



TUI T. SUTHERLAND

THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

WINGS OF FIRE

THE HIVE QUEEN



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by
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THE LOST CONTINENT PROPHECY

*Turn your eyes, your wings, your fire
To the land across the sea
Where dragons are poisoned and dragons are dying
And no one can ever be free.*

*A secret lurks inside their eggs.
A secret hides within their book.
A secret buried far below
May save those brave enough to look.*

*Open your hearts, your minds, your wings
To the dragons who flee from the Hive.
Face a great evil with talons united
Or none of the tribes will survive.*

PROLOGUE

The ocean swept across Moon's claws, as dark and speckled with stars as her own scales.

She'd always thought of the sea as the edge of the world. Once you got there, that was it; you couldn't go any farther.

But now she knew that wasn't true.

A dragon had been blown ashore, all the way from across the ocean — a dragon from a tribe nobody in Pyrrhia had ever seen before. A dragon with *four* wings instead of two; a dragon with long furling antennae and scales like sliced gems and the ability to spin silk that burned.

Luna was proof that there was a continent far on the other side of the sea, filled with strange dragons.

Dragons who need my help, she says.

Moon shivered. That couldn't be right. They didn't need *her*, of all dragons.

It was Moon's fault that Darkstalker had nearly taken over all of Pyrrhia; her fault that he'd killed so many IceWings, including their queen. She'd seen too much good in him and not enough of the bad. It was

too soon for her to trust another dragon with a story of persecution. She wanted to use her visions to help the world . . . but she was not ready to have the fate of any more tribes in her talons.

But Luna wanted Moon to save all the SilkWings. Luna thought Moon was the second coming of Clearsight, who was apparently the number one beloved ancient goddess of Pantala.

So, no pressure there.

She can tell us what's going to happen next! Luna's brain sang. She can see everything the HiveWings will do! She can predict Queen Wasp's next move and then the Chrysalis will know how to stop her!

It was like that all day long. Luna had extremely grand ideas of Moon's abilities and shining dreams of how they would change everything.

She was so wound up, in fact, about Moon's ability to see the future that Moon hadn't quite found the courage yet to tell her she could also read minds.

It was really awkward, hearing all of Luna's thoughts about her and Qibli and Jerboa, and honestly it was getting more awkward every moment that Moon *didn't* tell her. If she'd had any extra skyfire, she would have slipped it to Luna somehow, to silence the pileup

of expectations. But she didn't have any, so telling her wouldn't help much anyway.

I should, though. It's wrong not to.

Moon sighed.

She's seeing the future RIGHT NOW! came a thought, loud and clear, from right behind her. Moon winced and turned around to find Luna bounding over the sand. Well, trying to bound over the sand. The sand had a way of sinking out suddenly from under one's talons, so it was impossible to get any sort of bounding rhythm.

Those were partly Luna's thoughts. Moon sometimes got tangled up with them when they were too close to her own. She wasn't sure why, but there was something more entangling about Luna's mind than other dragons'.

"Why are you out here by yourself?" Luna asked, settling next to Moon in a spray of sand.

"I like to look at the moons sometimes," Moon answered, and then laughed. "That's my whole name, actually. Moonwatcher."

"My name means 'moon' in the old language, did you know that?" Luna asked. "Now it's a kind of moth." She dug a tiny hole in the sand in front of her

and dropped a thread of flamesilk into it. The glow warmed Moon's talons.

"I didn't know that," Moon said, but she liked hearing it. It made her feel a little closer to Luna, who could be a bit intense sometimes. "What's the old language?"

Luna shrugged. "I don't know . . . the language everyone spoke in Pantala before Clearsight arrived?"

"Clearsight changed your language?" Moon said, surprised.

"I think so. I heard a story once, anyway, that we all speak Dragon because of her."

That explained why the Pantalans and Pyrrhians could understand each other, but Moon was still puzzled. Why didn't Clearsight learn *their* language instead?

Maybe she foresaw that we'd need to communicate with each other one day.

Or maybe she just hoped for it.

"Are you having a vision?" Luna asked hopefully.

"No!" Moon said. "Sorry . . . no, nothing yet."

Luna's wings slid down into the sand and she picked up a seashell, fiddling with it as though focusing on it would keep her from crying.

"I am really sorry, Luna," Moon said. "I don't know how to get you back to Pantala. Nothing in my visions has shown me that."

