



# WINGS OF FIRE

THE DARK SECRET

by  
TUI T. SUTHERLAND

SCHOLASTIC PRESS  
NEW YORK

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher.

Text copyright © 2013 by Tui T. Sutherland  
Map and border design © 2013 by Mike Schley  
Dragon illustrations © 2013 by Joy Ang

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc.  
*Publishers since 1920.* SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos  
are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sutherland, Tui, 1978– author.

The dark secret / by Tui T. Sutherland.

pages cm. — (Wings of fire ; Book Four)

Summary: When Starflight, one of the dragonets of destiny, is kidnapped by the NightWings he finds that the kingdom of his birth is a miserable place, full of terrible secrets — and that, with his fellow dragonets too far away to help, the fate of two kingdoms rests in his talons.

ISBN 978-0-545-34921-5

1. Dragons — Juvenile fiction. 2. Prophecy — Juvenile fiction. 3. Identity (Psychology) — Juvenile fiction. [1. Dragons — Fiction. 2. Prophecy — Fiction. 3. Secrets — Fiction. 4. Identity — Fiction. 5. Adventure and adventurers — Fiction.] I. Title. II. Series: Sutherland, Tui, 1978– Wings of fire ; bk. 4.

PZ7.S96694Dar 2013

813.6 — dc23

2013018671

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

13 14 15 16 17

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First printing, November 2013

Book design by Phil Falco

# PROLOGUE

The ice dragons came out of nowhere.

It should have been a quiet night; they shouldn't have seen anyone but SkyWings and other MudWings on their patrol along the mountainous border between their kingdoms. There hadn't been a battle near their village since the one where they lost Crane, sixteen days ago.

Reed still couldn't think about that battle without feeling a huge pit open inside his chest. Sometimes he wanted to close his eyes and fall into that pit and never come out. But he couldn't: he had four other brothers and sisters who depended on him. He was their leader, their bigwings — even though he knew now that he wasn't supposed to be. It should have been their brother Clay, whose egg was stolen before they all hatched.

“Did you hear that?” Umber whispered, darting up to fly beside him. The smallest dragon in their MudWing troop of siblings, Umber was also the most observant. Reed knew by now that it was always worth listening to him.

“What?” Reed whispered back, tilting his head and straining his ears. His wings caught the air currents as they both soared higher, and he studied the dark, jagged shapes of the Claws of the Clouds

Mountains. He couldn't see any movement or hear any wingbeats.

Still, he twisted around to check on his brothers and sisters, calling them closer with a flick of his tail. In a moment, Pheasant, Sora, and Marsh were flying in a close formation behind him.

"I thought I heard hissing," Umber said. "Somewhere close by."

Reed glanced down uneasily at the shadowy trees that covered the mountain slope below them. Anything could be hiding in there.

But the only sound he heard was the SandWing general up ahead, calling at top volume as if "stealth patrol" were only a funny name for what they were doing.

"Move it, MudWings!" bellowed the sand dragon. His squadron of seven SandWings, all fiercely loyal to Queen Burn, hovered behind him, grunting. "I want to wrap up this patrol and get some sleep tonight!"

"It was probably nothing," Umber said to Reed.

And that was when the nine ice dragons suddenly shot out of the forest and attacked the SandWings.

It was so fast, so calculated and swift and sudden, that two SandWings were sent spiraling toward the ground with shredded wings and blood pouring from their throats before Reed could even process that this was a real attack.

Marsh shrieked with terror and grabbed Reed, nearly tumbling the bigwings out of the sky. Marsh had never really recovered from their first battle, where he'd seen their sister Crane die in front of him. *I need to do something about that*, Reed thought, *but not right now.*

“Marsh, keep it together!” he shouted, pulling his wing free. “Come on, quick, we have to help!”

He saw the hesitation on all their faces and caught himself wondering — *again* — what Clay would have done in this situation, and whether the others would have been happier and safer following him . . . and also wondering whether *they* were wondering that, too.

