

TUI T. SUTHERLAND

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WINGS OF FIRE

THE HYBRID PRINCE



A decorative border with intricate, repeating scrollwork patterns surrounds the central text. The border is composed of two parallel lines with a complex, organic design between them.

WINGS
OF
FIRE

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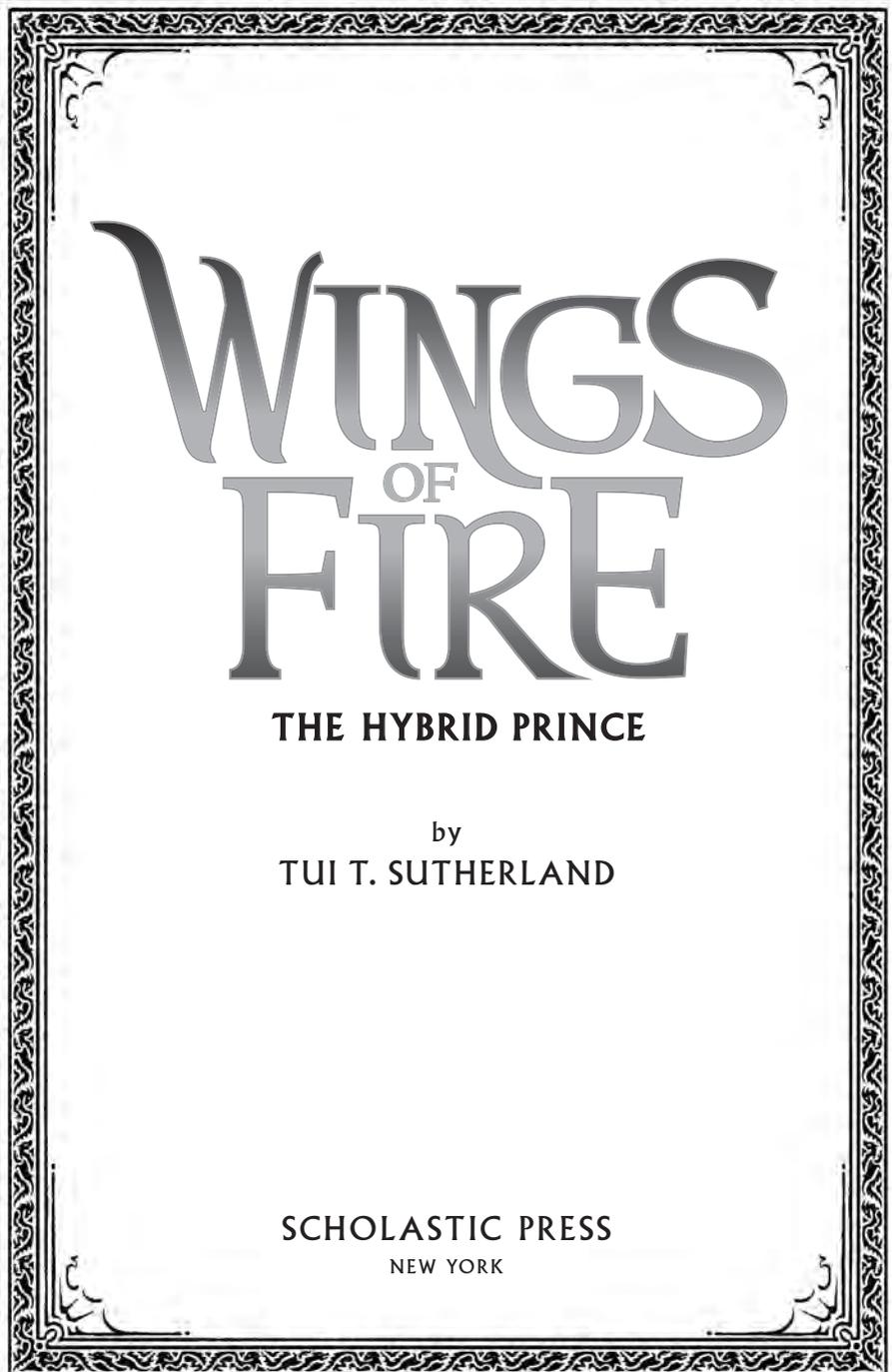
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BOOK SIXTEEN
THE HYBRID PRINCE