"I'm worried about my little brother," Luna said, throwing the seashell into the ocean. "And Swordtail. He must be losing his mind."

"Qibli will think of something," Moon said. "He usually does." She hesitated. "Luna . . . I don't know if it's a good idea to tell you this, but I've been hearing a prophecy in my head."

"A prophecy?" Luna echoed.

"It started with my vision of you in Jerboa's hut. I could hear a few words — and now, whenever I'm with you, it gets clearer and clearer. I don't completely understand it. And I'm afraid it might scare you."

"I'm not easily scared," Luna said. "Please tell me."

Moon sensed movement behind her, and then a few stray grumbling thoughts in a voice she recognized. Qibli had returned successful, then. Well, he could hear this, and so could the two dragons with him.

She took Luna's talons between her own, closed her eyes, and let her mind clear so the words of the prophecy could flow through her. She did not love this bit. Cryptic rhyming prophecies were not as useful as visions, in her opinion, and the last one had gone to a pretty terrifying place. But the last one had also saved her and her friends, so she couldn't ignore them.

“Turn your eyes, your wings, your fire,” she whispered, “to the land across the sea.” She felt Luna’s shiver all through her own scales.

*“Where dragons are poisoned, and dragons are dying,
And no one can ever be free.
A secret lurks inside their eggs.
A secret hides within their book.
A secret buried far below
May save those brave enough to look.
Open your hearts, your minds, your wings
To the dragons who flee from the Hive.
Face a great evil with talons united
Or none of the tribes will survive.”*

Silence fell. Moon took a few deep breaths.

“I know the secret in the book,” Luna said thoughtfully, “but what’s the secret in the eggs? And the buried one . . . maybe that’s the flamesilks. No one can ever be free, that’s definitely true. A great evil. Hmm . . . maybe the HiveWings are the great evil?”

“Yeesh,” Qibli said, coming up and nudging one of Moon’s wings with his. “Didn’t we *just* face a great evil? That should count, I say, if anyone asks me. Great evil, faced. Done. Take it off the to-do list.”

She opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"Sounds like a new great evil," their friend Turtle said nervously from beside him. "Can I vote no on any more great evils in our lifetime?"

"Hey, Turtle," Moon said. "Hey, Tsunami."

The tall blue SeaWing founder of Jade Mountain Academy gave her an exasperated face. "Moon," she said. "I feel like I was *really clear* about not having anything to do with any more prophecies."

"They just happen to me," Moon protested. "I'm sorry!"

"Moon," Luna whispered, poking her surreptitiously with her tail. "Who are these dragons?"

"Oh — sorry, of course," Moon said. "Luna, this is our friend Turtle and his sister, Tsunami. They're from the SeaWing tribe. Thank you for going to get them, Qibli."

"Well, I *thought* that maybe *Turtle here* could *make us something*," Qibli said carefully, "which would perhaps *take us across the ocean*. So that Luna can get home."

"Oh?" Luna said, squinting at Turtle. "Like my silk sail?"

"But one we can steer — or something like that," Moon said. She and Qibli had agreed that they should

wait to tell Luna about animus magic. If she got this excited and full of glorious vengeful plans over Moon's future-seeing, goodness knows how she would feel about real magic and all the things it could do to her enemy tribe.

Things we can't let her do, Qibli and Moon agreed. Animus magic was too dangerous.

But something made by animus magic that could get her home — that wouldn't hurt anyone. Qibli had offered to ask Turtle if he'd be willing to do that.

"Right," Turtle said. "Make something. So here's the thing. I can't."

"Oh," Moon said. "That's all right, Turtle, we understand. Your soul —"

"No, no," Turtle said, looking worried. "That's not it. I mean, I actually tried and . . . I can't."

Qibli made a face at Moon, like "It's true! I have no idea why!"

"Luna," Moon said. "Can you give us a moment?"

"Sure." The four-winged dragon turned and trudged slowly back to Jerboa's hut, limping on her injured ankle. *I knew I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up*, her mind thought sadly, and Moon felt awful for her.

"Poor lost dragon," Tsunami said. "It must be so

weird for her to be here, surrounded by strangers, with no way to get home."

"So what's wrong, Turtle?" Moon asked as soon as Luna was out of earshot.

"I don't know!" Turtle said, flinging up his wings. "I can't do *any* animus spells all of a sudden! I've tried all kinds of little things and nothing works!"

"Three moons," she said, blinking in confusion and alarm.

