



TUI T. SUTHERLAND

# WINGS OF FIRE

THE DRAGONET PROPHECY



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by  
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# THE DRAGONET PROPHECY

*When the war has lasted twenty years . . .  
the dragonets will come.*

*When the land is soaked in blood and tears . . .  
the dragonets will come.*

*Find the SeaWing egg of deepest blue.*

*Wings of night shall come to you.*

*The largest egg in mountain high  
will give to you the wings of sky.*

*For wings of earth, search through the mud  
for an egg the color of dragon blood.*

*And hidden alone from the rival queens,  
the SandWing egg awaits unseen.*

*Of three queens who blister and blaze and burn,  
two shall die and one shall learn  
if she bows to a fate that is stronger and higher,  
she'll have the power of wings of fire.*

*Five eggs to hatch on brightest night,  
five dragons born to end the fight.  
Darkness will rise to bring the light.*

*The dragonets are coming. . . .*

*Six Years Later . . .*



## CHAPTER 1

Clay didn't think he was the right dragon for a Big Heroic Destiny.

Oh, he wanted to be. He wanted to be the great MudWing savior of the dragon world, glorious and brave. He wanted to do all the wonderful things expected of him. He wanted to look at the world, figure out what was broken, and fix it.

But he wasn't a natural-hatched hero. He had no legendary qualities at all. He liked sleeping more than studying, and he kept losing chickens in the caves during hunting practice because he was paying attention to his friends instead of watching for feathers.

He was all right at fighting. But "all right" wasn't going to stop the war and save the dragon tribes. He needed to be extraordinary. He was the biggest dragonet, so he was supposed to be the scary, tough one. The minders wanted him to be *terrifyingly dangerous*.

Clay felt about as dangerous as cauliflower.

"Fight!" his attacker howled, flinging him across the cavern. Clay crashed into the rock wall and scrambled up again, trying to spread his mud-colored wings for balance. Red

talons raked at his face and he ducked away. "Come on," the red dragon snarled. "Stop holding back. Find the killer inside you and let it out."

"I'm trying!" Clay said. "Maybe if we could stop and talk about it —"

She lunged for him again. "Feint to the left! Roll right! Use your fire!" Clay tried to duck under her wing to attack her from below, but of course he rolled the wrong way. One of her talons smashed him to the ground, and he yelped with pain.

"WHICH LEFT WAS THAT, USELESS?" Kestrel bellowed in his ear. "Are all MudWings this stupid? OR ARE YOU JUST DEAF?"

*Well, if you keep that up, I will be soon,* Clay thought. The SkyWing lifted her claws and he wriggled free.

"I don't know about other MudWings," he protested, licking his sore talons. "Obviously. But perhaps we could try fighting without all the *shouting* and see —" He stopped, hearing the familiar hiss that came before one of Kestrel's fire attacks.

He threw his wings over his head, tucked his long neck in, and rolled into the maze of stalagmites that studded one corner of the cave. Flames blasted the rocks around him, singeing the tip of his tail.

"Coward!" the older dragon bellowed. She smashed one of the rock columns into a shower of sharp black pebbles. Clay covered his eyes and almost immediately felt her stamp down hard on his tail.

"OW!" he yelled. "You said stomping tails was cheating!" He seized the closest stalagmite between his claws and scabbled up on top of it. From his perch near the roof, he glared down at his guardian.

"I'm your teacher," Kestrel snarled. "Nothing *I* do is cheating. Get down here and fight like a SkyWing."

*But I'm NOT a SkyWing*, Clay thought rebelliously. *I'm a MudWing! I don't like setting things on fire or flapping around in circles biting at dragon necks.* His teeth still ached from Kestrel's jewel-hard scales.

"Can't I fight one of the others?" he asked. "I'm much better at that." The other dragonets were his own size (nearly), and they didn't cheat (well, most of the time). He actually *liked* fighting with them.

"Oh, yes? Which opponent would you prefer, the stunted SandWing or the lazy RainWing?" Kestrel said. "Because I'm sure you'll get to choose out on the battlefield." Her tail glowed like embers as she lashed it back and forth.

"Glory's not lazy," Clay said loyally. "She's just not built for fighting, that's all. Webs says there's not much to fight about in the rain forest because the RainWings have all the food they want. He says that's why they've stayed out of the war so far, because none of the rival queens want RainWings in their armies anyway. He says —"

"STOP YAMMERING AND GET DOWN HERE!" Kestrel roared. She reared up on her back legs and flared her wings so she suddenly looked three times bigger.

