing her wings.

He knew Luna wasn't scared, like he would be in six days when his own Metamorphosis time came. Luna had always felt ready for life with wings. Blue was not, and most of all, he was not ready for life with *her* wings, which meant everything changing.

Once she had wings, Luna would be assigned to a work order. Soon she'd be paired up with whichever partner the

queen chose for her and given another cell to live in. She might even be moved to another Hive.

It was normal; it was the way life always was for SilkWings. Everyone had a Metamorphosis. Everyone had a new life chosen for them. Everyone moved on.

But now that it was happening to his family, Blue found it extremely nerve-racking.

He was already awake when Luna bounded across the web and started shaking him, shortly before dawn. He wasn't sure he'd slept at all. For a while he'd been watching the glow of tiny lights moving far below them in Cicada Hive, imagining himself as one of those early-rising dragons on their way to work, awake before the sun. In the distance he could see Hornet Hive in one direction and Mantis Hive in the other, although the webs that connected them were mostly invisible in the dark.

He'd never been to any of the other Hives, but he knew they were spread out in a wide circle around the plains of Pantala. The enormous dragon cities rose from the grassland and reached for the sky like towering, dragon-made echoes of the trees that used to dominate the land. Their roofs arched out like branches, and the dense silvery threads of SilkWing webs created a canopy tying those branches together, so even wingless SilkWing dragonets could travel between Hives far above the ground, if they wanted to (and were allowed to).

He yawned and batted Luna's talons away, pretending he'd been in a deep sleep. Dewdrops glittered all across the web around and above them, as if it had rained tiny diamonds in the night. He could see the silk-bundled shape of Luna's mother on the outer edge of their cell, still fast asleep. His own mother was on a night crew these days and had been gone since midnight.

"It's today, it's today!" Luna whispered. Her pale green tail flipped back and forth, sending tremors through the silken threads. She bounced closer to Blue to poke his shoulder again and sent his hammock rocking perilously.

"Hey, watch it," he teased, nudging her away. "Some of us won't have wings for another six days." There were layers and layers of other strong webs crisscrossing below his family's web, ready to catch any falling dragonets . . . but even so, it was hard to forget how far down the ground was. He always felt safer in the Hives than he did out on the webs, which he worried was not a very normal SilkWing attitude.

"And some of us," she sang, "will have them todaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!" She sat up and flexed the tiny wing-buds on her shoulder blades.

"Well, not exactly," he pointed out. "Today is only your cocoon-spinning day. It'll take another five days for your wings to actuaaaaaAAAH!" he yelped as she upended his hammock and dumped him onto the web.

"Don't you 'actually' me," Luna said sternly. "I'm your older sister and I've been to, like, twelve Metamorphosis

days, plus I have the highest grade in our class in silk studies. I can ‘actually’ you under the table.”

“Yes, all right,” Blue said, stretching his legs one by one. “You’re the smartest dragon in the family, I know, I admit it.” He snuck a glance over his shoulder at his own wingbuds. They looked the same as yesterday: small, tightly curled, and iridescent violet, a brighter, more purple shade than the gemlike azure of the rest of his scales.

Luna’s wingbuds were starting to unfurl, so he could see whorls of cobalt and gold inside the pale green exterior. There were also signs of her silk coming in; already her palms and wrists were glowing a little, as though tiny fireflies were waking up under her scales.

*That’ll be me soon, he thought, tamping down a wave of panic. After my own Metamorphosis, I’ll have wings and silk, too.*

Maybe the changes would be small. Maybe he’d be assigned to live right here to help his mother strengthen the bridges between Hives. Maybe Luna would stay, too, and be a Hive drone like her mother, working for one of the upper-class HiveWing families.

She wouldn’t like that, though. Luna wanted to be a spinner. She was hoping to be paired with Swordtail in an artist’s cell near the sunny heights of the web. She wanted to make a weaving so beautiful it would have to be given to the queen of the HiveWings, who ruled both tribes — or at least to one of the queen’s sisters.