"Here's the really weird part—I don't think Anemone can, either," he said. "Right before Qibli came to get us, she was telling me about a spell she tried to restore Tamarin's sight. I'd been thinking of trying one for Starflight's, so we were comparing notes. But she said it didn't work, and she couldn't figure out why."

Turtle turned to give Qibli a severe look. "*I suspect*," he said, "that Qibli *broke* animus magic."

"ME?" Qibli cried. "What did I do?"

"The soul spells!" Turtle said. "Remember how you carefully planned them out with us? To protect our souls and make sure we can only do magic that doesn't affect another dragon's free will?"

"And no magic that's selfishly motivated," Qibli said. "Right. We all agreed safeguards would be helpful."

"Except I think it ruled out *everything*," Turtle said. "Maybe everything we do could be considered 'selfishly motivated' or affect *someone's* free will in some way. So now *none* of our spells work."

"Oh my goodness," said Moon.

"That is — no, that's — that's ridiculous," Qibli protested. "I did not *break* animus magic. I do not *think* I broke animus magic. That makes no — let me think about this."

"Did you try taking off your soul spell objects to see if it would work without them?" Moon asked.

"Anemone didn't want to," Turtle said, "but I did, just to try a small spell, and it still didn't work." He pointed at Qibli. "Broken."

"If it still didn't work without the soul spell, then it's *not the soul spell*," Qibli said. "And therefore *not me* who broke animus magic."

"It really feels like it is you, though," Turtle said.

"Maybe something else is going on," Moon said, worried. Darkstalker flashed through her mind, making plans, tinkering with dragons' powers. She knew he was gone now; he'd been turned into a dragonet with no powers and no memory of his past. But sometimes in her nightmares he still managed to mess with her friends. "What if someone else did this to you?" Or

left something behind that did this to you — some kind of safeguard. He could have done that, couldn't he? So if he ever lost his powers, so would everyone else?

"There isn't anyone who could do that," Qibli said gently. He'd had to wake her up from some of those nightmares, so he knew what she was thinking as clearly as though he had mind-reading abilities, too. "This is just a glitch, not a sinister plan. We'll fix it."

"What about Jerboa?" Tsunami asked. "Is her magic working? She's an animus dragon, too, right?"

"Sort of. But she's an animus dragon who won't touch her magic," Moon said. "We can't ask her for help with this."

"Well, all right, then let's not," Tsunami said. "You guys, we don't need animus magic."

"We don't?" Turtle tipped his head up to look at her.

Tsunami grinned with all her teeth. "My friends and I solved plenty of problems without animus magic, thank you very much. It's called *being resourceful*. And *smart*. And *totally heroic, no prophecies required*."

"All right, Smarty McSquid," Turtle said. "So how would you and your resourceful, heroic friends solve this problem?"

"Well, step one is we need more information, right?" Tsunami said. "We want to go over there to see

if Luna's stories are all true. To find out what's really going on and whether we should get involved."

"I think she's telling the truth, from what I can see in her mind," Moon said, "but it is hard to get a full picture of the situation. I wish we could go scout it out and see if there *is* a way we can help her."

"Maybe also what the great evil is?" Qibli suggested. "A heads-up about that would be super."

"So we need to get to the other continent," Tsunami said. "We don't need a magic flying sail thing to do that."

"Oh, ah," Qibli said. "Well, I mean. I did think of this. It's why I got you two, specifically. Just so we're clear that I thought of this first."

"Thought of what?" Turtle asked.

"To get to the lost continent, Turtle," Tsunami said, sweeping one wing out toward the ocean, "all you and I have to do is swim there."



PART ONE

THE GLITTERING HIVE



CHAPTER 1

For most of her life, Cricket's best friends were books.

Books accepted you the way you were and shared all their secrets with you.

Books never told you to stop asking questions or accused you of being nosy and annoying. Books never said, "Cricket, you don't need to know that, mind your own business."

In books, everything had an explanation. She especially liked nonfiction: lots of facts and things had to make sense. If a question came up, eventually you got the answer. Every mystery was solved by the end. Facts fit together. When you wanted something explained, there it was, with no whispering or cold stares or slammed doors.

Another thing she liked about books was the fact that one of them had probably saved her life.

It was a giant book called *The Architecture of the Hives, Expanded Edition* — now with sections on *Hydroponics and Silk Bridges!*, which, technically, belonged to her mother,

and therefore, technically, was off-limits to “tiny grubby dragonet talons,” which was why two-year-old Cricket was hiding in a cupboard with it the first time everyone lost their minds.

