



TUI T. SUTHERLAND

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WINGS OF FIRE

DARKNESS OF DRAGONS

A decorative border with intricate, repeating scrollwork patterns surrounds the entire text area.

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DARKNESS OF DRAGONS

by
TUI T. SUTHERLAND

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BOOK ONE
THE DRAGONET PROPHECY

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THE LOST HEIR

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THE HIDDEN KINGDOM

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THE DARK SECRET

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TALONS OF POWER

BOOK TEN
DARKNESS OF DRAGONS

LEGENDS
DARKSTALKER

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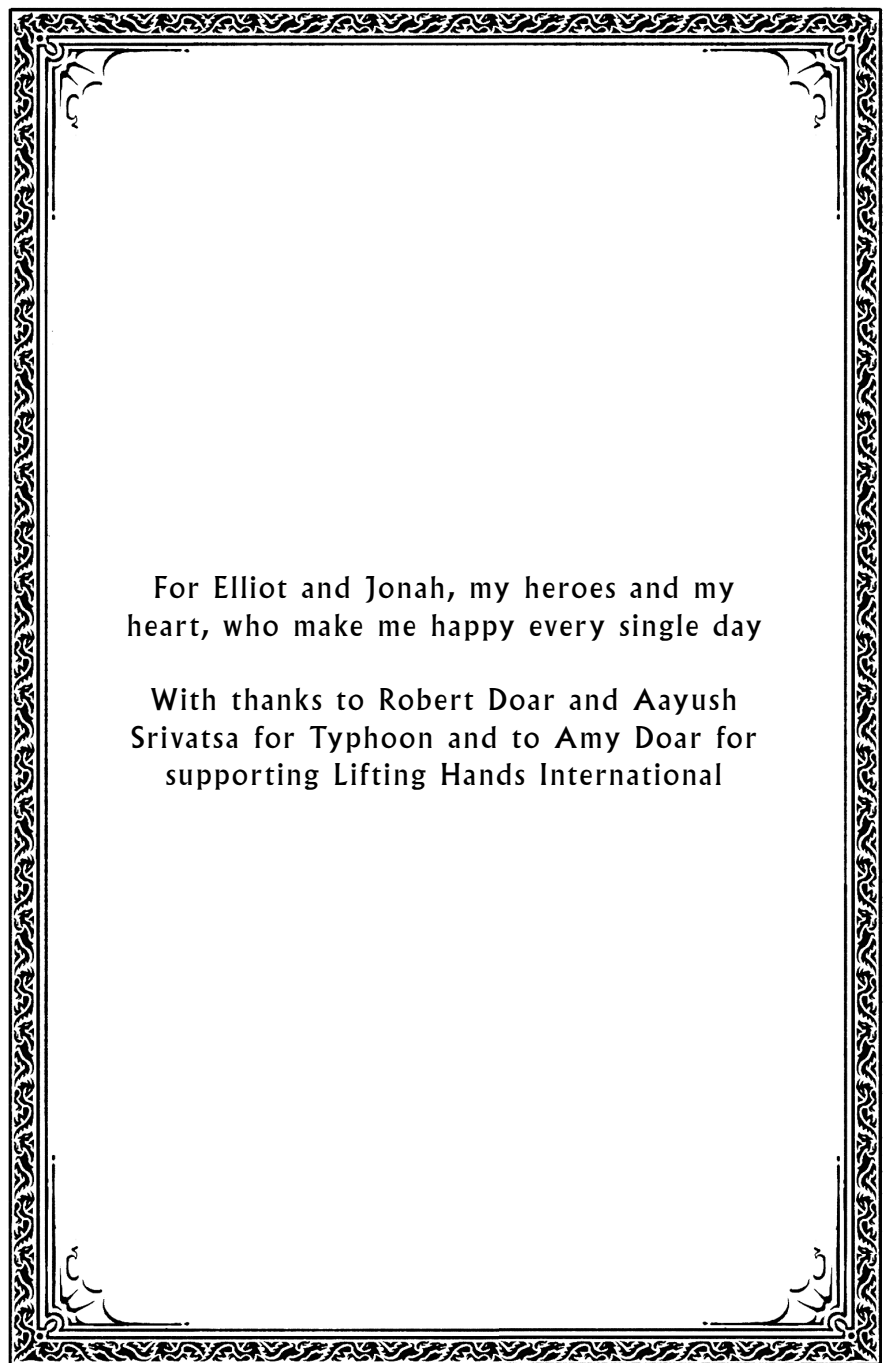
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For Elliot and Jonah, my heroes and my
heart, who make me happy every single day

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PROLOGUE

Almost twenty-one years ago . . .

