

TUI T. SUTHERLAND

DISCOVER WHERE THE DARKNESS BEGINS . . .

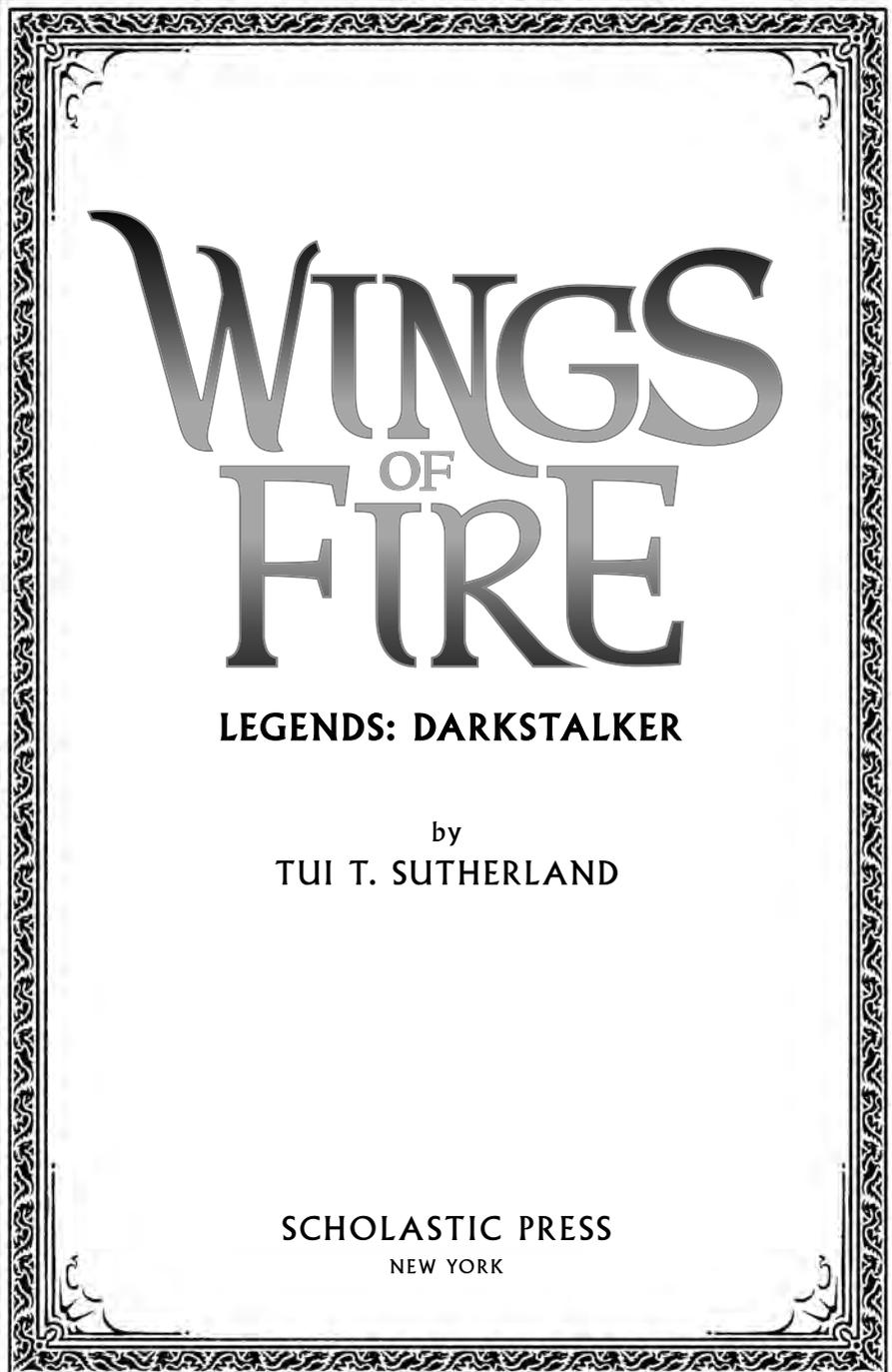
DARKSTALKER

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

WINGS OF FIRE

– SPECIAL EDITION –

COVER NOT FINAL



WINGS OF FIRE

LEGENDS: DARKSTALKER

by
TUI T. SUTHERLAND

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CHAPTER 1

FATHOM

Fathom had never thought of himself as anyone special, and he certainly wasn't expecting that to change the day of the animus test.

Eight SeaWing dragonets were lined up on the beach that morning, their blue and green scales wet from the hissing waves of the ocean behind them. All of them had turned two years old within the last few months. The sun was beating on Fathom's snout and his eyes felt prickly and sore from the brightness. He couldn't wait to get back to the underwater palace, where it was cool and dark.

But he sat quietly, patiently, waiting without moving (even though they'd been sitting there for ages), like they had been told to do. Unlike *some* dragonets.

Swish. Sand pattered across his back talons, just enough for him to be sure it wasn't the wind that had done it.