“Why is this book so in *love* with itself?” little Cricket muttered. All she’d wanted to know was how to get from her home in Cicada Hive to the Temple of Clearsight in Wasp Hive, preferably in some clever, really fast way where she could be home that same night and nobody would notice she’d been gone. She just wanted to see it again, even if only for a moment.

But every sentence in this book was MILES too long and the author kept repeating himself over and over. Not to mention the never-ending rapturous paragraphs about every tiny curve and window and detail that “exemplified” Queen Wasp’s “exquisite mental quality” and “eye for visual balance” or some such nonsense.

“This is not a book of answers,” Cricket grumbled, flipping ahead. “This is a book of groveling.” She paused on a full-page drawing of Wasp Hive. The book was nearly as big as she was, so the artist had lots of space to draw the temple at the heart of the hive. She rested her chin on her talons and stared dreamily at the perfect columns, the perfect dome on the roof, the perfect library and quiet pools all around the Temple of Clearsight.

She'd visited it for the first time only a few days earlier, when her sister, Katydid, took her as a treat for her second birthday. It was the most beautiful place Cricket had ever seen. Imagine being the Librarian and living there forever! Imagine being in charge of the Book of Clear sight, the most important book in the world — and being one of the only two dragons who *ever* got to read it.

Now *that* was a book with answers. Hundreds of years ago, Clear sight had written down her prophecies of every important thing that would happen after her death, starting in her time and reaching far into the future. If Cricket read it, she'd really know everything! Maybe her brain would finally stop buzzing with questions all the time. Maybe she'd finally feel like everything made sense.

Cricket wanted the world to feel more like a book: Here is a question, so here is an answer. Here are the mysteries of the universe; now here is everything you want to know about them.

If her life were a book, she could check the index and go straight to the page that would tell her why her parents were always fighting or why her mother didn't love her. She would read the chapter about how Katydid was always sad, and then she could read about how to fix it to make her sister happy.

Those were the big mysteries of two-year-old Cricket's life. She had no idea that there was an even bigger one

hiding below the surface of her entire tribe, or that she might be the key to solving it.

A shriek from outside tore through the hum of Cricket's thoughts, startling her so much she banged her head on the top of the cupboard and nearly knocked over the little flame-silk lamp she'd smuggled in. She caught it with a flare of panic and relief. If she set her mother's book on fire, she might as well go ahead and burn the whole house down to hide the evidence — she'd be in just as much trouble either way.

The scream came again, and Cricket nearly leaped out of the cabinet to investigate. But before she could, heavy talons entered the kitchen, and she covered the lamp quickly with her wings.

"There is a traitor in this Hive," said her mother's voice, but not her mother's voice at all. **"Do not let him escape."**

Cricket held her breath, more terrified than she even understood. Who was her mother talking to? Why did she sound all . . . wrong?

More talonsteps entered the room — this had to be Katydid, the only other dragon at home — but without any further conversation, the two of them ran out the front door.

Cricket pushed the cupboard door open a crack and peeked out. The kitchen was deserted, although she could hear a lot of commotion on the street outside.

Curiosity and fear went to war within her, and as often happened in Cricket's life, curiosity won. She left the book hidden, took the lamp with her, and slipped out of the cabinet, hurrying upstairs to her mother's office, which had a window with a view of the street.

It was the same street she flew down every day: houses built of treestuff, turquoise mosaic tiles glittering in the light of the flamesilk lamps, neatly tended gardens here and there, a line of black stones inlaid in the ground to show young dragonets the way to school.

But instead of her polite, peaceful neighbors and the usual strolling dragons, the street was now bristling with marching rows of teeth and claws. Cricket had never heard the word *mob*, but when she did, years later, she thought it was almost right for what she'd seen — but not quite. The dragons below her weren't enraged or in chaos. They moved in eerie unison and near-complete silence as they surrounded the one dragon who was out of sync with the rest, cutting off all his possible escape routes.

He cowered in the center of the glaring circle, his red-and-black-striped wings folded in tightly. He looked quite old, older than most dragons Cricket knew. Maybe sixty or a hundred? She didn't really know how to guess the ages of grown-up dragons. But he was quite big and his scales were a little dull and he moved in a tired, aching-bones kind of way.

