

A vibrant illustration of a green dragon with yellow scales and large, translucent green wings. The dragon is shown in profile, flying towards the left. The background is a lush, misty jungle with various plants and a small bird in flight.

TUI T. SUTHERLAND

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

WINGS OF FIRE

THE POISON JUNGLE



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by
TUI T. SUTHERLAND

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A decorative border with a repeating floral and scrollwork pattern surrounds the page. The corners of the inner frame are adorned with stylized, symmetrical flourishes.

To Hazel



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.*



A decorative border with intricate, repeating scrollwork patterns surrounds the central text. The border is composed of two parallel lines with a complex, repeating design between them, and decorative corner pieces at each of the four corners.

WINGS
OF
FIRE

PROLOGUE

The HiveWing city loomed out of the savanna, impossibly tall and imposing and indestructible-looking, and honestly, its big smug aura would have been enough reason to burn it down, in Bryony's opinion.

But it was also, bonus, full of their enemies.

Not to mention that it was made from trees that had been stolen from her own tribe, the LeafWings, long before she hatched. She had never known those trees herself, but she *should* have. They should have lived hundreds of years, whispering to their seedlings and slowly reaching toward the light. Instead they had been murdered, ground up into splinters, and mixed into the mash HiveWings called "treestuff." Every Hive was made of it.

Which is why every Hive is going to burn.

Eventually. This one was a bit of a trial run. Bloodworm Hive — even the name gave her the creeps. She was glad her leaders had chosen one so palpably horrible; she might have felt a tad less enthusiastic about burning the prettier Jewel Hive they'd flown past a few days ago.

Then again, maybe not. All she had to do was picture the dragons inside and even the sparkly Glitterbazaar became instantly more sinister.

But it didn't matter; they were here, behind a greenhouse outside Bloodworm Hive in the middle of the night, moments away from executing their great mission.

"I think it's kind of funny that all the Hives have greenhouses," she said to Hemlock and Pokeweed. "It's like, the HiveWings wiped out all the trees thinking they were *sooo* clever, and then after they were done, they realized, oops, plants are kind of useful, actually; maybe we should make some little houses and grow a few."

She brushed one of her leaf-shaped wings across the panes of glass. "Easy enough once they also stole the SilkWings' fire, I guess," she added.

Hemlock and Pokeweed, as usual, were being stoic and boring and ignored her by staring grimly off into space, as if they were too busy envisioning heroic things to trouble with conversations. She rolled her eyes, crouched beside them, and peeked into the jar Belladonna had left them.

Bryony had seen fire before, once when lightning hit a tree and burned it to charred ash. But she'd never seen

it like this, a long thread curled quietly inside stone, glowing like a bit of captured sun. It was so *small*.

Especially compared to the giant Hive in front of them.

“How can this possibly work?” she whispered. *How can this tiny bit of fire bring down a whole city?*

“We follow the plan,” Hemlock said. He gestured at the bags of dittany and other flammable plants they’d brought with them from the jungle.

“This would be easier if we had Sundew with us,” Pokeweed pointed out in his deep, slow voice. “I don’t understand why she isn’t here.”

“She’s busy,” Hemlock said curtly.

“Doing what?” Bryony asked, although she knew perfectly well he would continue to not tell her anything about his daughter’s mystery activities.

“I thought she was going to help,” Pokeweed said again. “I *thought* the plan involved flaming ivy growing up the walls.”

“It will,” Hemlock said, lifting his claws and flexing them significantly.

Pokeweed gave him a dubious look. “Maybe we should wait for her,” he said. “Maybe she’ll come soon.”

“Pokeweed,” Hemlock said, finally letting a bit of exasperation slip into his voice. “Don’t be annoying.”

“Hm,” Pokeweed grumbled. “That’s nice.”

“The plan is fine.” Hemlock picked up the jar and cupped it between his talons. The glow lit up his face from below, casting his eyes into shadows. “We have what we need.”

“Not being annoying,” Pokeweed muttered. “Being sensible.”

Another dragon appeared around the corner of the greenhouse, and for a moment, Bryony tensed, ready to fight.

But it wasn’t a HiveWing. This dragon had goldenrod-yellow spots on his wings, but the rest of his scales were shades of gray, pale and dark overlapping, like a chinchilla. Or a snuggled-up pile of chinchillas.

She’d only known this SilkWing for a day, but every time she saw him, she thought of small adorable furry things.

“Grayling!” she whispered.

“Hi, Bryony,” he whispered back, smiling.