LEGENDS

DARKSTALKER
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WINGS OF FIRE

THE HYBRID PRINCE

by
TUI T. SUTHERLAND

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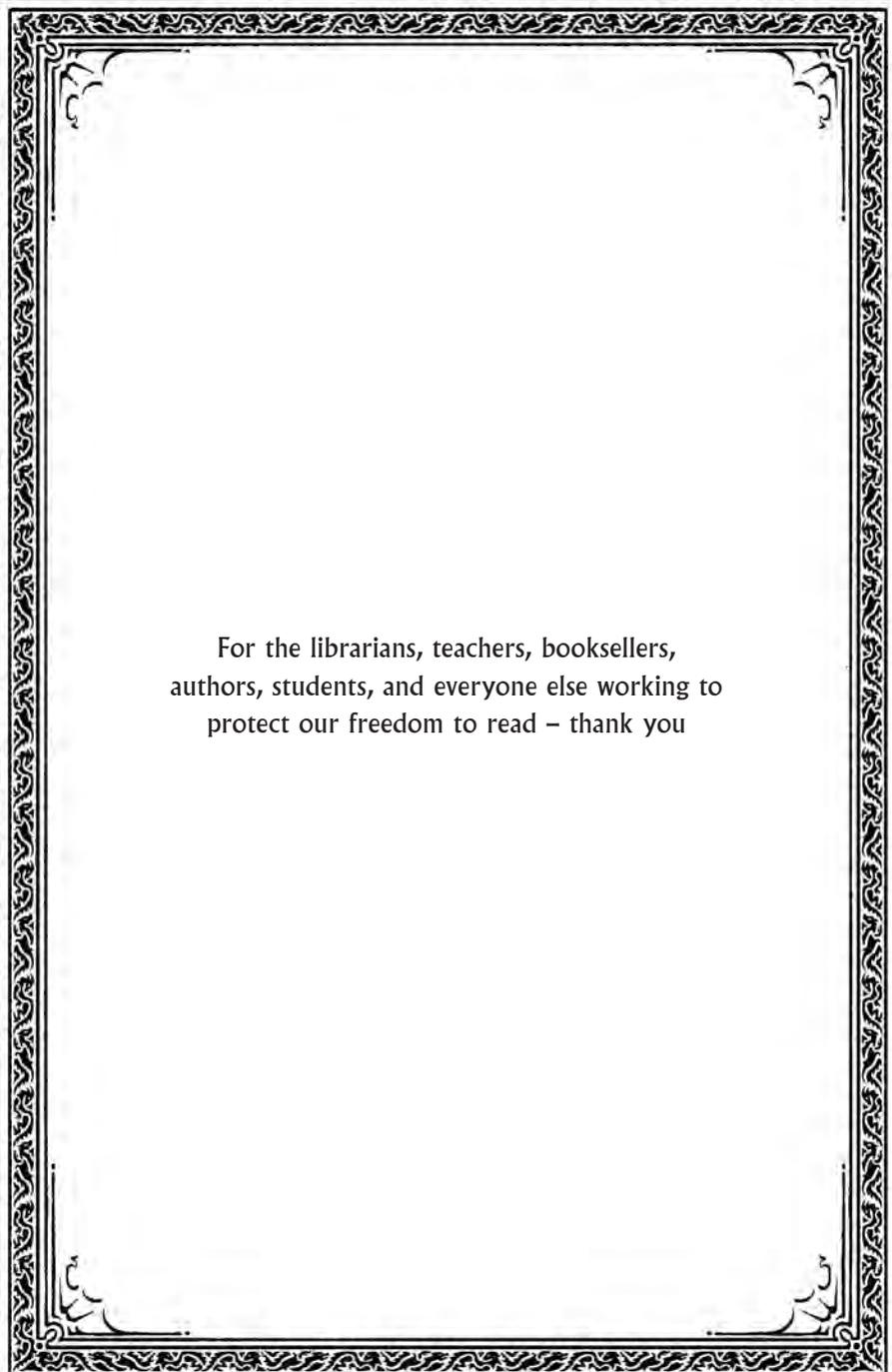
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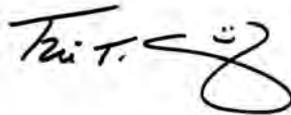
THE FORGOTTEN ISLES PROPHECY

Dear readers,

I know: What is this? This is not what normally goes here! WHERE is the new prophecy?

