



WINGS OF FIRE

ESCAPING PERIL

by
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Summary: Peril is possibly the most dangerous dragon in Pyrrhia, because she has
firescales that can kill an opponent with a touch, but now she has a mission —
find her former queen, Scarlet, who is threatening the Jade Mountain Academy,
and then stop her, and she is not sure if the persistent SeaWing, Turtle, who is
accompanying her will be a help or a hindrance.

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CHAPTER 1

Deep in a cave in Jade Mountain, the most dangerous dragon in Pyrrhia was hiding.

Which she was not particularly pleased about.

“Just until Ruby’s gone,” Peril muttered, pacing. “That’s what he said. *Hours* ago. He said he’d come get me as soon as it was safe. Ha! As if I should be afraid of her. I’m not afraid of anyone! Three moons, it’s been *forever*. How long does it take to collect a body?”

And why should she have to hide anyway? That’s what she wanted to know.

Yes, she was banished from the Sky Kingdom, but Queen Ruby couldn’t banish her from Jade Mountain, too. Clay had said it himself: this wasn’t the Sky Palace. He’d said, “You have every right to be here.”

Was that true?

Did she actually have the right to be *anywhere*, after everything she’d done?

But all she wanted was to be with Clay. Near him, around him, breathing the same air and watching the same skies. That wasn't asking too much. And if it meant she wasn't hurting anyone anymore, wasn't that what everyone wanted?

Maybe not. Maybe Queen Ruby wanted Peril to be miserable and alone.

Well. Peril hissed a tendril of smoke and marched to the cave entrance, peering out. If *any dragon* tried to keep her away from Clay, she would *melt off their head*. Even if that dragon was the new SkyWing queen!

Unless Clay told me not to, I guess.

Peril went back to circling the small cave, flicking her wings at the claustrophobic stone walls.

There had been a moment, months ago, in the chaos of the SkyWing transition, when Peril thought things were going to be different. After she'd helped Clay and the others escape from Scarlet's arena, she'd flown back to the palace only to find Queen Scarlet and Queen Burn gone and the whole tribe in a state of panic. Who'd be in charge now? What had happened to their invincible queen?

The relief when Princess Ruby arrived and took over . . . Peril remembered it clearly, with a wince of pity for her idiotic hopeful former self. Along with everyone else she had thought, *A new queen! One who isn't terrifying! Everything's going to change!*

It was true: everything *had* changed. For the better, generally, for everyone but Peril.

There had been no thank-yous, no celebrations or medals. Idiomatic hopeful former self had hoped for them. Idiomatic hopeful former self was very stupid.

In fact, there hadn't been any acknowledgment at all that Peril had helped the dragonets of destiny defeat Queen Scarlet. *I mean, they did most of it, but I did help. Didn't anyone notice?*

Instead, Ruby's very first act as queen had been to banish Peril from the Sky Kingdom.

Peril could still hear her hissing, "I never want to see you again" . . . and she could still feel the strange, falling vertigo it had given her, as if her wings had been sliced off.

Until that moment, Ruby had always been — not friendly, exactly — but not hostile, either. Mostly she'd been quiet. She'd stayed out of Peril's way, nodding politely in the halls or leaving the room when Peril came to talk to Scarlet. She'd never seemed very queenly, to be frank. So where did this imperious, decisive dragon come from?

"But . . . why?" Peril had asked, trying to ignore the expressions on the guards that surrounded Ruby. Why did they look so *pleased*?

"Because you're a murderer," Ruby replied, as if that should have been perfectly self-evident.

But aren't we all murderers? Peril had thought. *Didn't we all do terrible things because Queen Scarlet told us to? Can you find me one dragon who defied her? Why am I the only one getting punished for obedience?*

Then she'd looked into Ruby's eyes and realized it was personal. Ruby actually hated her. Peril had never known that — and even now, she still wasn't sure why. Hadn't they both been loyal SkyWing subjects? Hadn't they both always followed Scarlet's orders? Couldn't Ruby, of all dragons, understand everything that Peril had done?

"Leave now," Ruby had said. "Or die. Whichever."

And how do you plan to make me? Peril had felt fiery rage swelling under her scales. *I could kill you right now, as easily as breathing. I could kill everyone in this cave just by spreading my wings.*

She nearly had. She'd really, really wanted to. The only thing that had stopped her was thinking of Clay.

He said he saw good in her. Which *probably* meant he didn't want her setting large groups of dragons on fire every time she got mad.

He thought she could be more than Queen Scarlet's pet killer, and so, for him, she would be.

Well . . . she would *try*.

It was *hard*, though. Dragons could be *awful*. Some of them really *deserved* to be set on fire.