"Please just let me go!" he shouted at the crowd. His eyes flickered white for a moment and then dark again. "I promise I'm not a threat to you! I don't want to be like them!"

"That is not an option," the surrounding dragons said in one voice.

It wasn't just the voice that was wrong. Their eyes . . . their eyes were all wrong, too.

Cricket felt a spasm of fear. Throughout the crowd, the dragons' eyes were all white, like pure glassy marbles, like empty snakeskins, like dead blood-sucked grubs.

Three of them stepped forward with their claws or tails raised to point menacing stingers at their prey. Their faces were blank, cold, and merciless. They looked ready to kill without a flicker of emotion.

And one of them was Katydid.

Cricket ducked below the window frame, her heart beating frantically.

What is happening? What is wrong with my sister?

What's wrong with all of them?

She heard another scream from below and forced herself to peek out again.

The old dragon was being marched away down the street, struggling weakly, surrounded by a phalanx of dragons who were almost all Cricket's friends and neighbors. Except now they had been transformed into something else, something

dark and no longer dragon, and Cricket wasn't sure she'd ever be able to look at them the same way again.

Her eyes caught on a flutter of blue near a doorway, and she realized that a SilkWing was there, pressing herself back into the shadows to stay out of the way. The SilkWing's eyes were normal, but her expression was fearful and puzzled.

Cricket's gaze flicked across the houses quickly and she spotted five more SilkWings watching from doorways and windows. None of them had the snakeskin eyes. A couple wore resigned expressions, as though they'd seen this before, but at least all of them had *some* emotion on their faces. None of them were empty, like the HiveWings down below.

*So whatever's happening, it's only happening to HiveWings.
It's not affecting the SilkWings . . .*

. . . or me.

Her mind leaped onto this puzzle, preferring it enormously to the other option of contemplating the horror of what she'd just seen.

Is it because I'm too young? But that couldn't be it — there were little dragonets everywhere in the crowd, intoning the same words as the other HiveWings. Bombardier, the most annoying dragonet in her class, was among the ones who'd marched the old dragon away. Even Midge, the tiniest dragonet on the block, who had hatched a month ago, was down there with her eyes blank and teeth bared.

Maybe this was something parents taught their kids to do, but because Cricket's parents didn't like her, they'd forgotten (or neglected) to do it.

Maybe the other HiveWings had learned it in school, sometime when Cricket was reading under her desk and not paying attention.

Maybe there were secret meetings for all the other HiveWings except her, and she wasn't invited because she asked too many questions.

But Katydid . . .

Katydid would have told her if all the HiveWings did something together that Cricket should know about. She would have taught her how to blank out her eyes and march with the others and threaten old dragons and look totally scary.

More important, Katydid would never actually do any of those things.

Except she did. I just saw her.

A door slammed downstairs. Cricket glanced outside and saw the HiveWings dispersing. The ones who had marched the old dragon away were still visible in the distance, but everyone else was blinking and yawning and heading back indoors.

Uh-oh. If Katydid was one of the ones marching off . . . that meant the dragon who'd just come into the house would be Mother.

Cricket ran out of her mother's office and dove into the nearest closet just in time. Through the crack in the door, she saw her mother stomp past the closet and into her office in a blur of orange and black scales, her wings buzzing slightly the way they did when she was annoyed (usually at Cricket).

Come to think of it, it was really strange for Cricket's mother to leave her office during her morning work hours. Cricket and Katydid weren't allowed to make even the slightest noise before noon in case they disturbed her.

The office door slid shut and Cricket let out the breath she'd been holding. A part of her desperately wanted to burst in and ask her mother all the questions swarming in her head. Starting with, Would Katydid come back? How soon? And, of course, things like, So WHAT IN THE HIVE WAS THAT?

But some deeper instinct protected her. This once, she didn't let her curiosity win.

Instead she crept up to Katydid's room on the top floor and curled herself under her sister's dark blue silk blankets. She closed her eyes and tried not to cry and waited.

It was late that night when Katydid finally returned, exhausted and windblown. Cricket's father had come home earlier and Cricket had listened to both her parents eating dinner and hissing at each other. Neither one had looked for her or called to ask her to join them. But that was normal.

Katydid was the only one in the house who tried to organize family meals. She was the one who made sure Cricket was fed and got to school on time. In a year, she'd be the one who finally took Cricket to an eye doctor to get her glasses.

She was the only dragon Cricket loved.