Well, it turns out the new prophecy is FULL OF CRYPTIC SPOILERS for this book (as one might expect from a prophecy! So inconvenient, dragons who can see the future!). Therefore, to preserve some mystery, we have decided not to put it here at the front of Book Sixteen. Never fear: The Forgotten Isles Prophecy will turn up eventually . . .

Happy reading!
With love and dragons,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tim T. S." followed by a large, stylized flourish.



PROLOGUE

*Over three thousand years ago
in the forests bordering the Beetle and
Leaf Kingdoms on Pyrrhia . . .*

“I don’t see anything,” Sorrel whispered.

“Keep your eyes on that cloud,” Darkling whispered back. “They’ll come from there.”

Sorrel shifted his claws on the branch, flicking rain off his tail and his long, leaf-shaped wings. They’d been waiting in the misty drizzle for hours as the sun set and the sky went from pale gray to dark purple. There were so many gloomy clouds bunched together overhead that Sorrel had no idea which one Darkling meant or why she was so sure that was the one to watch.

And then — movement.

Darkling was right. Two dragon shapes dropped swiftly, silently from the clouds into the forest, barely flickers of shadows. Easy to miss if you weren’t watching.

“They know about Harmony,” Darkling said. “Come on.” She leaped down to the forest floor, her BeetleWing scales shiny with raindrops, and Sorrel followed. Dread simmered through him. If other tribes had found out about the hidden village in the forest . . . did they also know what Queen

Euphoria and Queen Magnolia were planning? And if so, what would they do about it?

The sounds from the village were sleepy and peaceful, no louder than the rustling trees or chirping frogs around them. Darkling paused on the outskirts, scanning the shadows, then caught Sorrel's eye. After a moment, he saw them, too: two dragons perched like vultures in one of the vast oaks, peering down. The NightWing was barely visible, and the SkyWing beside him was so still she seemed like a strange, twisted branch of the tree.

Darkling and Sorrel crept closer, and gradually Sorrel's ears picked up their whispers.

"See?" hissed the NightWing. "Look at this abomination. BeetleWings *and* LeafWings, which is bad enough, but look closer, Precipice. This place has fugitives from *every* tribe." Sorrel recognized Bloodshed's voice and his heart sank even further.

"Seems like a violation of the Accords," the SkyWing agreed. She angled her head toward the village. A glimmer of moonlight reflected off something in her talons — one of the weird little things Precipice carried everywhere.

"It's grotesque," Bloodshed growled.

"It's illegal," Precipice said in a measured voice. "We have to tell the other Queens' Claws."

"We can't trust Sorrel or Darkling," Bloodshed lashed his tail. "They kept this from us. They know what their queens are up to. They must be punished."

"I'm sure the other Claws will agree," Precipice said.

Sorrel shivered. This was bad. There were nine dragons in the council of the Queens' Claws, one representing each tribe. They kept the peace by shaping and upholding the Accords of Dragonkind. If Bloodshed and Precipice thought the village was illegal . . . then Darkling and Sorrel would have to work fast to get the other tribes on their side, if they could.

But the village doesn't break the Accords, Sorrel thought, his claws sinking into the damp moss below him. It's not hurting anyone. Harmony is just a safe place for any dragon to live. What's wrong with that?

"This place undermines all of us." Bloodshed pointed a claw at one of the village houses. Outside it, a small white dragonet with leaf-shaped wings was playing with a blue-and-gold BeetleWing. An older dragonet, pale green with icicle spikes around his head, was sorting berries while he watched them.

"For example, I'm sure the IceWings would be *very* interested to know where that banished family went," Bloodshed said viciously. "They were supposed to suffer and die outside the Ice Kingdom. Not cozy up to *LeafWings* and live happily ever after in a forest village full of monsters."

Sorrel had been with Queen Magnolia the day two desperate IceWings came to her, pleading for refuge in the Leaf Kingdom. What was she supposed to do — drive them out? Kill them herself? She wasn't that kind of queen. Of course she had let them stay.