And she didn't *like* being told to sit in a cave for hours, just because the sight of her might make Ruby angry. The SkyWing queen was on her way to Jade Mountain to collect the body of the student who'd died, Carnelian. So, yes, she probably wouldn't be in a very good mood to begin with. Peril could understand that it would be easier for Clay and his friends if she stayed out of the way, so that Ruby's visit would go as smoothly as possible.

But WHY WAS IT TAKING SO LONG?

Peril paced to the cave entrance again, peering out into the dimly lit tunnel.

Farther along the tunnel, deeper in the mountain, the faint sounds of splashing and laughter echoed from the underground lake. The SeaWing students had decided the lake was their exclusive clubhouse and were there all the time now. Peril was always careful to avoid them. She avoided all the students as much as she could.

Everyone here was afraid of her, but no one was *careful* of her the way they'd been in the Sky Kingdom. Only the SkyWings knew how to steer a wide path around her. The dragons in Scarlet's palace had been experts at avoiding Peril; wherever she'd gone, empty space opened up around her.

Here, *she* had to be the cautious one. *She* was responsible for staying out of *their* way. Even though they were terrified of her, the other students kept forgetting she was there.

But what if she bumped into one of them? What if her tail brushed someone's wing by accident?

How would Clay look at her then?

He said she deserved a second chance . . . but if she burned one of his students, she knew there wouldn't be a third.

Peril's claws twisted and clenched, thinking of all the dragonets Clay was protecting here. Did he love them more than her? He must — he should — why wouldn't he? They were innocent symbols of the bright future he always talked about. None of them had murdered — her mind shied away from the numbers — a whole lot of dragons.

But none of them had saved his life either! *And his friends!*

Didn't matter. They still hated her, those shining friends who stood between her and Clay like blue and green and gold flames, flaring suspiciously whenever she so much as looked at him.

Down on the sands of Burn's stronghold, after she'd saved him, under the eyes of all the tribes, Clay had said, "Maybe Peril is our wings of fire." And for one surreal moment she'd thought, *maybe I am — maybe this makes up for everything I've done. Maybe by saving Clay, I've saved the world.*

Maybe everyone will forgive me now. Maybe everyone will love me now.

But that wasn't what had happened.

After the end of the war, Peril had searched for Queen Scarlet for months, all across the continent. And everywhere she went, dragons fled screaming at the sight of her. Or they fainted. Or they threw spears and rocks at her, along with anything else sharp or pointy or heavy that they could get their talons on. Once she'd been walloped in the face by a dead crocodile, flung from the depths of the MudWing swamps.

It was strange to realize that things like that could hurt more on the inside of your scales than the outside.

It was strange to realize that a dragon who *couldn't* be hurt on the outside could have so many ragged holes on the inside.

There! Talons thumping on stone! The rough slither of a tail! Was it him?

Peril nearly leaped into the corridor — and came within a wing flicker of colliding with a dragon who definitely wasn't Clay.

The dark green SeaWing dragonet didn't scream or faint or stagger back in terror. He simply froze, slamming his eyes closed as though danger would obligingly disappear the moment he couldn't see it anymore.

"What are you *doing?*" Peril yelled, jumping away from him.

“Um,” he said in a low, rumbly voice. “Walking? In the halls? Back to my cave?” He risked opening one eye to peer at her.

“Well, that was VERY STUPID of you!” she snapped.

He thought about that for a moment, then opened both eyes and regarded her peaceably. “Oh,” he said. “Sorry.”

What a peculiar dragon. He seemed to have no fire about him at all. That wasn’t a SeaWing thing; Tsunami was a fireball that blazed up and down and sideways at everything that made her mad (which was most things). And her sister, the little SeaWing princess, at least from a distance seemed to be a shower of bright orange sparks on the inside.

This SeaWing, on the other talon, was a puddle. A fireless puddle, blobbing quietly into the rocks in front of her, not even trying to get away.

“You’re Peril, aren’t you?” he said. “Queen Scarlet’s . . .” He trailed off, perhaps realizing there was no good way to end that sentence. *Champion? Weapon? Notorious death monster?*

“Yes,” she hissed. “I’m Queen Scarlet’s notorious death monster.”

He made an odd hiccupping noise and ducked his head. “Ah, OK. I’ll just . . . go, then.”

What would Clay want her to do in this situation? *Maybe you’ll make some friends here*, he’d said, in that oblivious

magical way he had of thinking that any other dragons in the world might have open hearts like his.