"Shhh," he said out of the corner of his mouth.

"Who, me?" said the dragonet next to him. "What did I say? Nothing, that's what. *You're* the one being noisy. I'm

just sitting here. Perfectly still. A model dragonet, me." She lifted her chin and put on an angelic expression.

A large, sleek seagull landed up the beach from the dragons, near the tree line, and eyed them suspiciously. It had the face of a bird who knew things — a shrewd bird who had managed to survive this long in a dragon world. It was clearly trying to figure out why a bunch of dragons had popped out of the water and then decided to sit quietly in a row on the sand. Were they about to drop bits of food for a crafty seagull? Or were they all conspiring to eat him?

The bird pivoted its head to study them with its other eye.

"I dare you to grab it and eat it," Indigo whispered.

"Quit talking to me," Fathom growled.

"You know you want to." Her voice was as light as feathers, barely stirring the air.

He *did* want to. He was *very hungry*. But the queen had told them not to move, and he was not going to be the dragonet who failed. Being the queen's great-nephew would not save him from whatever trouble that would cause.

Swish. This time a hermit crab got caught in the sweep of Indigo's tail and bonked against his side as the sand sprayed over his feet. Fathom felt the crab stagger dazedly across his claws, trying to figure out what had just happened to it.

"Stop. That," he growled, keeping his face as still as he could. On his other side, he heard his sister, Pearl, let out a small, exasperated sigh.

"I think *you're* the one who should stop *distracting*

everybody with all your *chitchat*, Highness,” said Indigo with mock primness.

“Indigo.” Queen Lagoon materialized suddenly behind them, rising out of the ocean like a sinister iceberg. She stalked slowly up the beach between Fathom and his troublemaking friend.

“Your Majesty,” Indigo said, her dark blue-purple claws gripping the sand. She managed to keep her anxiety out of her voice, but Fathom knew that the queen terrified her. Given how openly Queen Lagoon disliked her, in fact, Indigo would be quite justified if she tried to bury herself in kelp whenever the queen appeared.

“I hope you are taking this test seriously,” said the queen. She turned her gaze to scrutinize Fathom, and he felt as though eels were wriggling under his scales. He liked it much better when the queen ignored him, as she did most of the time. He was only a minor prince in the palace, nobody important.

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Indigo widened her eyes as if she’d never done anything wrong in her entire life.

There was another splash behind them, and Fathom found himself holding his breath as a new dragon stalked up the beach to join the queen.

It was *him*.

The most respected dragon in the SeaWing tribe, second in power only to the queen: Fathom’s grandfather, Albatross.

Albatross was from the same hatching as his sister, Queen Lagoon, but he was nearly a neck length taller than her, with

long wings that swept majestically across the sand. His scales were bluish gray but so pale that in places they looked almost white, while his eyes were a blue so dark they were nearly black. In fact, his coloring was somewhat similar to the seagull, which had now retreated to the safer vantage point of a palm tree.

His expression, too, was as suspicious as the seagull's. He looked down his long, hooked snout at the dragonets.

"This is a waste of time, Lagoon," he said. "Nobody ever tested me, but we figured out quickly enough what I could do. If any of them have a shred of power, surely they would know by now. Or it will become obvious, sooner or later."

"I'd prefer sooner," the queen said silkily. "If we find another animus in the tribe, that would make us twice as powerful, which would be quite useful given how the MudWings and RainWings have been behaving lately. And the earlier we find her, the sooner you can start to train her, and the sooner I can start to use her.

"Besides," she added in a lower voice, so Fathom had to strain to hear her, "I think we would all prefer to discover our next animus in a less . . . dramatic fashion than you were discovered. Don't you?"

Albatross flinched, just slightly. He cast a skeptical eye across the young dragons. "My power is more than enough for whatever you need. I've given you everything you've asked for, haven't I? And I don't *want* an apprentice."

Lagoon coiled her tail and bared her fangs. Suddenly she

did not seem smaller than Albatross at all. Fathom dug his talons into the warm sand, trying not to shiver.

“You are done complaining about this,” she hissed. “The animus tests will continue. You will administer them whenever I tell you to. You will train any dragonet we find with powers like yours. And you will never question my decisions again.”

There was a long pause, and then Albatross bowed his head. “Yes, Your Majesty.” He folded his wings and paced down the line of dragonets, avoiding everyone’s gaze. “Some of you may have heard of animus magic. It is a rare kind of immense power, and a dragon is either born with it or he isn’t. What we are doing today is a simple test to see if you have that power. Almost certainly you do not,” he added.

Albatross flicked his tail at the trees. The seagull let out an alarmed screech as eight coconuts suddenly wrestled themselves loose and came flying down to the beach, rolling to a stop on the sand, one in front of each dragonet.

“Pick up your coconut,” Albatross said.

Fathom hesitated. There was something a little terrifying about this order. Albatross sounded bored, and yet a coconut that flew through the air by itself might do anything when you touched it. Would it explode in their claws? Turn into a sea urchin and stab them? Was this the kind of test that might hurt?