And then of course other dragons had followed, drawn by the promise of safety. That was all they wanted.

Sorrel didn't understand how anyone could look at Harmony, at these peaceful dragons living together and taking care of one another, and see a threat.

"My queen may not care," Precipice said pensively, "as long as the SkyWings here never try to return to our kingdom." She turned the object in her talons over, adjusting something without looking at it. She always did this at their meetings, too; her claws needed things to hold or move or work on while she thought.

Maybe we can talk to Precipice. Sometimes she listens. If we get her away from Bloodshed and tell her our side . . . maybe there's a chance.

"Your queen *should* care," Bloodshed spat. "This is only the beginning. Euphoria and Magnolia have bigger, more dangerous plans."

He knows, Sorrel thought with a stab of despair. He'll turn them all against us.

"Like what?" Precipice asked.

"Shhh," said the NightWing, and they fell silent for a long moment. Sorrel stopped himself from shivering. He was behind the dragons, pressed into a hollow between tree roots on the forest floor. There was no way Bloodshed could know he and Darkling were there.

Unless he's been a mind reader all along without telling us.

But he couldn't be. One of the rules of the Accords was that the NightWings couldn't appoint a mind reader to the Queens' Claws. No animus dragons or flamescales or

leafspeakers were allowed either. And none of them could use any of their regular powers during their meetings. That was only fair.

Finally Bloodshed spoke, his voice laced with quiet menace.

"I'll tell you somewhere safe," he said. "But trust me, both tribes must be punished."

"Then we'll call for a trial, and they'll be judged by the laws of the Accords." Precipice slid her little creation into her traveling bag.

"No," said Bloodshed. "That's not enough." The NightWing hunched forward, glaring at the village. "We must burn this place to the ground."

"Not on our own," Precipice said. "We should report back to our queens and see what they want us to do."

"Fine," Bloodshed spat. "But no matter what the other tribes say, these dragons cannot be allowed to survive."

In a span of heartbeats, with a muffled snap of wings, they were gone.

Sorrel turned his head quietly to look at Darkling. She was crouched in the shadow of the oak, angry tears in her eyes.

"We'll get to the other Claws before they do," he said. "I'm sure we can get the RainWings on our side. The SeaWings, too, I think."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. You heard Bloodshed. He's not going to worry about the law or getting

the queens to agree. He's going to come back with an army to kill everyone in Harmony." She flared her venom-tipped claws and hissed softly. "But he'll have to go through me."

Sorrel dug his talons into the carpet of moss underfoot. "What if we hide them instead? So there's no one here when the army comes? We can send them somewhere safe."

"Where?" Darkling demanded. "There *isn't* anywhere to hide from the queens on this continent."

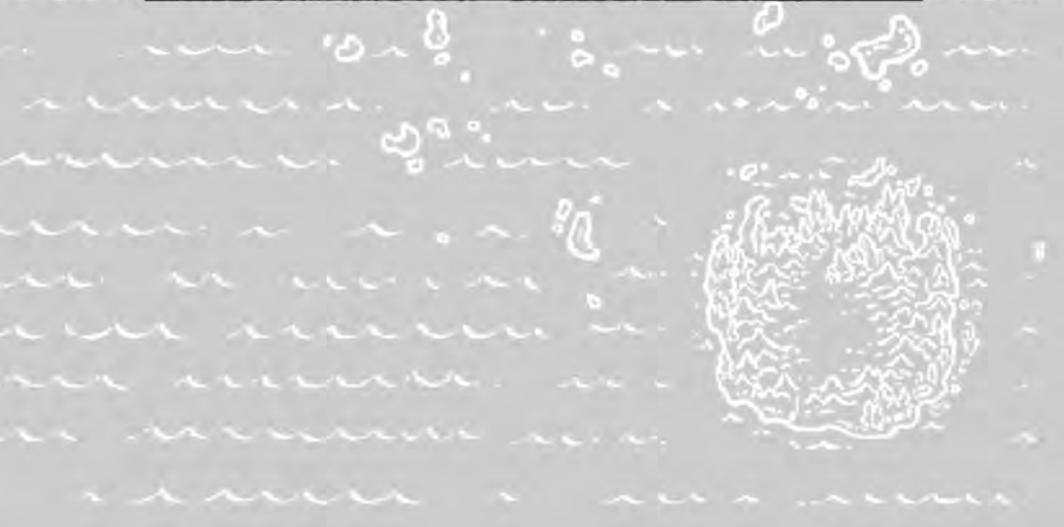
"Then maybe there's somewhere else," Sorrel said. The drizzle was turning to rain, slipping wet tendrils between his scales. "Not on this continent. A safe place far away from the queens who want to kill them." He took one of Darkling's cold talons in his.