Her heart lit up as Katydid came through the door. Cricket bounded out of the blankets, grabbed her sister's shoulders, and stared into her face. Her eyes were back to normal.

"Ow, gentle," Katydid scolded, but kindly. She removed Cricket's claws and rolled her shoulders as though they were sore. "I had to fly to Wasp Hive and back today, so take it easy on me."

"Why?" Cricket demanded. "Why did you have to? What did you do to that old dragon? What happened to your eyes this morning? Why was everyone acting so awful and weird?" All the questions she'd been bottling up all day spilled out of her, along with the tears she thought she'd beaten. "What was that voice? Why did you look so mean? Katydid, what happened to you?"

Katydid was supposed to say something reassuring. She was supposed to shrug and laugh and explain how it was a HiveWing game and Cricket would learn it next week, not to worry, nothing important.

But instead Katydid stared at her, with the least reassuring expression possible on her face.

"What happened to me . . ." she said. "Didn't it happen to you, too?"

"No!" Cricket cried. "I mean, I don't know what it was, but I sure didn't get all super possessed and freaky-looking and mean like everyone else I could see. Your eyes were totally white, Katydid! And you were growling at that old dragon! Couldn't you see how scared he was?"

"But that was a whole-Hive command," Katydid said. "All talons out. Every dragon in the Hive was included. There's no *way* you could have been left out." Her kind orange-yellow face was all worry. Cricket had never seen her sister look so anxious.

"Left out of what?" Cricket asked nervously.

Katydid rubbed her forehead and sidled over to close the door, although their parents were probably both asleep already and usually never came up to the sisters' rooms anyway.

"It doesn't happen often," she said softly, "but sometimes Queen Wasp . . . controls dragons. I mean, not just with orders and soldiers. I mean she gets into your brain and makes you do, um . . . anything she wants you to."

"What?" Cricket said. "How? That's — *what?*"

"It's very efficient," Katydid pointed out. "Like today, when there was a traitor who'd run away from her and was trying to hide out in our Hive. Queen Wasp can take over

all the dragons in the Hive at once and find him immediately. Then we catch him, and she releases most everybody while a few of us escort him back to her."

"But — do you want to?" Cricket asked. "Can she do it anytime she wants, from anywhere? What if you're busy? Or what if you don't want to do what she says?"

Her sister shook her head. "You *do* want to," she said. "She *is* the queen, Cricket. If she were standing next to you giving an order, you'd do it no matter what, of course. This is basically the same, except she doesn't have to be everywhere at once."

It's not the same at all, Cricket thought rebelliously. "So your talons move and your voice speaks and your wings fly and there's nothing you can do to stop it?" she asked. "You can't even say, no thank you, not today?"

Katydid threw out her wings. "Of course not! Cricket, you wouldn't really ever say that to the queen, surely. Be serious."

If she ordered me to stab someone, I would, Cricket thought. *If she asked me to drag away an elderly dragon who was crying, I would say no.*

She thought. She hoped.

She wasn't sure. There was a difference between being brave in a book and brave in real life, so there certainly might be a difference between the Cricket in her head and

a real Cricket standing in front of the actual terrifying queen.

“But how does it work?” Cricket asked. “I’ve never seen anything like that in any science book.”

“I have no idea,” Katydid said tiredly, which was how a lot of conversations between the sisters ended. Cricket wasn’t ready to let this one go yet, though.

“And why doesn’t it work on me?” she pressed. “Is Mother right that there’s something wrong with me?”

“No!” Katydid protested. “Of course not. I don’t know why. But why doesn’t matter — what matters is how to protect you so no one realizes it doesn’t work on you. You’ll have to stay alert for when it happens. We’ll find places for you to hide. The good news is she doesn’t do it very often. I’ll keep you safe, Cricket, I promise.”

“You think I’ll be in trouble if Queen Wasp finds out?” Cricket said in a small voice.

“I’m afraid maybe,” Katydid admitted. She put her wings around Cricket and they leaned into each other.

“But — if she takes over your brain — won’t she know about me, now that you know?” Cricket asked.

“No, it doesn’t work like that,” Katydid said. “She doesn’t get into our thoughts and secrets and everything we know. She just controls what our bodies are doing for a little while.”

Cricket shuddered. That sounded *completely horrible*, plus also it was extremely weird and unsettling that Katydid didn't *think* it sounded completely horrible.