“Is it done?” Hemlock interrupted.

“We did the best we could,” Grayling said. “All the SilkWings who sleep in the Hive have been warned to stay near an exit and keep their dragonets with them so they can evacuate first. We have members of the Chrysalis assigned to retrieve our eggs and the

dragonets going through Metamorphosis right now. And we've sent messages along the webs that connect this Hive to Jewel Hive and Mantis Hive." He hesitated. "If we had one more day —"

"We don't," Hemlock said, not unkindly, but with absolute finality in his voice.

Grayling's gaze went to the long bridge of silk overhead that stretched toward Mantis Hive. It glimmered a little, as if some of the starlight was caught in the silvery filaments.

"Do you really think the whole city will burn?" he asked. "And the webs along with it?"

"We're not going to set the webs alight on purpose," Bryony answered. "But if the Hive burns down like we're hoping . . ." She didn't have to finish the sentence. It was pretty clear what would happen to the webs that were woven to the top levels of the Hive.

When Sundew had first told them about the underground movement of SilkWings called the Chrysalis, Bryony had thought someone must have cracked her very hard on the head. She had grown up side by side with Sundew, who was only a year younger than her. They had both been raised with the absolutely certain knowledge that SilkWings were weak and timid and never stood up to anyone.

And then when Sundew said they needed to *warn* the Chrysalis before burning Bloodworm Hive . . . well, that was truly epic nonsense. Wouldn't someone go straight to tell the HiveWings? Wouldn't that ruin the whole plan?

But then they found Grayling and a few other dragons from the Bloodworm Hive Chrysalis. And now Bryony couldn't even think about what would have happened if they'd burned it without getting the SilkWings out first. She'd never have known Grayling at all; he might have died, and she wouldn't have known she'd lost him.

"All right," Grayling said, shaking himself. "Then how can the Chrysalis help?"

"You would do that?" Bryony asked, surprised.

A spark kindled in Hemlock's eyes. "You could burn it from the inside, too," he said. "That would be very helpful."

Grayling looked up at the Hive — no, not the Hive, Bryony realized. He was looking at the webs where he and his family lived, the home they had spun for themselves. The only home they knew. This mission, if it succeeded, would leave them lost in the savanna, with no idea where they'd end up.

“You don’t have to do anything,” she said, earning herself a frown from Hemlock. “It will be massively dangerous.”

He met her eyes and tipped his head to the side. “I’ve wanted to fight back against the HiveWings almost since the day I hatched,” he said softly. “They let my father die and they sent my brother away to Tsetse Hive. Lady Bloodworm is one of the cruelest of Wasp’s sisters; that’s why the Chrysalis here has so many members. I’m ready to do something real. I think we all are.”

“Excellent,” Hemlock said. “Let’s choose locations and plan our timing.”

“We all have to act fast and as synchronized as possible,” Bryony said to Grayling. “Queen Wasp will be inside all these dragons the moment she realizes what’s happening. By then it has to be too late for her to stop it.”

“I’ll show you the plants we have for burning,” Pokeweed said lugubriously.

“I can do that,” Bryony jumped in. “You and Hemlock review the interior map of the Hive we got from the Chrysalis.” She brushed Grayling’s wing with her own and beckoned him over to the supplies.

As she described each plant — how quickly it would catch, how long it would burn, which ones would spray burning oil — she caught Grayling watching her with a strange expression in his eyes.

“What?” she said, putting down a bundle of dead palm fronds they’d gathered that morning along the shore of Dragonfly Bay.

“It’s just . . .” He hesitated. “I’m just amazed at how much trouble your tribe has gone to — all these plants and all this work — just to save us.”

Bryony tried not to show how startled she was. “To save you?” she echoed.

“The SilkWings,” he said. “You could have left us to rot in Queen Wasp’s talons, after we abandoned you during the Tree Wars. But you didn’t. You came back to set us free.”

Oh, the guilt! Bryony felt it stabbing all her internal organs at once. How could she tell him that she’d never once thought about the plight of the SilkWings before she met him? That their mission was vengeance, not rescue?

“It’s n-not —” she stammered. “I mean, we — we’re doing it for ourselves. Honestly. Please don’t think of us like heroes or saviors or anything.”

He flicked his tail, nearly toppling a neat pile of dry grass. "Maybe as friends, then?" he asked.

"That works for me," she said. "I'm sorry we're burning down your home."

"It's more like a cage anyway," he said. "Where are you going to go after it burns?"