"We just have to find it."



PART ONE

ESCAPE FROM
JADE MOUNTAIN





CHAPTER 1

My sister is a murderer.

Lightning flashed all around Umber, flickering inside the clouds like a battlefield full of smoke and dragon fire. The rain hadn't started yet, but the air was heavy with the scent of it.

She killed two dragons while trying to kill another. And she still kept trying — she wasn't going to stop, no matter how many dragons got hurt.

She's dangerous, and she's in danger. And she's my responsibility.

This was never supposed to be in Umber's talons. He was the little brother of his sibling group, the last-hatched and the smallest. He was hilarious jokes and cheerful suggestions and following orders and being agreeable. He was definitely not "shelter a murderer and figure out where she'll be safe" or "mastermind the fugitive from justice plan" or "make sure she doesn't kill again, because something's definitely wrong in there, good luck!"

But I don't have a choice.

She's my sister, and I'll do anything for her.

He could see Sora's shape winging furiously ahead of him into the darker and darker clouds. She hadn't stopped since they'd left the school, or even looked back to make sure he was behind her.

"Sora!" Umber called. "Sora, wait!"

Imagine if I lost her already. We just left the school; I just promised to keep her safe — and keep everyone safe from her.

He still couldn't believe his sister — quiet, sad, shattered Sora — was the one who'd set off a dragonflame cactus that killed two students.

Why hadn't he seen how unhappy she was?

Because she's been unhappy for so long, he answered himself. *Ever since Crane died.* He'd thought the school would make everything better for all of them — him, Sora, and their brother Marsh. He'd dreamed about how happy they would be. They'd be with their brother Clay. They'd meet new dragons and learn how to live in peace after growing up in a world at war.

But Sora brought the war to school with her. He understood some of that — he missed Crane, too. If he'd met an IceWing who looked like the memory of Crane's killer in his head, he might have snapped like Sora had.

Even then, he couldn't imagine trying to kill someone or his next step being "set off an explosion." He didn't ever want to fight another battle. He definitely didn't want to hurt anyone. He felt Sora's grief, but he'd never understand how she could put all the other innocent dragons in danger.

I wish she'd told me. Or Clay. We could have found her a new clawmate and gotten her away from Icicle. We could have helped her find peace. I think . . . I hope.

Will I ever see Clay again? Or any of my other siblings?

A gust of cold, wet air knocked him sideways, spraying raindrops in his face. He righted himself, shaking his head, and spotted Sora diving toward the trees below. Was this the rainforest? He couldn't tell how far they'd gone. He spiraled into a dive to follow her.

It took him a panicked few moments to find her; her brown scales blended with the shadows under the trees. But he heard her soft sobs below the sound of the branches thrashing, and he slipped through the undergrowth to her side.

She lifted her head as he brushed her wing, then buried her face in her talons again.

"Sora," he said, twining his tail with hers. "Where are we going?"

"Home," she said. She tipped her snout to give him a puzzled, tearful look. "Of course home. To Reed and Pheasant. Marsh will find us there."

Back to our siblings. To our big brother and sister, who have always taken care of us.

"Sora, we can't go home," he protested.

"I know we can't *stay* there," she said, "but we have to go talk to them — to tell them — to explain. Then they can come with us wherever we go. We can all be together, like we should be."

“We can’t do that to them,” Umber said, although he wanted so badly to go to Reed right now. He wanted his big-wings to say *it’ll be all right and I’ll sort this out, don’t worry* and *oh sure, homicidal sisters are perfectly normal, don’t fret, everyone’s got one*. But it wouldn’t be fair to Reed and Pheasant. “For one thing, they work for Queen Moorhen now — we’d get caught before we made it into the palace. And even if we did get to them, they should turn us in out of loyalty to her.”