With a yelp of alarm, Clay tried to leap to the next stalagmite, but his wings unfurled too slowly and he smacked into the side of it instead. Sparks flew as his claws scraped down the jagged rock. He let out another yowl of pain as Kestrel snaked her head between the columns, seized his tail in her teeth, and yanked him out into the open.

Her talons closed around his neck as she hissed in his ear. "Where's the violent little monster I saw when you hatched? *That's* the dragon we need for the prophecy."

"*Gawp,*" Clay squawked, clawing at her grip. He could feel the strange burn scars on her palms scraping against his scales.

This was how battle training with Kestrel always ended — with him unconscious and then sore or limping for days afterward. *Fight back*, he thought. *Get mad! Do something!* But although he was the biggest of the dragonets, they were still a year away from being full grown, and Kestrel towered over him.

He tried to summon some helpful violent rage, but all he could think was, *It'll be over soon, and then I can go have dinner.*

So, not the most heroic train of thought.

Suddenly Kestrel let out a roar and dropped him. Fire blasted over Clay's head as he hit the floor with a thud.

The red dragon whirled around. Behind her, panting defiantly, was the SeaWing dragonet, Tsunami. A red-gold scale was caught between her sharp white teeth. She spat it out and glared at their teacher.



“Stop picking on Clay,” Tsunami growled. “Or I’ll bite you again.” Her deep blue scales shimmered like cobalt glass in the torchlight. The gills in her long neck were pulsing like they always did when she was angry.

Kestrel sat back and flicked her tail around to examine the bite mark. She bared her teeth at Tsunami. “Aren’t you sweet. Protecting a dragon who tried to kill you while you were still an egg.”

“But luckily you big dragons were there to *save* our *lives*,” Tsunami said, “and we sure appreciate it, because now we get to hear about it *all the time*.” She marched around to stand between Clay and Kestrel.

Clay winced. He hated hearing this story. He didn’t understand it. He’d never want to hurt the other dragonets.

So why had he attacked their eggs during hatching? Did he really have a killer monster inside him somewhere?

The other minders, Webs and Dune, said he’d been ferocious when he hatched. They’d had to throw him in the river to protect the other eggs from him. Kestrel wanted him to find that monster and use it when he fought.

But he was afraid if he ever did, he would hate himself, and so would everyone else. Thinking about what he’d nearly done to his friends made him feel like all the fire had been sucked out of him.

He didn’t particularly *want* to be a violent angry monster, even if Kestrel thought that would be an improvement.

But maybe that was the only way to make the prophecy come true. Maybe that monster was his destiny.

"All right," Kestrel said dismissively. "We're finished here anyway. I'll mark another failure in your scroll, MudWing." She snorted a small flame into the air and swept out of the cave.

Clay flopped down on the floor as soon as her red tail had vanished from sight. It felt like every one of his scales was stinging from the burns. "She's going to be so mean to you during your training tomorrow," he said to Tsunami.

"Oh, no," the SeaWing dragonet gasped. "I've never seen Kestrel be mean before! That'll be so unexpected and out of character!"

"Ow," Clay groaned. "Don't make me laugh. I think my ribs are broken."

"Your ribs are not broken," Tsunami said, poking him in the side with her nose. "Dragon bones are almost as hard as diamonds. You're fine. Get up and jump in the river."

"No!" Clay buried his head under his wing. "Too cold!"

"Jump in the river" was Tsunami's solution for everything. Bored? Aching bones? Dry scales? Brain overstuffed with the history of the war? "Jump in the river!" she'd shout whenever any of the other dragonets complained. She certainly did not care that she was the only one who could breathe underwater or that most other dragon tribes hated getting wet.

Clay didn't mind being wet, but he couldn't stand being cold, and the underground river that flowed through their cave home was always freezing.

"Get in," Tsunami ordered. She seized his tail between her front talons and started dragging him toward the river. "You'll feel better."

"I will not!" Clay shouted, clawing at the smooth stone floor. "I'll feel colder! Stop it! Go away! Argh!" His protests went up in a cloud of bubbles as Tsunami dumped him in the icy water.

When he resurfaced, she was floating beside him, ducking her head and splashing water over her scales like a beautiful overgrown fish. Clay felt like a gawky brown blob next to her.

He splashed into the shallows and lay down on a submerged rock ledge, with his head resting on the bank of the river. He wouldn't admit it, but the burns and aches did feel better in the water. The current helped wash away the smoky rock dust caught between his dry scales.

Still too cold, though. Clay scratched at the rock below him. Why couldn't there be just a *little* mud down here?

"Kestrel will be sorry one day, when I'm queen of the SeaWings," Tsunami said, swimming up and down the narrow channel.