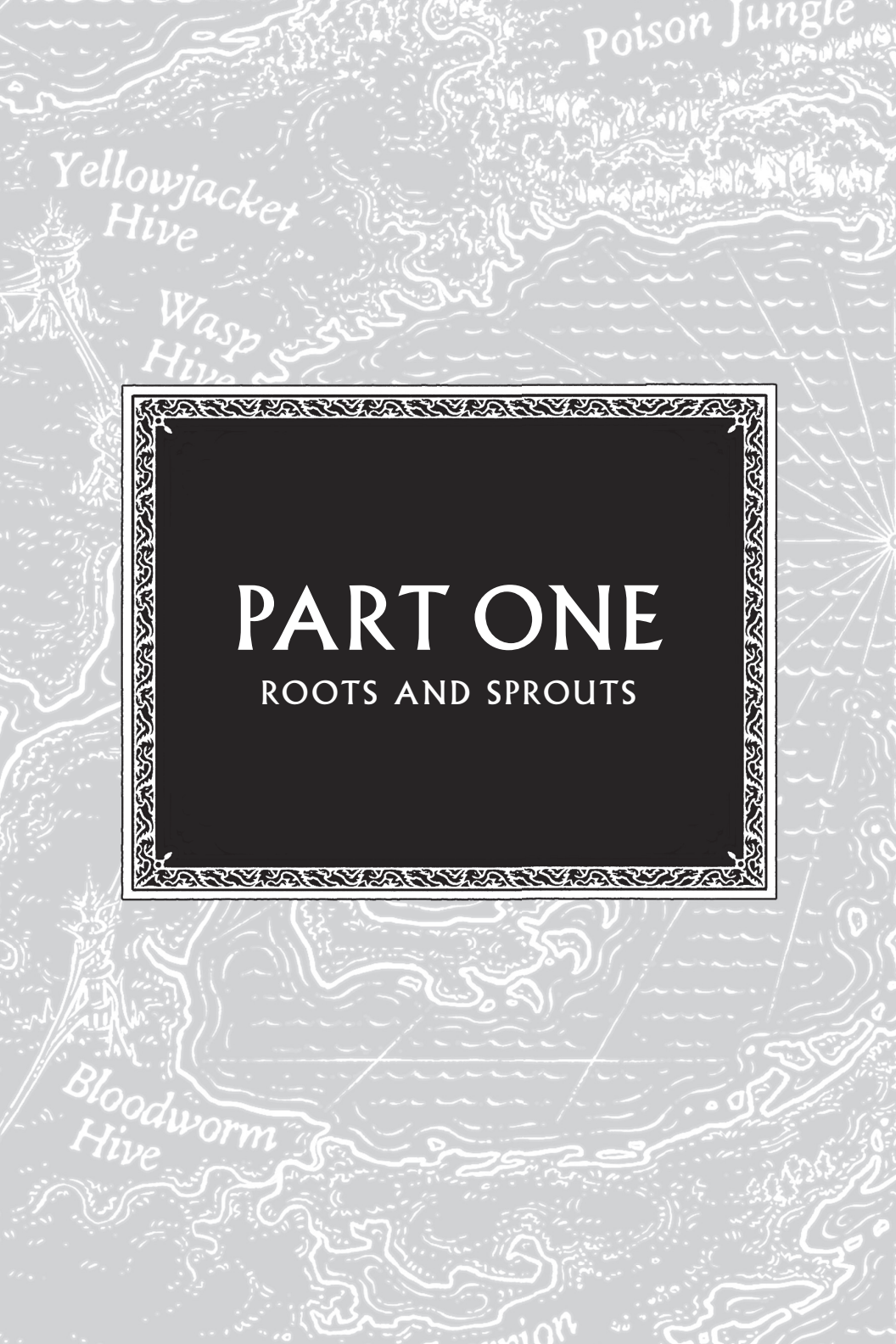
"We found some underground caves to hide in for a few days," she said. "Belladonna said we had to lie low so we wouldn't lead Wasp back to everyone else."

"Oh," he said, running his claws over one of the palm fronds. "Any chance there's room in there for a small friendly SilkWing?" She smiled at him, and he made a "sorry about this" face. "Or . . . a couple hundred of them?"

"I'll talk to Hemlock about it," she promised. She could see the older LeafWing beckoning them, his talons holding down the scribbled map of the interior of the Hive.

"Thank you," Grayling said.

She twined her tail around his. "Let's go set a fire."