But no one said what they must be thinking — *it's a suicide mission; what help can we be; I don't want to lose another sibling.* Instead they formed up behind him and dove toward the writhing dragons.

Reed hated fighting IceWings. Their serrated claws seemed ten times sharper than normal claws, and their whip-thin tails left stinging marks across his snout and wings. Worst of all, they could just *breathe* on you and kill you.

He shot a burst of fire at the biggest IceWing, who was grappling with the SandWing general. Her teeth snapped shut and she hissed at him, but she was too busy with the SandWing to come after Reed. He spun

in the air, lashing out at silvery white scales as another IceWing attacked his flank. They clutched each other with fierce talons for a moment, the wind buffeting their wings. Finally Reed managed to cough out another bolt of flames and the IceWing jerked away, narrowly avoiding a singed nose.

Reed spotted an IceWing diving toward Umber and leaped to knock his brother aside, catching the brunt of the white dragon's momentum against his chest. As he staggered back, he saw another IceWing wrap her dangerous claws around Sora's neck, and he roared with fury. Pheasant was there in an instant, throwing the IceWing off Sora, but the ice dragon came back at them with her mouth open to shoot her frostbreath.

*I can't lose anyone else, Reed thought. It'll kill me.* He smashed into the IceWing's side and sliced his claws across her throat while she was twisting to breathe on him. Her eyes went wide and she made an agonized, gargling noise as blood bubbled from the wounds. When he let go of her, the IceWing soldier fell toward the dark forest, her wings twitching feebly like a dying grasshopper.

"Retreat!" a voice suddenly howled. Reed's heart jumped hopefully, thinking the IceWings were giving up — but then he realized it was the SandWing general. "Retreat!" the sand dragon yelled again.

Reed thought they might defeat the IceWings if

they kept fighting, but it wasn't worth the risk. Every moment was another opportunity for an IceWing to kill one of his brothers or sisters. Retreating meant keeping them alive.

"Retreat," he echoed the general, grabbing Umber and pulling him back. "Fall back! Pheasant, you too!" He scanned the struggling shapes in the moonlight and picked out his troop: all still alive, for now.

His sister sank her teeth into her opponent's forearm and he released her with a shriek of pain. In a flash she was at Reed's side, and they soared up into the sky with Marsh, Sora, and Umber right beside them.

Reed saw the SandWings take off toward the mountains. Most of the IceWings shot after them; only two turned to pursue him and his siblings.

"This way!" he cried, diving for the forest. If IceWings could hide in there, so could his dragons. He wasn't obligated to follow the SandWings — they'd probably make a run for the Sky Palace anyway. And he didn't want to lead the IceWings back to his village.

Pine branches whipped against his face as he hit the trees. His brothers and sisters had practiced a formation like this, zipping through an overgrown forest while staying together. He had to trust that they'd remember and be close behind him.

He heard the sound of thrashing wings farther back and risked a glance over his shoulder. Even in the

shadows, he recognized the shape of how his brothers and sisters flew; they were all there. It must be the IceWings who'd gotten caught in the upper branches.

Reed took a chance and landed. The others dropped to the ground with him, and they all immediately flattened themselves with wings outstretched, becoming puddles of shadow on the dark forest floor.

Silence fell. No one breathed. The branches creaked overhead, and small night animals skittered through the bushes around them. Reed felt a squirrel dart over his foot, but he didn't move a muscle.

After a long while, they heard a faraway whistle and the sound of wings in the distance, as if the IceWings had reassembled to fly away.

Reed still didn't move. He waited for almost an hour, until he couldn't hold his breath any longer, until any and all dragon noises had faded long ago.

Then, very carefully and quietly, he inhaled. He heard the others do the same.

"Is anyone hurt?" Reed asked softly.

"That was awful," Marsh whispered. "I thought we were all going to die."

"I'm fine," Pheasant said. "Nothing that won't heal soon."

"I'm all right, too," Sora said hoarsely.

"Umber?" Reed said when the smallest dragonet didn't respond.