“Turn *me* in,” she said, her eyes dark pools. “They wouldn’t do that.”

“You’re probably right,” he said. “But if they run off with us, they lose everything — and if we all get caught, they’d be in trouble, too. I don’t want to put them in danger, do you?”

“They wouldn’t *lose everything!*” she protested. “We’d have each other — brothers and sisters! That’s all we need!”

She wasn’t wrong. That was how MudWings lived; you stayed with your sibling group your whole life.

Umber realized he was already thinking like the other dragons at Jade Mountain. He was imagining families like other dragon tribes had, with falling in love, and dragonets you took care of, and work that wasn’t “fight a war until you die.” He’d *been* imagining it ever since he got to the school. A future with someone like Qibli, studying and maybe teaching and choosing his own path.

I’m never going to see Qibli again either.

He pushed that thought away. *That was a crush. Sora is my family.*

"You have me," he said. "I'll always be your brother. But we can't go back to the Mud Kingdom. We have to hide somewhere that the IceWings won't find us."

"It's not fair," Sora said in a trembling voice. "Icicle killed Crane and then I didn't even actually kill her and now we have to hide from her forever?"

Umber didn't know how to answer that. It wasn't only about Icicle — Sora had killed a SkyWing and a NightWing who had tribes and families that would want justice. Moorhen was a good queen. She wouldn't risk another war to protect Sora when Sora was guilty.

Should I convince Sora to turn herself in?

What if I did, and they executed her? I'd never forgive myself.

Sora's not evil, she's just . . . wounded, in a way that's hard to see.

"Maybe Clay's friend would take us in?" Sora suggested. "The one who's the queen of the RainWings now?"

Glory has to answer to her NightWing subjects, too, Umber thought. She's one of the queens who will need Sora to be punished.

"Let's find our own place," he said. "Maybe south?" *The opposite direction from the Mud Kingdom and Sky Kingdom.* "I think there are islands south of the rainforest. Maybe we can find one where we'll be safe and no one will ever know we're there."

Sora let out a long sigh. After a moment, she stood up. The rain was pouring through the trees now, sliding off leaves and sending sudden chilling cascades down Umber's spine.

“Fine,” she said. “South. But I still don’t think this is fair.”

She took off again and he followed, trusting her uncanny sense of direction. Sora was always their navigator on long flights, but this time they were going off the map of the known world. Umber didn’t know what they would find, or whether there actually were habitable islands there. He just wanted to get Sora far away from other dragons.

I’m not sure what’s happening inside her head. She seemed genuinely remorseful about hurting Tamarin, and he was pretty sure she felt guilty about accidentally killing Carnelian and Bigtail. But she had still tried to kill Icicle a second time. The war was still raging in Sora’s mind, and Umber wasn’t sure who else she might hurt.

Somewhere far away, somewhere peaceful, where she can rest and get better. That’s what they needed.

Then maybe one day they could come back, when all the war and death was far behind them, and Sora could atone for what she did.

Umber glanced over his shoulder, although the dark and the storm made it impossible to see the mountains they’d left behind. Rain pelted in his eyes as he thought of the future he’d dreamed of — studying with his wingleet, making friends, living without the shadow of the war over everything.

That was all gone now.

He turned away and flew after Sora.

The next morning they crossed out of the rainforest and flew over a stretch of choppy water. The sky was still gray and

overcast, and beady-eyed seagulls darted around them, screaming indignantly when Umber tried to catch one. He was so hungry, but Sora flew as though she had no plan to ever stop.

The southern coast of the continent rippled with inlets and wetlands full of mangroves that reminded Umber of home. But they didn't stop to sink their claws into the mud, even for a moment. They flew on, out into the wild ocean sky and over clusters of tiny islands, most of them no more than rocks.

Finally, around midmorning, they spotted a larger island covered in greenery. It was small enough that Umber could see the whole thing from the air, but bigger than the overgrown boulders they'd seen so far. He followed Sora down to land on the pebbly beach. Tiny crabs, no bigger than the tip of his claw, darted away in a flurry of movement and vanished into the sand.

