

Island of the Blue Dragons

Sirin sat on a sandy beach, watching a dozen Blue dragon hatchlings dip and dive in the turquoise waters of a hidden lagoon.

The Blues seemed as comfortable in water as they were on land, and their slim, agile bodies undulated in the waves, reminding her of the old sea serpents she'd sometimes seen on antique maps. The hatchlings seemed to take particular joy in flicking the water with their tails, throwing glittering sprays of water onto Sirin. She shrieked and covered her head, and suddenly a small Green dragon lunged in front of her, snarling at the swimming Blues and ready to defend Sirin tooth and claw.

Want me to bite them? the little Green's eager voice echoed in Sirin's thoughts. *I will bite off their tails if you want me to!* She wagged her tail like a puppy eager to please her master.

"Easy!" Sirin said with a laugh. "They're only playing, Sammi."

Sammi. Her Lock. Whose heart and soul and mind were now bound together with Sirin's.

Covered in sand from nose to tail tip, the little Green huffed indignantly and shook herself.

Slimy water lovers, all of them! she huffed, her high voice echoing in Sirin's thoughts.

Sirin had come to love Sammi-the-dragon as much as she'd loved Sammi-the-cat back in her old life, but sometimes it still shocked her when she heard her new Sammi's voice in her own mind. It tickled the inside of her head, like a chill running over her scalp.

Want to go for a swim? she sent back, her own inner voice sounding wobbly, as she was still getting the hang of sending mental messages to her Lock.

Water, eugh! The little Green lifted her nose imperiously and resumed her sunbathing. *Let's fly!*

Sirin shook her head, her stomach tightening with fear as she looked up. "Joss and Allie said the sky isn't safe," she reminded Sammi. "We're in hiding, remember? There are terrible dragons looking for them. For *us* too, I suppose."

There was so much to remember about this world, but that was the point her new friends the Morans had emphasized most. *They're hunting us, and when they know you're with us, they'll hunt you too.* The Lennixes, a powerful family allied with the Raptors—evil dragons who'd happily make lunch of Sirin. These Raptors wanted to conquer *her* world, Earth, and they needed Joss's Lock, the fierce Silver Lysander, to do it. From what Joss had told her, if they ever got hold of Lysander, they'd use him to lay waste to Earth and devour, enslave, or otherwise destroy the people living there, just as they had done to *this* world.

"And you're *sure* you wanna hang out with us?" Joss asked her with a nervous laugh.

She hadn't seen the Raptors yet, but she'd only been in this world for three days.

The night she'd seen Lysander the Silver swooping over

London, with two human riders on his back, Sirin had known at once that her life was about to transform. After all, you didn't see a *real live dragon* and then go on your way as if everything was normal.

And Sirin had done so much more than just *see* a dragon.

Seated on Lysander's shining, scaled back, she'd held her breath in disbelief as the great Silver had angled for the sky, wings pumping. The next thing Sirin had known, the sky had flashed white and her skin had shivered with static electricity as they passed through a hidden portal. Then, wide-eyed, she'd stared down at a whole other world.

A world of dragons.

Now, three days later, she and her strange rescuers were hiding out in the middle of a vast ocean, on an archipelago of mossy green islands that looked, from the sky, like an emerald necklace dropped on the blue water. The islands were home to the great clan of the Blue dragons.

Sirin was in a new world.

She was Locked with a dragon.

She was an orphan.

That last thought sent a splinter of panic through her. She sucked down a sharp breath, squeezed her eyes shut, and drew her knees to her chest. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. Against her collarbone, the dragonstone pendant suddenly felt as cold as ice. She'd been keeping it under her shirt, out of sight. It hurt too much to look at it, almost as much as it hurt to picture her mother's face.

Sensing Sirin's sudden turn of mood, Sammi was at her side in a flash, pushing her scaled muzzle into Sirin's lap.

Want a fish? Sammi asked. *Fish makes me feel better. I will catch the quickest, brightest fish for you!*

Sirin only hugged Sammi tight and waited for the wave of grief to pass. She refused to cry. She refused to think of her mother. She refused to feel anything at all.

That was the only way she would survive.

A low growl rolled over the lagoon, and Sirin looked up to the high rocky bluff across the water, where two enormous dragons had been conversing all morning. One, a faded Green that was larger than any dragon Allie had yet seen, she knew to be Bellacrux, the Lock of Allie Moran. Sirin was more than a bit terrified of the great Green, who seemed docile enough but with a dangerous glint in her eye that told of a fierce and ancient past. The other dragon, the Blue Grand and leader of these islands, was called Ash. He and Bellacrux seemed to have some history together, and Sirin had seen hints of affection between them. But other times they argued in their strangely beautiful dragon language called dragonsong, and when that happened, every dragon on the islands tensed up.