PART ONE

ROOTS AND SPROUTS



CHAPTER 1

Sundew sometimes liked to imagine that she could fly all the way around the world without stopping, using nothing but her fury to keep her going.

When she got tired, she'd think about all the things that made her angry.

HiveWings.

HiveWings.

HiveWings.

Queen Wasp.

The murder of the trees.

The attempted murder of my entire tribe.

HiveWings.

Mother and Father . . .

No, those weren't allowed on this list.

HiveWings. Sundew imagined stabbing her claws into their necks, ripping their smug expressions off their faces,

choking them with strangler vines, releasing fire ants into their eyeballs . . .

A flash of yellow and black caught her eye, and she whipped her head toward it with a hiss.

“Sorry!” Cricket dropped to a different air current and called up, “I didn’t mean to startle you!”

“You didn’t,” Sundew snapped. It was sort of difficult to rage-fly on the power of hating HiveWings when there were two HiveWings flying right alongside her, being *extremely* noisy and distracting. Also when one of those HiveWings was sort of practically almost a friendish kind of dragon, maybe, and the other was the size of a large mango and madly in love with Sundew.

“SNUDOO!” cried the little dragonet tied snugly to Cricket’s chest. Bumblebee reached her tiny talons toward Sundew. “MRBLE SNUDOO!”

“Is that tiny lizard trying to say my name?” Sundew asked, alarmed. “How did THAT happen?”

“She’s very smart,” Cricket said proudly.

“Not if she thinks she wants *my* attention,” Sundew pointed out. She turned her head north again, beating her wings harder.

There was a dark line on the horizon ahead. They were almost there.

The Poison Jungle. Home. Or Never-home, as some of the

LeafWings called it, but the only home Sundew had ever known. Her tribe's true home, the rest of the continent, covered in vast ancient forests, only existed in stories of the old days and dreams for the future.

Sundew breathed and flew.

Each wingbeat brought her closer.

Closer to the thorn-sharp, fangs-bared, twisted safety of the Poison Jungle.

Closer to the dragon she wasn't allowed to think about.

She felt the pouch she kept over her heart thump once, twice, again, in rhythm with her wings. It was the only pouch, out of the many wrapped around her, that didn't hold venomous insects or useful plants.

Inside it was nothing but a small jade frog.

Which didn't help with the not-thinking-about. It served, in fact, the opposite purpose.

But Sundew still brought it with her everywhere. As long as her parents, Belladonna and Hemlock, didn't know what it meant, they couldn't do anything about it.

"Um — Sundew?" Blue asked nervously from her left. She tilted her head toward him. It was weird to know a SilkWing, after years of scoffing about how beautiful and useless they were. Even weirder, he'd turned out to not be useless at all. *Flamesilk. I should have been a flamesilk. If I had the power of fire . . .*

Well, I sort of do, now that we have Blue.

That thought made her uncomfortable, and she wasn't sure why. She bared her teeth at a passing starling, and it nearly fell out of the sky in fright.

Blue's wings glimmered azure in the rays of the setting sun. "Um. Isn't the Poison Jungle . . . really dangerous?"

"Or is that a lie?" Swordtail asked from her other side. "Like, maybe LeafWings spread stories exaggerating how dangerous it is so that no one else would go there? That would make sense; I bet that's it."

Sundew laughed. "How could *we* spread stories?" she said. "We haven't communicated with any SilkWings or HiveWings since the end of the Tree Wars fifty years ago. We were supposed to be extinct. That was kind of your whole goal, remember?"

"Not *our* goal," Blue protested in distress.

"No, everything you've heard about the jungle is true," Sundew said to Swordtail. "Queen Wasp sent a few expeditions to the Poison Jungle looking for resources and trying to make sure no dragons were hiding from her there. Almost all of them died; the rest are the ones who brought the stories back to you."

She frowned. "One of the expeditions was sent to burn down the jungle, because Wasp wanted no more trees

anywhere. *None of those dragons survived.*" She flicked her tail. "We helped the jungle make sure of that. No one who comes for the trees again will be allowed to live."

"But then how have you survived?" Blue asked. "How can there be a whole tribe living in a place that's so dangerous for dragons?"

"We didn't have a choice," Sundew answered. "It's easier when you grow up knowing what to avoid and how to treat snakebites and where the quicksand is. Nowadays we only lose a few dragons a year to the carnivorous plants."

"The what now?" Swordtail said, his voice rising an octave. "CARNIVOROUS WHATS?"