Other than that, nothing moved except the waves crashing behind them and the jungle swaying ahead of them. Tangles of vines hid the interior.

Sora flumped down and covered her head with her wings.

Is this it? Umber wondered. Do we live here now?

"Excellent choice. So rustic," he tried to joke. "Great, uh . . . sand. Plus nonstop soothing ocean noises! Very peaceful. I always say, *any* neighbors are *too many* neighbors, am I right?"

Sora did not respond.

"Much calmer than the academy anyway?" he offered.

Maybe this was what Sora needed — space to breathe and be alone.

Alone. Umber sighed. That wasn't what he wanted at all. He loved other dragons; he loved meeting new ones and being in busy, noisy groups. But this wasn't about him; this was about taking care of Sora. Although he wasn't doing a very good job of that so far, as she still had her head under her wings and seemed to be finding him the opposite of funny.

He walked up the beach to the line of trees and peered in. Shadows, branches moving, ominous rustling. The very distinct, creeping feeling he was being watched.

As his eyes adjusted, he noticed a scratch on one of the closest trees — something that looked like a gouge left by a claw. He turned and saw another on a tree some distance to his right, and then another farther along.

Were there other dragons here?

He followed the clawmarks (if that's what they were), finding one every few trees until he reached what seemed to be the halfway point of the beach. To his left, the island curved away out of sight, and to his right, a stretch of craggy rocks trailed into the ocean and cut off the view beyond.

And here, at the midpoint, the clawmarks changed. Umber felt a chill run through his scales.

There were words carved into the trees.

NOT SAFE HERE, the jagged letters read.

KEEP GOING.

Umber felt as if sharp-taloned little birds were scuttling between his shoulder blades and crawling out to his wingtips.

Who left this message? Why isn't it safe here?

Does "keep going" mean there is somewhere safe to go?

He turned and ran back to where he'd left Sora — but as he came closer, he realized she wasn't there anymore. The beach was empty.

"Sora!" he shouted. "SORA!"

He found the churned-up sand where they had both landed and the depression where she'd dug herself in to rest. His own talonprints were still there, heading toward the trees . . . and here was another patch of scattered sand as if Sora had taken off.

Did she . . . leave without me? He looked up, but the sky was still and overcast. *She wouldn't do that, would she?*

Something howled from deep in the jungle and Umber spun toward the trees. Maybe she'd gone in there to look for food.

He flew up the beach and crossed the tree line, shoving aside the damp branches and strangling creeper vines. It was worlds colder in the shadowy jungle. Every tree seemed to lean toward him and he kept feeling tendrils (or snakes, *it's probably not snakes don't think about snakes*) coiling around his talons as he edged farther in.

"You get it," he heard Sora say, in such a normal conversational tone that he felt off-balance for a moment. "I see what you're thinking. You'd have tried to kill her, too."

“Sora?” he called.

There was a pause, and then he heard her whisper, “He doesn’t get it.”

He followed her voice until he found her a little farther in, perched high up in the canopy, on a branch of a tree that had twisted itself around another tree until the one underneath was dead.

“It’s just war, right?” Sora was saying. “They kill someone we love, now it’s our turn to kill them.”

“Sora, who are you talking to?” Umber asked, tilting his head back.

She glanced down at him, then flicked her tail impatiently at the canopy around her.

The shadows were full of eyes.

Eyes gleaming yellow and green in the dark, eyes that blinked slowly as they drew closer. Eyes sunk deep in shaggy skulls, glowering under heavy brows.

Monkeys? Umber thought, but these were the largest, hairiest, most sinister-looking monkeys he had ever seen — twice the size of Winter’s scavenger, and covered in heavy, dense gray fur. One jumped to the end of Sora’s branch, grinned down at Umber, and yawned to show off teeth as huge as a full-grown dragon’s claws. Its face was striped red and blue and its growl was low and muttering.

“My point exactly,” Sora said to it.

“Sora,” Umber said cautiously. “I think we should get out of here.” He would deal with *my sister thinks she can converse*

with menacing monkeys once they were well out of range of those teeth.