"I hate this war," Umber burst out. "I don't



understand what we're even fighting for. Who cares who the SandWing queen is? I've never met Burn and I don't want to. Why am I fighting an IceWing over a throne that has nothing to do with either of us?"

"Because our queen says we have to," Pheasant said, with a little more sarcasm than Reed thought was safe, even if there was no one to overhear.

"Queen Moorhen must have a good reason for allying with Burn and the SkyWings," Reed said. "We shouldn't doubt her."

"Besides, the war will be over soon," Sora said unexpectedly. She hardly ever spoke, and she'd spoken even less since Crane's death. Reed turned and saw her eyes reflecting the glow of the moonlight. "Clay is going to end it."

There was something about the way she said Clay's name that made Reed want to sink into a mud puddle and stay there for a month. She sounded as if she believed in him so much — a dragon they'd barely met. They followed Reed and they loved him, he knew that. But surely they must wonder what could have been . . . and whether Crane might still be alive if Clay were their bigwings all along.

"That's true," Umber said, lifting his head. "Clay and his friends — they're going to save us soon."

"How soon?" Marsh asked. "I thought the prophecy said twenty years — doesn't that mean two more years before they end the war?"

“Actually,” Pheasant said, “some dragons think it depends on when you start counting. If you count from the first battle, then it’s only been eighteen years. But if you go back to the death of Queen Oasis, which is really when this whole thing started, then it’s been almost twenty.” She caught the tilt of Reed’s head and shrugged. “I’ve been reading about the prophecy since we realized Clay is in it.”

There was a pause as they all had their own thoughts about Clay, the war, and the prophecy.

“If you’re all unhappy,” Reed said tentatively, “we could — I mean, we could try to find the Talons of Peace.”

Pheasant let out a shocked *hiss*. “I may not like this war, but that doesn’t mean we should leave our tribe and our home. We’re MudWings. We belong in our village.”

“Unless *you* think we should leave,” Marsh said, leaning against Reed’s side. “I’ll do whatever you decide.”

“We all will,” Umber said.

Reed knew they would. But should they? He had no idea what to do — betray his tribe, or keep risking his siblings’ lives?

“You don’t have to decide tonight,” Pheasant said, more gently. “We just had a narrow escape. Let’s go home and sleep. We’ll all feel better in the morning.”

Reed nodded, and they gathered themselves,

stretching their cramped wings as best they could under the trees. Showers of pine needles slid across their scales, smelling of winter fires.

“What were those IceWings doing here anyway?” Marsh asked, stamping his feet.

“I have no idea,” Reed said. “It seemed as though they were lying in wait for us, but it’s not like we’re an important patrol. Perhaps they were here for something else and we were unlucky enough to attract their attention.”

“Maybe they were here for the scavenger den,” Umber said.

“What scavenger den?” Reed glanced at him, surprised.

“Can’t you smell it?” Umber asked. “We flew over part of it, too — it’s pretty well hidden in the forest.”

“How do you *notice* something like that in the middle of a frantic escape?” Pheasant demanded.

Umber shrugged.

“Why would the IceWings care about a scavenger den?” Sora asked softly.

They all thought for a moment, then looked at Reed.

“I don’t know,” he said helplessly. It felt like he was saying that all the time these days.

“Well,” Pheasant said, spreading her wings, “it doesn’t matter. What matters is we survived another battle, thanks to Reed.”

*I wonder if they really feel that way, he thought. I certainly don't.*

"I hope we survive the next one," Marsh said gloomily.

"I hope we don't have to," Umber said. "I hope Clay fulfills the prophecy and ends the war and saves the world really soon, before we have to do any more fighting. Don't you think? Maybe he will?"

"Maybe," Pheasant said. "I hope so."

"I do, too," Reed said. He looked up at the stars. *Before the war takes anyone else I care about. Before our village is destroyed; before I have to choose between loyalty to my tribe and the safety of my brothers and sisters. Before we have to kill anyone else.* "I hope so, too."



# PART ONE

THE SECRET PLAN



## CHAPTER 1

*Where is she?*

Starflight suspected that he might be dead, except that everything hurt so much. Darkness pressed against his eyes whenever he tried to open them. His nose and throat ached in a fierce, raw way, as if they'd been scraped out with a crocodile tail.