"Yeah, *you will probably* get eaten," Sundew said with a shrug. "They always get the loud flappy ones. And that HiveWing dragonet is cobra lily food for sure."

"ZAMEE!" Bumblebee shouted from behind them.

"I am not enjoying this conversation," Swordtail observed.

"Do we have to go to the place with the certain death?" Blue asked.

"Yes, because it's my home," Sundew said. "And also the only place you'll be safe from Queen Wasp after burning down her greenhouse of mind-control plants." *And also because there's a dragon there who I'm definitely not thinking about and certainly do not think about all the time.*

“We’d be safe across the ocean, wouldn’t we?” Cricket offered, flying back into Sundew’s line of sight. “In the Distant Kingdoms?”

Sundew laughed. “If you would all like to fly out to sea in search of an imaginary continent, go for it.” She thought, but did not add: *Except for you, Blue. You belong to the LeafWings now.*

The group fell silent as they drew closer to the edge of the Poison Jungle. The Snarling River, dark and swift-flowing, marked the boundary, but the jungle was always prowling across the line. Pitcher plants and cobra lilies grew thick along the shores on both sides, and every time Sundew flew this way, she saw more plants extending their tendrils across the water, more twisted little thorn trees starting to muscle their way up on the wrong side.

If we set it free, the Poison Jungle could devour the continent for us, and all the HiveWings, too.

If I set it free. I could unleash the jungle and send it forth to strangle our enemies.

I won’t, though. I don’t want a Pantala covered in poisonous, dragon-eating plants. I want the Pantala of the old stories: the giant forests that stretched from shore to shore.

She closed her talons into fists.

But if I can’t have that, feeding all the HiveWings to overgrown bladderworts is a solid plan B.

Sundew was over the river when she realized the others had stopped, hovering in midair to stare at the trees. She swung around and flew back to them.

"They're so big," Cricket said in an awestruck voice. Her gold-orange wings hummed like a cloud of dragonflies. The late-afternoon sunlight caught in her glasses, reflecting the rippling water below. "I didn't know trees grew so enormous. Some of them look as tall as the Hives! How old are they? Can you tell? Would they all get that big if they lived that long? Are they *all* dangerous? Oh, please tell me you have books about all these plants!"

"I want to know how you can fly in there when everything's so close together," Swordtail declared, squinting at the tangles of vines, fallen trees, giant spiderwebs, and thickets of plants that wove impassable barriers between the trees.

"It feels like one vast creature with a million eyes," Blue added softly. "I can almost hear it breathing . . . like it's waiting for us."

The others stared at him, and even Sundew, who was used to the creepy aura of the Poison Jungle, felt a trickle of ice run through her veins.

"Arglerarrgh flort," Bumblebee announced, jabbing Cricket's chin with one of her claws and breaking the spell. "Eeeepow? Snudoo?" She reached hopefully toward Sundew.

"I think 'eeepow' means 'eat now,'" Cricket explained with a sigh. "She's been yelling it for the last half a continent."

"EeeeeeeeeeePOW!" Bumblebee demonstrated with expansive arm gestures, trying to wiggle out of her sling. "EEEEEEEEEEepow!"

"You can wait until we get to the village," Sundew said sternly. "Don't make that face at me. No whining, or you can wait until tomorrow morning."

Bumblebee flopped slowly over backward so her head and wings drooped toward the river below. "Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee~~never~~," she said, mournfully and distinctly.

"Awww," Cricket said, tucking the dragonet back into place and patting her head. "She's such a quick learner." Bumblebee snuggled into her chest and gave a loud, dramatic sigh.

Sundew turned to Swordtail. "We keep the outer layers of the jungle as wild and impenetrable as possible," she said. "For obvious reasons."

"Obv — oh, she means you," he said to Cricket. "The obvious reasons are your murderous tribe and your evil queen."

"Swordtail, come on," Blue said, drawing closer to Cricket.

"Your tribe isn't exactly welcome here either, SilkWing," Sundew pointed out. She had a feeling she was going to get a pretty strong reaction when they got to the LeafWing

village. But it was Belladonna's fault for leaving and setting a Hive on fire instead of waiting for Sundew to meet her, as she'd promised. If she didn't want Sundew bringing strangers into the jungle, she should have stayed in one place till they came.

Sundew looked up at the press of jostling tree trunks that rose before them. "Flying gets easier farther in," she explained. "But for now, we climb. Follow me, stay close — and *don't touch anything* I haven't touched first."

She arced her wings and caught an air current that smelled faintly of salt and distant whales. It lifted her up and up, toward the swaying tops of the trees.