"I thought only a queen's daughters or sisters could challenge her for her throne," Clay said. Tsunami swam so *fast*. He wished he had webs between his talons, too, or gills, or a tail like hers, so powerful she could nearly empty the river with one big splash.

"Well, maybe the SeaWing queen *is* my mother and I'm a lost princess," she said. "Like in the story."

Everything the dragonets knew about the outside world came from scrolls picked up by the Talons of Peace. Their favorite was *The Missing Princess*, a legend about a runaway SeaWing dragonet whose royal family tore up the whole ocean looking for her. At the end she found her way home, and her parents welcomed her with open wings and feasting and joy.

Clay always skipped the adventures in the middle of the story. He just liked that last part — the happy mother and father. And the feasting. The feasting sounded pretty great, too.

“I wonder what my parents are like,” he said.

“I wonder if any of our parents are still alive,” Tsunami said.

Clay didn’t like to think about that. He knew dragons were dying in the war every day — Kestrel and Webs brought back news of bloody battles, scorched land, and burning piles of dragon bodies. But he had to believe his parents were still safe. “Do you think they ever miss us?”

“Definitely.” Tsunami flicked a spray of water at him with her tail. “I bet mine were frantic when Webs stole my egg. Just like in the story.”

“And mine tore apart the marshes,” Clay said. They’d all imagined scenes of their parents’ desperate searches ever since they were young dragonets. Clay liked the idea that someone out there was looking for him . . . that someone missed him and wanted him back.

Tsunami flipped onto her back, gazing up at the stone roof with her translucent green eyes. "Well, the Talons of Peace knew what they were doing," she said bitterly. "No one would ever find us down here."

They listened to the river gurgle and the torches crackle for a moment.

"We won't be underground forever," Clay said, trying to make her feel better. "I mean, if the Talons of Peace want us to stop this war, they *have* to let us out sometime." He scratched behind his ear thoughtfully. "Starflight says it's only two more years." He only had to hold on that long. "And then we can go home and eat as many cows as we want."

"Well, first we save the world," Tsunami said. "And *then* we go home."

"Right," said Clay. *How* they were going to save the world was a little fuzzy, but everyone seemed to think they'd figure it out when the time came.

Clay pulled himself out of the river, his waterlogged wings heavy and drooping. He spread them in front of one of the torches, arching his neck and trying to get warm. Feeble waves of heat wafted against his scales.

"Unless . . ." Tsunami said.

Clay lowered his head to look at her. "Unless what?"

"Unless we leave sooner," she said. She flipped over and pulled herself out of the water in one graceful motion.

"Leave?" Clay echoed, startled. "How? On our own?"

“Why not?” she said. “If we can find a way out — why should we have to wait another two years? I’m ready to save the world now, aren’t you?”

Clay wasn’t sure he’d ever be ready to save the world. He figured the Talons of Peace would tell them what they had to do. Only the three guardian dragons — Kestrel, Webs, and Dune — knew where the dragonets were hidden, but there was a whole network of Talons out there getting ready for the prophecy.

“We can’t stop the war by ourselves,” he said. “We wouldn’t know where to start.”

Tsunami flapped her wings at him in exasperation, showering him with cold droplets. “We can too stop the war on our own,” she said. “That’s the whole *point* of the prophecy.”

“Maybe in two years,” Clay said. *Maybe by then I’ll have found my dangerous side. Maybe then I’ll be the ferocious fighter Kestrel wants me to be.*

“Maybe sooner,” she said stubbornly. “Just think about it, all right?”

He shifted his feet. “All right. I’ll think about it.” At least that way he could stop arguing with her.

Tsunami cocked her head. “I hear dinner!” The faint sound of dismayed mooing echoed up the tunnel behind them. She poked Clay cheerfully. “Race you to the hall!” She whirled and pounded away without waiting for a response.

The torches in the battle room seemed dimmer, and cold water was seeping under Clay’s scales. He folded his wings

and swept his tail through the debris of the smashed rock column.

Tsunami was crazy. The five dragonets weren't ready to stop the war. They wouldn't even know how to survive on their own. Maybe Tsunami was brave and tough like a hero should be, but Sunny and Glory and Starflight . . . Clay thought of all the things that might hurt them and wished he could give them his own scales and claws and teeth for extra protection.

Besides, there was no way to escape the caves. The Talons of Peace had made sure of that.

Still, part of him couldn't help wondering what it would be like to go home now instead of waiting another two years. Back to the marshes, to the swamps, to a whole tribe of MudWings who looked like him and thought like him . . . back to his parents, whoever they were . . .

What if they could do it?

What if the dragonets could escape, and survive, and save the world . . . their own way?