*Is she all right?*

He couldn't remember what he'd dreamed and what was real.

Perhaps he was still under the mountain. Perhaps his friends had never tried to escape their guardians. Maybe this was one long nightmare that had started with the threat of Morrowseer's visit.

But Starflight was sure he could remember the large NightWing taking him aside. There was a lecture about how "NightWings have a reputation to uphold" and "NightWings are natural leaders" and "you must make the others respect you, fear you, and follow you, or you'll be the greatest disappointment our tribe has ever produced" . . . Starflight

couldn't have conjured that from his own brain. That was all real.

He curled onto his side and felt jagged rocks press into his scales.

Was the SkyWing palace real? The dragonets captured before even tasting sunlight. The prison on the tower of rock. The baking-hot arena sands that smelled of blood and terror. Queen Scarlet's delight at capturing him, a real NightWing out in the world, and her plans to make him fight, and her excitement about the prospect of watching him die.

No, that had to be real, because Starflight remembered being "rescued" by the NightWings. He remembered watching his friends turn into small dots below him, blue and brown and bright, and he knew it was real because it felt so much like *this* felt: as if he were a scroll ripped in half down the middle so none of the words made any sense anymore.

*Will I ever see her again?*

*I hope she's not here. I hope she's safe somewhere.*

"I think there's something wrong with him."

Was that a voice?

He tried to listen, but his dreams dragged him back down.

There had been another stern lecture from Morrowseer. It was essential for Starflight to be the leader of the dragonets; *everything depended on him*. And a new order: he must convince the others to choose Blister as the next SandWing queen.

“Maybe they killed him by accident. That’d be all right. Maybe I’ll get to be in the prophecy instead.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works, Fierceteeth.”

And then there was the Kingdom of the Sea. No one would listen to him. He couldn’t lead anyone. His friends practically laughed at him when he tried to support Blister.

Another prison; another escape where Starflight did just about nothing to help. And then the rainforest and the strange unnatural tunnels: one to the Kingdom of Sand and one, apparently, to the secret home of the NightWings.

*That* Starflight remembered.

He remembered staring up at it — the dark hole in the tree that led to a home he’d never seen.

“I bet he’d wake up if I bit him.”

“I bet Morrowseer would throw you in the volcano if he found tooth marks on his prophecy pet.”

“I bet my mom would have him for lunch if he tried!”

He was definitely hearing voices — unfamiliar voices, very close by.

The memory of the rainforest was blurring. Starflight tried to fix his mind on it — on those last moments, guarding the tunnel so the NightWings wouldn’t come through and attack the RainWings. What had happened?

“Well, he’d better wake up and be interesting soon, or Morrowseer will take him away again before we get to ask him anything.”

“Ooh, I have an idea.”



Claws scabbled on rock, and then there was quiet.

Starflight's eyelids felt too heavy to open, as if extra scales were piled on top of them. He let the darkness drift up over him again.

Right — guarding the hole. With Clay. Morning sunbeams flickering through the green leaves, octopus-blue flowers turning their heads up to the light. Sunny was back in the village, with Tsunami, watching Glory try to become queen of the RainWings, of all things.

Sunny had brought them food the night before, her golden scales brushing against his dark wings as she passed him strange little purple fruits.

*I love you, he would never say. Don't hate me because of what the other NightWings have done. Don't think I'm like my tribe. Don't listen to Glory's description of my kingdom, the smoke and the fire and the smell and the death and the trapped, tortured RainWings and the cruel black dragons. Don't look at me like I'm one of them, like I could ever do what they've done, please.*

And then she'd glanced up at him and smiled, and in Sunny's eyes he could see himself as Starflight, just fine the way he was.

Her friend.

Which made everything better and worse all at the same time.

"Careful! I'm not going back for more if you spill it, idiot."

"Get your great honking wings out of my way then, fathead."

The voices again. Starflight caught at the memories, trying to remember the last thing that had happened before everything went dark.