“Yeah, obviously,” Sora scoffed. “This island belongs to them.” She snapped her wings out, and the gathering crowd hissed. “I’m not *rude*, I don’t *pick fights* with creatures who *haven’t* wronged me or, you know, murdered my loved ones.” She snorted and leaped into the air, flying up through the leaves into the sky.

“Come onnnn, Umber!” her voice trailed back to him.

The eyes all turned to Umber.

“Uh. Sorry,” he said, taking a step backward. He couldn’t fly out the way Sora had gone. If he tried, he’d have to go straight through the crowd of monkeys, which would make him an easy target for anything large and shaggy that felt like jumping on him and maybe biting off his ears or whatever shaggy teathy monsters liked to do.

“I’ll just . . . go,” he said.

One of the creatures let out an ear-piercing shriek and threw itself down the tree toward him, faster than any animal should be able to move. Umber turned and bolted back toward the beach, tripping over every branch and smashing his head and wings into tree trunks as he tried to run.

He didn’t look back, even when the howling felt as though it was right on his heels, and as soon as he hit the open beach he flung himself into the air. He hoped he was just imagining the graze of teeth against his back talons.

The trees shook with angry growls as he soared out of their reach.

Sora was up in the sky, doing little flips around a wisp of cloud.

“There’s another island that way,” she said, pointing. “Let’s go check it out!”

Umber followed her, exhausted, his heart pounding.

Is she all right? he wondered. *That wasn’t normal, was it?*

Maybe they were both just tired and overemotional. She probably didn’t *really* think she’d been having a conversation with the monkeys. She didn’t realize she’d left him in danger; she would never do that on purpose. *Right?*

The next island was all rocks and it was covered in angry, giant-beaked birds defending their nests. Sora and Umber circled a few times without landing, and Umber thought he saw an arrow scratched into a few of the rocks, pointing south.

The island after that looked promising at first, muddy and crisscrossed with little rivers, but as they got closer Umber spotted another message spelled out in rocks on the beach. **NOT SAFE.**

KEEP GOING.

“Sora,” he said tentatively.

“I see it,” she said. “Let’s not land here.”

“I wonder where someone wants us to ‘keep going’ to,” he said.

“I guess we’ll find out,” she said with a shrug, which was quite a bit more casual than Umber felt about it.

They flew over three more islands (and several rock

formations and a lot of ocean) with similar messages, until finally it started growing dark. Umber's wings ached and his heart ached and his stomach was *so empty*.

"I think — I think I need to rest," he said.

Sora pointed to a crescent-shaped island off to their right. The two arms of the island curved around a bay that glimmered with phosphorescent jellyfish and silvery reflections of the moons. The sand was soft and warm under their talons as they landed. Umber didn't see any messages, and even if there was one, he was too exhausted to "keep going" tonight.

He collapsed to the beach and dragged sand around him with his wings. Sora walked up and down the shoreline, frowning, then came over and studied the nest he was making. Finally she dug herself in next to him and rested her chin on his shoulder.

Her breathing slowed and evened out, and he felt her warmth spread through his cold scales. For a moment, he could pretend they were back in the swamps, with Marsh and Crane and Pheasant curled up beside them and Reed standing watch for any danger. For a moment, everything felt normal and safe.

He was almost asleep when he heard her whisper, "Thank you for coming with me, Umber."

This is why I left Jade Mountain Academy with her, he thought. She's my sister and I'll always protect her. That's what brothers and sisters do.

His heart finally calmed down, and under the rising moons, he fell asleep.

In his dreams, he walked through long empty halls in an unfamiliar place, looking for Sora — or Clay, or Reed, or anyone he knew. He could hear laughter echoing in the distance, but he couldn't find anyone. Room after room was empty, filled with nothing but echoes.

Something brushed his ankle, and when he looked down, he realized there were hundreds of snakes covering the floor. All at once the room was wall-to-wall snakes, slithering and hissing and sliding and winding around and around and around his ankles.

He tried to back away, to turn and run, to leap into the air, but a giant python had him in its grip, and it dragged him ruthlessly into the hissing scales. The snakes rose around him like a wave — like water rising, rushing into his mouth.

Umber woke up with a start, choking on seawater.

A huge tentacle was wrapped around his front leg, dragging him into the ocean.

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