Blue had seen the queen only once, when she visited Cicada Hive. Queen Wasp had come through to inspect their school with twenty HiveWing soldiers marching in impressive exact unison behind her. Her scales glittered in perfect black and yellow stripes and her eyes were large and completely black, surrounded by an oval of yellow scales.

Imagining himself into her was almost impossible; it was like trying to imagine life as the sun. But he couldn't help trying. He thought about how she must wake up in the morning and eat breakfast like anyone else. (Although if the rumors were true, she ate as rarely as possible, and only predators: the head of a lioness for lunch one day, slices of black mamba in squid ink soup for dinner twelve days later.)

He wondered if her wings felt strong or heavy as she flew from Hive to Hive to check on her subjects. Was she relieved to have sisters to share her responsibilities with — or did she worry that they might covet her throne? How often did she check the Book of Clear sight? If he were queen, with two tribes full of thousands of dragons depending on him, Blue guessed he'd read it every day until he had it memorized.

At one point during her visit, she had spotted Blue and Luna and stared at them for approximately a century and a half, by his internal clock. He'd gotten the distinct feeling that she was trying to decide between adopting them or eating them.

Queen Wasp was as breathtaking and superior as all the



stories said. After that, her sister Lady Cicada, the ruler of their Hive, had never seemed quite so terrifying to him again.

And maybe that was the point of the queen's visits: to remind everyone whose claws held the real power.

"So?" Luna said, taking one of his talons in hers. "My last day as a dragonet! What are we going to do?"

"Lie around on the web in the sunlight?" he suggested hopefully.

"No, you lazy banana slug," she said. "All my favorite things! That's the correct answer."

"This isn't fair," he pointed out. "By the time it's *my* Metamorphosis Day, nobody will be left to do all *my* favorite things with me. You'll all be too busy flying around with your big flappy wings doing fancy busy wingish things."

Luna managed not to make a face, but Blue instantly felt guilty anyway. He knew she wished Swordtail could spend the day with them, too. But Swordtail was on construction duty on the west side of Cicada Hive all day — probably getting dusty and frustrated and missing Luna like crazy.

"Sorry," Blue said.

"Don't be," Luna said. "Once I have my wings, Swordtail and I can be partnered, and then I'll see quite enough of him." She grinned, as though applying for the partnership actually meant they'd get it, which Blue thought was far from certain. He didn't know any adult SilkWings who'd been given the partner of their choice. His mother and Luna's



mother hadn't even known their father, who had been whisked away to another Hive once there were eggs. Blue knew his name — Admiral — and nothing else.

*Better this way, though*, he thought. Burnet and Silverspot ended up loving each other much more than they could ever have loved Admiral. They were a good family, the four of them. It had all worked out for the best. Queen Wasp and her sisters knew what they were doing with the partner assignments. If Luna and Swordtail weren't matched up, it would be for a good reason.

"So where do we start?" he asked. "No, wait, let me guess. Honey drops."

"Honey drops!" Luna sang, bouncing the web again and fluttering her wingbuds. "Move your tail and maybe we'll beat the line at the checkpoint."

He dipped his snout into their dew collector, washing his antennae and the dry scales under his eyes, as Luna darted across the web to her mother. Silverspot sat up and wrapped her wings around Luna — quickly enough that Blue wondered whether she had been awake all night, too.

"Have a wonderful day, my darling. I'll try to make it to the Cocoon," Silverspot promised. "But —"

"I know," Luna said. "It's all right." Silverspot's mistress was bad-tempered and frantically insecure about her place in the Hive hierarchy, and she tended to take out her rage on Silverspot with thousands of small cruelties. Keeping

Silverspot from her only daughter's Metamorphosis would probably be the highlight of her year.

"Just think," Luna said brightly, "next time I see you, I'll have wings! We can go flying together!"

"I can't wait," Silverspot agreed. But when she hugged Luna again, Blue caught a strange expression crossing her face.

Anxiety? Fear?

He felt a weird chill run through his scales. Silverspot looked as though she knew something they didn't.

As if, for some reason, Silverspot suspected she would never see her daughter again.

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