He'd been staring at the hole, wondering what the other NightWings were really like. Wondering if they were all as scary as Morrowseer. Wondering if he went through and talked to them, whether they would listen. What if he could stop the NightWings and RainWings from fighting? What if his tribe understood him and believed in him; what if they thought it was better to be smart than brave? What if they didn't care that he had no special NightWing powers?

*What would Sunny think of me then?*

*She'd probably think: who are you, and what have you done with Starflight?* Because there was no way he'd ever be brave enough to go through that tunnel on his own.

And then Clay had yelped, "Did you see that? I think it was a boar! I'll be right back!" And poor ever-hungry Clay had charged off into the trees, leaving Starflight to watch the hole alone. . . .

In a heartbeat, dark wings had boiled out of the hole; dark claws had circled his snout; a dark voice had hissed in his ear, "Silence if you want your friend to live." Another dark voice: "Better safe than sorry," although he hadn't made a sound, and he'd known it would hurt right before the blow struck his head and pain blazed through him, and that was the last thing he —

*SPLASH!*

Starflight jolted up with a yell. His eyes popped open. Freezing salt water cascaded over his snout and snaked down his neck, seeping into his scales. The muddled heavy feeling vanished in an instant.

"It worked!" cheered one of the unfamiliar voices.

"Drat," said another. "I really thought he was dead."

Starflight shook his head and the pain ricocheted around inside. He rubbed at his snout, trying to clear the ocean water from his stinging eyes.

Six or seven or maybe eight dark blurry shapes surrounded him. Beyond them, glowing red light pulsed in lines along the walls. The freezing water had cleared his nose for a moment, but heavy, smoky air was already pressing back in.

"Who are you?" Starflight gasped, or tried to.

"Huh. I thought he might attack us," said a third voice. "That's what I would do."

"He doesn't look very dangerous," said another voice skeptically. "They should have picked someone bigger. Don't you think? Bigger and scarier and fiercer."

"Like me," said the voice who had hoped Starflight was dead.

"You all have tiny RainWing brains," said yet another voice. Starflight was losing count. "He was still inside his egg when they took him. They didn't know if he'd be big or scary or even if he'd be male or female. Otherwise, of course, they would have picked a girl, obviously."

"Like *me*."

“Hello,” Starflight coughed. “Hello?”

One of the shapes came close enough for him to make out the features of a disgruntled-looking dragonet a year or two older than himself. She poked at his mouth and peered at his teeth, jabbed at his chest so he coughed again, inspected his claws, and sighed huffily.

“Weak,” she declared. “I’d have sent him back, too.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re hoping they’ll pick you instead,” said another dragonet, pushing forward. He patted Starflight’s head in an almost friendly way. “But prophecies don’t work like that.”

“We’ll see,” she muttered.

“That’s Fierceteeth,” said the friendlier dragonet to Starflight. “Don’t mind her. Older sisters always think they can do whatever you’re doing better than you can. I know, I’ve got one, too. I’m Mightyclaws, by the way.”

“Older sister?” Starflight echoed, blinking at Fierceteeth.

“Yes, this is the touching family reunion part,” she said. “Same mother, different fathers, we assume. How do you feel?” She eyed him from horns to tail. “Ill? Very ill? Dying, perhaps?”

“What part of *brightest night* are you having trouble with?” said another dragonet behind Fierceteeth. “Haven’t you been listening in class? Events have to match the prophecies. Hi, strange dragon. I’m Mindreader. But don’t worry, I promise I’ll stay out of your head.”

The older dragonets in the room laughed uproariously, as if this was the most hilarious joke in Pyrrhia history. The

three dragonets who looked younger than Starflight rolled their eyes, like they were used to hearing jokes that made no sense from that group.

Starflight rubbed his wet scales, confused.

Now that his sight was clearing, he could see that he was in a long, narrow cave lined with indentations in the rock at regular intervals, all the right size for dragonet beds. He was curled on one of these, not far from a large archway that seemed to be the only exit from the room. Next to him on the floor was a large hollow stone, which was apparently what the dragonets had used to collect the seawater they'd just poured all over him.