“Who are you?” she asked. *Hmmm. That came out more menacing than it sounded in my head.* “I mean, who are you?” she tried, adding a Sunnyish cheerful lilt to her voice. *Now I sound manic.* “I’m not being creepy,” she added hastily. “I’m not, like, putting you on a murder list or anything. I don’t have a murder list! Not a to-be-murdered list, I mean. Wait, no — to be clear, I have no kind of murder list at all. Definitely out of the murdering business, me. Maybe I should stop saying the word murder.”

“That would be great,” the SeaWing said. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

“I just did what I was told,” she said in a rush. She couldn’t remember another dragon standing still long enough to hear her say that, not since Ruby had thrown her out of the Sky Palace. “I was doing what my queen told me to do. Isn’t that what everyone does? I can’t help what I’m like — and what she made me do. Can I?”

Maybe it was that he didn’t look scared. He didn’t look *thrilled* to be having this conversation, but he hadn’t run screaming yet.

His green-eyed gaze traveled thoughtfully along her smoking scales, shifted for a moment to his own talons, and then dropped to the ground. “I guess,” he said. “Turtle.”

Peril puzzled over this for a moment. Was it some kind of SeaWing code? Was he calling her a turtle? Was that a good or a bad thing?

“Moose,” she tried out, just to see what would happen.

He squinted at her. “Uh . . . I mean, my name is Turtle.”

“Oh!” she said. “Right. Hello. Thank you for not screaming or fainting or throwing a crocodile at me.”

“I thought about it,” he said. “I mean, not the crocodile. Definitely not in the reptile-throwing business, me.”

Now it was her turn to narrow her eyes at him. Was he making fun of her?

“Ha ha?” he tried. “Friendly joke? Are those allowed?”

“Why aren’t you scared of me?” she asked.

“I *am*,” he said. “I just . . . you’re not the only dragon I know with dangerous powers.”

“Really?” she said. What did that mean? Who was he talking about?

But before he could answer, a roar billowed down through the corridors, like a rolling smoke cloud.

Turtle flared his wings, his green eyes wide. “What was that?”

“Probably Queen Ruby,” Peril said. Was Ruby yelling at Clay? Was Clay all right? Did he need her to come protect him? She glanced back at the row of fire globes leading uphill to the school. “Maybe they just told her that I’m here.”

“Want to go find out?” Turtle asked.

Peril frowned at him. “So I can get roared at face-to-face? That *does* sound more fun.”

“I don’t mean go say *hi*,” Turtle protested. “I mean, *I’m* going to eavesdrop to see what’s happening, so do you want to come?”

Peril curled her wings in, severely tempted. “Oh, no, I shouldn’t. Clay would be upset with me. He told me to wait here.”

“He doesn’t have to know,” Turtle said with a shrug. “That’s kind of the point of being stealthy. And if he doesn’t catch you, then you’re not doing anything wrong, are you?”

That sounded true. That sounded very true! Really, Clay just wanted her to stay out of Ruby’s way. So if she didn’t let Ruby see her that was basically the same thing, right? After all, he didn’t *specifically* say “you must hide in a cave for hours like an obedient snail.”

Stop for a moment. Think this through.

On the one talon, she was still pretty sure Clay wouldn’t approve of this plan. On the other talon, it sounded a LOT more appealing than sitting in a cave waiting to be released. On the third talon, why was this strange SeaWing offering to hang out with her? Did he have an agenda? Was it because if they got caught, she was sure to get in a lot more trouble than he would?

Then again, on the fourth talon, shouldn't she say yes to the first friendly dragon she'd met at this school? Clay *did* want her to make friends. So in a way she *was* doing something he would approve of. Right?

Unless Clay secretly thought she was too dangerous for anyone to be friends with. He might think that. She kind of was. Her only friend before Clay had been killed by Queen Scarlet for telling Peril too much.

Well, then, maybe she needed more friends so that some of them could be expendable. If anything happened to Clay right now, it would be the END OF ALL THINGS. She would literally burn down the world. She couldn't even think about it, or else the tunnel would soon be full of rage smoke.

But if she had Clay *and* Turtle as friends, and then Turtle got himself killed by Queen Scarlet or accidentally set on fire, well, then she'd survive OK, because she'd still have Clay.

It occurred to her that this was a rather morbid train of thought to be having about a new friend.

"Yes," she said decisively, making him jump. "Let's go. You walk in front, so I don't whack you with my tail by accident. But don't move too slowly, or I might accidentally step on you." She ducked into the cave again to let him by safely.

Turtle had an “I am now sensing this was a terrible idea” expression on his face, but he took the lead without arguing and managed to walk fast enough that Peril wasn’t annoyed.

The roar echoed from above again.

Together — more or less — Turtle and Peril headed straight for it.