They were arguing now, and Sirin looked away, not wanting to be caught spying. She couldn't understand what they were saying anyway. Sirin had picked up only a few simple words of dragonsong in the last three days, and those still felt strange on her tongue.

"They're *still* going at it?" asked a voice.

She turned around and saw Joss Moran standing behind her. "Since dawn," she said. "What are they saying?"

Joss glanced up at the two large, angry dragons and winced. "The same thing they've been arguing about since we got here.

Bellacrux thinks Ash knows of some ancient dragon weapon that can take down the Lennixes and the Raptors, but he won't tell her what it is. If Ash doesn't come around, Allie says we'll have to leave. It's only a matter of time before the Raptors find this place."

Sirin nodded fiercely. "Absolutely. No way am I going back to . . . well, I don't even know where I'd go back *to*."

What did her social worker think had happened to her? Had she told everyone Sirin had been snatched up by a dragon? Likely not. Who'd believe that? Maybe they all thought she was dead. Sirin was surprised to find she liked that idea, because then she could believe it too—metaphorically, anyway. The *old* Sirin was gone, as was every boring, tedious, or annoying part of her life, like math exams and weird foster families and dodging back-alley pubescent bullies and . . .

And, of course, there was the *other* thing . . . the big, impossible, terrible thing she couldn't even let herself think about. The moment the image of pink hospital walls popped into her head, she shoved it out again.

"Lysander?" Joss tilted his head as his Silver dragon came loping toward them, his gaze unfocusing for a moment, which Sirin knew meant he was getting a message from his Lock. She wondered if she got the same look when Sammi was talking to her.

Sirin was still awestruck by the sight of Lysander, whose scales shone so brightly they seemed to glow. He moved with liquid grace, not so much running to Joss's side as flowing there. Though he was still very young for a dragon, he held his elegant head with dignity.

But right now, he looked worried, his eyes meeting Joss's. Sirin waited for them to communicate, and her heart skipped a beat when the blood drained from Joss's face.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Maybe nothing," he replied, but he looked queasy. "It's just . . . Lysander said he caught a scent on the wind. *Raptor* scent."

Sirin gasped, covering her mouth. "They're *here*?"

"Maybe, maybe not. But Lysander and I should go scout around, just in case."

"I'm coming too." Sirin stood and dusted sand from her jeans. She hadn't exactly come to the world of the dragons prepared for a beach day, and every part of her itched from getting sand stuck in her clothes. "Three pairs of eyes are better than four."

Hey! squeaked Sammi indignantly.

"Er . . . make that *four* pairs of eyes. Sorry, Sam."

Sammi had only just learned how to fly, and she was always eager for a chance to show off this new skill.

Joss nodded. "Let's go, then. Before Lysander loses the scent."

"Shouldn't we tell Allie first?"

Joss waved a hand dismissively. "It's not like she's the boss. Besides, she's on the other side of the island, collecting oysters for dinner, and it'd take half an hour just to find her. We'll just take a quick look around and be back before she ever knows we were gone."

They climbed onto Lysander's back, Joss seated in front of Allie. The Silver spread his wings and launched into the sky, and Sirin looked down to see his shadow shrink away as they rose higher and higher. Sammi flitted all around.

"What if it's Raptors?" she said into Joss's ear.

He shrugged. "Probably just a false alarm."

But Sirin heard the tremble in his voice.

Lysander glided on a warm breeze, the membrane of his wings

fluttering like sails. Sirin's breath caught in her throat. She felt a moment of queasy fear when she glanced at the sea far, far below, and she gripped Joss's shoulders tighter. The sun glinted off Lysandar's silver scales, which shone so brightly Sirin could see her own distorted reflection in them. He really was a magnificent creature.

The shiny one is old and slow! Sammi chortled in her mind. *Bet he can't keep up with me!*

Sammi darted ahead, and Lysander accepted the hatchling's challenging growl with a roar of his own. The Silver shot forward with a powerful thrust of his wings, forcing Sirin and Joss to hold on with all their strength. The breeze turned to a gale that pulled at Sirin's hair.

Careful, Sammi! she warned. *There might be Raptors up here!*

Let them come! Sammi snarled back. *I am Sammi the Fierce, and I fear no one and nothing!*

Sirin sighed and shook her head. There was no reasoning with hatchlings, she'd learned, especially ones as headstrong and ferocious as Sammi.

They flew farther and farther until the Blue islands were a scatter of green pebbles on the ocean, ringed by white beaches and reefs. The water sparkled in the sun, turquoise shallows fading into dark cerulean depths.

The sight was beautiful. But Sirin pulled her gaze from the world below to instead scan the sky, her stomach knotting as she wondered if she was about to meet, for the first time, the terrible Raptors—or the merciless humans who rode them.