It didn't look like a prison. It looked like a dormitory.

Hot coals smoldered in alcoves in the walls, lending a red glow to the room. A skylight at each end of the cave allowed a bit of dim gray light to filter in.

There were at least fifty sleeping spots that Starflight could see, but only about eleven of them looked slept in. Several had rough blankets heaped on them in messy piles, while others were scattered with objects that looked like seashells and twisted bits of rock. A few of the blanket-covered beds had a scroll lying next to them, which made Starflight's claws itch with longing. But most of the beds were completely bare.

*Places for dragonets, but no dragonets to fill them.*

Starflight remembered something Morrowseer had said offhandedly, shortly after rescuing Starflight from the

SkyWings. He'd said, "We can't afford to lose any NightWings, even peculiar little ones."

*Maybe there is something wrong with my tribe, Starflight thought. Maybe they're losing dragonets somehow — or not having enough of them in the first place.*

Everything smelled like sulfur and decaying animals. As Fierceteeth leaned over and jabbed his stomach again, Starflight realized that a lot of the decaying smell came from the dragonets. They all had horrendously bad breath. Morrowseer's breath had never been wonderful either, but this was much worse. It took all of Starflight's willpower not to recoil when they spoke to him.

They were also shockingly thin, every one of them, with narrow chests, bloodshot eyes, and hacking coughs. *Even the dragonets who survive are in pretty bad shape,* Starflight thought.

He stretched gingerly, eyeing the door. It didn't seem to be barricaded in any way; as far as Starflight could tell, he could walk right out into the caves beyond. *There's probably a guard,* he thought. *Or LOTS of guards. Or maybe something really creepy, like Queen Coral's electric eels. Or a lava river like the one that keeps the RainWings trapped in their prison caves.*

A shiver of fear ran down his spine.

"Why am I here?" he blurted.

The little crowd of dragonets exchanged glances.

"Because you failed," Fierceteeth offered. "I assume."

“We don’t know that,” Mightyclaws interjected. “A couple of the big dragons dropped you here a few hours ago and you’ve been muttering and thrashing around ever since.”

“Yeah, lots of worrying about Sunny. Who’s Sunny?” one of the other dragonets demanded.

Starflight considered throwing himself into the volcano. “Another dragonet,” he mumbled. *I hope she’s safe.*

“I want to hear about the mainland,” Mindreader said eagerly. “Tell us everything. We’ve heard there are trees taller than dragons and that in some places the sky is blue. True? False? What’s the coolest thing you’ve seen? What’s the best thing you’ve eaten?”

“You’ve never been to the mainland?” Starflight said.

“Dragonets aren’t allowed to leave the island until we’re ten years old,” Mightyclaws said. “Apparently we can’t be trusted to keep all the NightWing secrets until then.”

Almost in unison, all the dragonets snorted impatiently.

“You’re the only exception,” Fierceteeth said in a voice dripping with scorn.

“Him and the other one,” Mindreader said. “I heard my mom say there was another.”

“I don’t know any NightWing secrets,” Starflight said.

“Oh,” said Mightyclaws. “I guess that’s one way to make sure you keep them!”

The scrabble of claws in the hall outside heralded the appearance of a dragonet smaller than the others, perhaps three years old. She raced into the room and gasped, “He’s coming!”

Immediately the dragonets scattered to their sleeping spots. Half of them dove into their blankets and pretended to be asleep. A few of them grabbed their scrolls and looked studious; others fussed busily with the objects around their beds. Fierceteeth sat down on her bed, folded her wings, and glared at the doorway.

Starflight wished he was unconscious again as he heard heavy footsteps tramping toward the room. He glanced up at the skylight, wondering if he could fit through it but knowing perfectly well he was too terrified to try.

With a scraping, hissing sound, Morrowseer slithered into the room. He frowned at Fierceteeth, then looked coldly down his long nose at Starflight.

“Up,” he snarled. “The queen of the NightWings wants to see you.”