Pearl was the first to lift her coconut into her talons, with Indigo a moment behind her. Neither of them started

screaming, so Fathom reached out and picked his up as well.

It seemed like an ordinary coconut — hairy, a little heavy, warm from the sun.

“Now,” said Albatross, “tell your coconut to fly over here and hit me.”

The dragonets glanced at one another in confusion, shuffling their feet. Fathom felt the ocean lapping at his tail as the tide started to come in.

“Um,” said Indigo — of course it was Indigo, the only dragonet who ever spoke up about anything. “Sorry. How do we do that?”

Queen Lagoon glared at her, but Albatross looked obscurely pleased. “You use your power, if you have any,” he said. “An animus dragon can enchant any object to do what he wants it to do. I can do it now without even speaking, but saying it out loud is the way to start. Simply whisper to your coconut that you want it to fly over here and hit me.” He smiled.

“Huh,” said Indigo. “Wouldn’t it be easier to just throw it at you?”

Albatross barked a laugh. “But then you might miss. An enchanted coconut will never miss, no matter how I dodge or try to block it. Go ahead and try.”

Small voices began to murmur on either side of Fathom. He glanced over at Pearl, who was frowning hard at her coconut, and then at Indigo, who met his eyes, grinned, and gave a “well, *this* is the dumbest thing we’ve done all day” shrug.

Fathom curled his claws around the brown sphere and brought his snout close to it, feeling quite silly indeed.

"Coconut," he whispered. "Um. Would you please go hit my grandfather?"

The coconut didn't move. It wasn't a magical ball of danger. It was just a coconut.

Fathom exhaled. He didn't know *what* he felt. A part of him had hoped . . . well, it was ridiculous to hope. Albatross was the only animus in the tribe — the only animus any SeaWing had ever known. There were rumors that other tribes had them, but who could tell if that was true. Maybe Albatross was the only one ever. The chances of finding another SeaWing animus just a generation or two after Albatross, when there had never been one before . . . and the chances of it being him, Fathom, of all dragons . . .

"Fathom, you jellyfish," Indigo whispered, giggling. "I don't think you're supposed to ask politely. He said *tell* it what to do."

"How would you know?" Fathom whispered back. "*You* don't know how effective politeness can be because *you* have atrocious manners."

The other dragonets were starting to whisper to one another as well. Nobody's coconut had done anything interesting. Albatross turned to the queen with an "I told you so" smirk.

"It's a coconut." Indigo rolled her eyes. "I think you're allowed to boss it around."

"Fine." Fathom held the coconut a bit higher and gave it a

stern royal stare as imposing as his great-aunt's, trying to make Indigo laugh. "Coconut, listen up. I *command* you to fly across this beach and strike my grandfather."

The coconut shot out of his talons so fast that Fathom stumbled forward, thinking he'd dropped it. He let out a yelp of surprise, but it was not enough warning for Albatross, whose eyes were on the queen. Fathom's coconut smashed into his grandfather's chest hard enough to knock him backward, his wings flying out, sand blasting in all directions like waves.

Silence dropped over the beach.

Fathom had never known it was possible to feel this elated and this terrified at the same time. He wished he could dive into the ocean and scream at the top of his lungs, but he couldn't move a single muscle.

"Whoa," Indigo breathed.

Albatross slowly rolled to his feet, struggling against the sucking, shifting white sand. He shook out his wings and stood up, wincing. He looked suddenly a lot older than he had before. Without looking at the dragonets or the queen, he carefully picked up the coconut that had attacked him, stared at it for a moment, and then held it to his chest. Fathom thought he could hear tiny crunching sounds. Had he cracked his grandfather's ribs? Was Albatross using the coconut to heal himself?

Was he in the very worst trouble he'd ever been in?

Finally Albatross looked up.

"Who did that?" he asked. Queen Lagoon swiveled her

head, staring down the line of dragonets until she came to Fathom's empty claws.

Fathom hunched his shoulders and saw that Pearl was pointing at him.

"It was my brother," she said. "Fathom's an animus!"

"Leaping barracudas," Indigo said to him. "I can't believe you never told me!"

"I didn't know!" he protested. "I had no idea!" Frankly it had never occurred to him to give orders to inanimate objects before.

"Prince Fathom," said the queen, stepping toward him with a glittering smile. "How perfectly wonderful. You are going to do such wonderful, important things for m — for your tribe."

Fathom held out his talons and stared at them. *I'm an animus. The rarest of all dragons. ME. I am special after all. I have magic like no other dragon in the Kingdom of the Sea.*

Except one.

He looked up and met his grandfather's eyes.

"Yes," said Albatross, smiling. "What happy news."

Behind him, out of view of the other dragons, a vine curled slowly out of the jungle and wrapped itself around the seagull's throat. Fathom watched, transfixed, as the bird was strangled to death without a sound.

Albatross patted Fathom on the shoulder, his face calm and friendly. "Another animus in the tribe," he said. "I'm so very, very pleased."