But Katydid kept her promise. For the next four years, Katydid covered for her, and Cricket learned to be careful and how to hide quickly until the commands passed. The question of “why” *did* matter to her, and she did all the research she could, but with no luck. Still, she kept the secret and she was clever and safe and as cautious as an impulsive, curious little dragonet could be.

Until the most beautiful dragon Cricket had ever seen fell over a wall into her school courtyard, and all her caution threw itself out the window.

She couldn't exactly say why she'd helped Blue hide — or why she'd told him her secret — or why she'd left the safety of her Hive to fly across the savanna with him on a hazardous rescue mission. Maybe those were all answers she'd find at the end of her own book.

For now, all she had were consequences. She was a fugitive, wanted for stealing the Book of Clearsight and helping flamesilks escape the queen. The Book of Clearsight had *not* contained all the answers to the universe, after all. Worse, Cricket's secret Hive-mind immunity had been exposed in the Temple, and now the queen knew that she

was different — that the mind control didn't work on her. Cricket would never be able to go home again.

But on the other talon, now she had Blue in her life. And as she sat by his softly glowing cocoon in an underground cave deep below Pantala, she decided she had no regrets about what she'd done . . . except maybe one.

She really

really

REALLY wished she'd brought a book with her.

Cricket sighed and stretched out her wings. Four more DAYS of sitting in a cave with nothing to read? She was seriously going to lose her mind.

It had been very dramatic and romantic when Blue's golden flamesilk had begun spiraling from his wrists and they'd come running down into this secret cave and she'd knelt beside him and pledged to be there when he woke up and to stay beside him always . . .

But now he was peacefully snoozing away, growing his wings, and she was SO BORED.

She stood up and circled his cocoon. It was a beautiful silvery-gold color, but she missed the blue and purple of Blue's scales. She wished she could see even a hint of them through the silk. She knew that when she did, that would be a sign he was almost ready to come out.

She hoped his friends would be back by then. She hoped Luna and Swordtail and Sundew were safe. How long had she been down here? Her sense of time seemed muffled by the caves, but she thought a whole day might have passed. Had Luna been blown out to sea, or recaptured by the HiveWings? Had Swordtail followed her? Was Sundew all right?

It felt a little odd to worry about Sundew, who had been her captor only a few days earlier. Sundew — well, really Sundew's parents — had forced Cricket to help steal the Book of Clearsight, which led to this whole mess. But then Sundew had helped her rescue Blue and Luna, so that more than balanced the scales, in Cricket's opinion.

And the truth was, she kind of liked the fierce LeafWing. Sundew let herself be mad and always said what she really thought and made all her own decisions, even when her parents didn't like it, and Cricket didn't know any HiveWings like that. Prickly opinions that stuck out in the Hives tended to get smashed down fairly quickly.

Are all LeafWings like that? Brave enough to do their own thing, no matter what anyone else thinks?

Sundew's parents, Belladonna and Hemlock, would have preferred to keep Cricket and Swordtail under their wings until they found another use for them. It was Sundew who had insisted on helping them free the flamesilks instead.

And she'd kept the Book of Clear sight, instead of giving it to them. Cricket's parents would NEVER have agreed to that or trusted her with something so important. Belladonna and Hemlock had grumbled, but when Sundew put her talons down, they accepted it.

She didn't have to help fight the HiveWings who spotted Luna and Swordtail, either, Cricket thought. But she didn't even hesitate.

Cricket wished she could ever be that sure of herself. Sundew moved like a dragon who'd already found all the answers to her questions.

It was really quiet in the caves this far under the earth. If she sat still and concentrated, she could hear water trickling in the distance. And every once in a while, she heard weird little squeaky echoes, which she suspected — all right, she *hoped* — were more of those little reading monkeys, like the one she and Blue had seen at the bottom of a sinkhole on the savanna.

If I could find them, maybe I could borrow one of THEIR books, she thought wistfully. Which made her laugh at herself. Of course she wouldn't be able to understand the little reading monkey language (if that's what it was). Plus her claws would be too big for their tiny books.

But imagine holding a book by *another species* in her talons! What if she could translate it? What would it say? What

did monkeys think about? What were their stories about? What did they know that dragons didn't? It felt as if her head might explode, thinking about everything she might discover. *In another life, where studying them could have been my destiny.*

A noise sounded from the stone passages beyond the cave. Cricket froze, all senses on alert.

It came again . . . the scratch of claws on rock. The sound of a tail slithering along the floor.

Someone else was in the caves.

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