Up here, the branches were like thousands of long spider monkey arms. They reached and caught one another, bending back and looping around, fuzzy with pale green moss or marked with the scratches of dragon, jaguar, and tamarin claws.

The spot where the makahiyas grew was well camouflaged; other plants with similar leaves had been planted all around it up and down and along the wall of foliage. But Sundew never had any trouble finding it. She could have flown to it with her eyes closed. She could sense the vibrations of the makahiya leaves like quiet music in her head; they were higher and trembled more than the vibrations of other plants.

Sundew slowed down and brushed her tail lightly across the center of the makahiya cluster. At once the long, oval, fern-like leaves began folding together, pair after pair along the stems like butterfly wings closing up. As they closed, they revealed a gap in the branches behind them, just large enough for a dragon to fit through.

“Whoa,” Blue whispered. “I’ve never seen a plant do that before.”

“Oh, I think . . . they’re called ‘touch-me-nots,’ aren’t they?” Cricket asked Sundew.

“That’s one name for them,” Sundew answered.

“Oooooo,” said Swordtail. “That sounds super dangerous! Touch me not — or you will DIE!”

Sundew snickered, and Cricket covered her snout to hide her smile. “Actually,” Sundew said to Swordtail, “this is probably the only plant up here that *won’t* kill you.”

“Hmm,” he said skeptically, squinting at the folded leaves as he followed Sundew through the hole.

Stepping into the jungle always felt like plunging underwater, if that water was actually thick green soup, in a cauldron, boiling, and full of insects. Sundew hissed at a mosquito the size of her ear, and it veered away in search of more docile prey. Behind her, Cricket let out a yelp and lifted one talon to reveal a crushed mess of yellowy-orange ooze that had probably been a tree slug.

“Ooom-yum?” Bumblebee inquired, reaching for it. “Eeee?”

“No,” Cricket said. “GROSS, Bumblebee!”

“GWOSE!” Bumblebee cried, waking up an anaconda as thick as Sundew’s tail in the next tree over. The snake raised its head slowly and narrowed its eyes at the little dragonet.

“Shhh. Let’s move,” Sundew whispered. She ran lightly along the branch and leaped to another, then scrambled up to one that crisscrossed above them. The trees shook as the other dragons tried clumsily to follow her.

Sundew could sense the message spreading through the trees. *Something new*. Leaves whispered to leaves; roots and networks of underground filaments flickered the news along like twigs in a current. *Watch listen be safe caution stand guard*. She didn’t have time to dig her talons into the dirt and shape the story. She had to hope she could get her dragons to the village quickly, and then she could take a moment to talk to the trees.

“You’re like a monkey,” Swordtail panted, catching up to her when she stopped to wait for them. “I mean — in a good way — like a — very fast — jumps — good jumps — not foodishly — I mean, not in a dinner way — just, so fast.” He wheezed to a stop.

Cricket balanced along the branch to a spot behind him, digging in her claws in a way that made Sundew wince. The trees wouldn’t like that. But Bumblebee kept lunging

sideways, nearly out of her sling, reaching for bright flowers or shining beetles, so Sundew could see why Cricket needed to hold on tight.

Bringing up the rear behind her was Blue, who looked as if he was trying to swallow the jungle with his eyes.

"It's scary, like being high up in the webs," he said thoughtfully, "but loud, like the inside of the Hives, except the buzzing isn't in a language you can understand."

"And the smell is way worse," Swordtail observed.

Sundew bristled. "No, it isn't! The smell of hundreds of dragons trapped in one structure is *much* worse! This is what plants and fresh air and freedom smell like!"

"Isn't it also what rotting plants smell like?" he asked. "And dead animals? And . . . I don't know what else . . . swamp gas?"

"*You* smell like swamp gas!" she said furiously.

"I'm sorry," Blue interjected. "I only meant it's interesting. I'm trying to map it onto something I've felt before, but it's so different from anywhere I've been."

"Yeah, sorry," Swordtail agreed, giving Sundew an abashed look. "It's not that bad. Some of it is kind of cool. Like that flower right below us — look, Blue, it's like an enormous wild pink open book. I mean, SO pink! And it actually smells kind of —"

“DO NOT —” Sundew shouted as he leaned toward it, sniffing.

But it was too late. Swordtail’s nose brushed the pink surface, and the plant’s jaws snapped shut around him, yanking him off the branch and swallowing him whole.

In an instant, Swordtail was gone.

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