A dragon was fleeing across the dunes.

She didn't dare fly. The sun had just risen into the cloudless blue expanse overhead. Up there, she'd be as easy to spot as one of the dark, circling buzzards that seemed to be waiting for her to die.

But I'm not going to die, she thought fiercely. Not today.

She ran with her sand-colored wings outstretched, hoping to catch any stirrings of wind, but the air was still and hot down on the desert floor. Her scales were baking; her back had never been so hot; her body was a sack of fire-heated stones she had to drag along behind her. Her earrings felt like twin pieces of the sun blazing against her skull. Brief, dazed visions of roasted lizards drifted in and out of her head. Sometimes she was the one on the spit, turning above the fire; sometimes she had fallen in and was staring up at them as they rotated slowly overhead and the flames licked around her.

Was that the sound of wingbeats in the distance?

She threw herself down and burrowed until she was hidden. A few layers below the surface, she found

a cooler swathe of sand, and she drove her scalded talons into it.

I left the dates out to dry for too long. They've all shriveled up. Quicksand will be so disappointed in me.

She blinked and blinked again, trying to shake off the hallucination without moving. Her old boss had been dead for years. She wasn't in the kitchens anymore. She was running for her life. She couldn't let the desert consume her mind right now.

The flickering shadows of two dragons swept past. She stayed still, buried, until the wingbeats were long gone.

And then she was up and running again.

It can't be much farther, she thought desperately. Of course, the journey never seemed this long when she flew. But she'd been running for half the night and surely the sun had risen hours ago. What if I'm lost? Or what if she moved without telling me? It had been almost a year since her last visit . . .

Something wavered on the blurry horizon — a hut? A tree? The dragon shifted course to aim for it, but as she got closer, it disappeared again.

A mirage.

I'm losing it. But I can't.

There's too much at stake.

She stopped, closed her eyes, and concentrated fiercely.

SandWings were naturally adapted to desert conditions — better at handling heat and a lack of water than other dragon tribes. But even SandWings weren't supposed to spend hours on the desert floor, running along the sand in the baking sun. They were supposed to get up and fly — to sweep from oasis to oasis on swift wings.

An oasis. She lives near that pool with the five palms. Maybe . . .

She strained her ears.

There — the faintest faraway sound of splashing, of a bucket plunging into water and coming out dripping.

She opened her eyes and ran toward it, determination in every muscle of her heavy body.

And finally there it was — the small hut by the pool, shaded by the five palm trees. She let out a cry of relief and stumbled, half sliding down the last dune and collapsing entirely into the water.

The door of the hut opened, and a sharp-eyed dragon emerged, wiping her claws on a small, sandy, dark green towel.

“Don't drink too much,” she said acerbically. “If you're sick in my oasis, you're cleaning it up yourself.”

“I know,” said the fugitive, taking one more swallow and stopping reluctantly. She sat up, water streaming off her wings, and burst into tears. “Prickle, I'm in s-so much trouble.”

“Oh, by the circle of snakes,” her sister snapped, throwing the towel at her. “I told you to stay away from that prince. You should have left the palace with me when he first started mooning around the kitchens. I *knew* he’d get you killed sooner or later, and probably me too if I didn’t clear out.”

“Please help me,” Palm begged. “You were right. Of course you were right. I’m sorry I didn’t listen.”

“Are the queen’s guards chasing you right now?” Prickle said sharply. “Did you lead them to me? I will *not* be murdered for your mistakes.” She glanced up at the sky and took a step back toward her door.

“No, wait!” Palm floundered out of the pool and threw herself at her sister’s feet. “I was careful, I promise! I just need a place to hide for a few — even one day, just one day. Then I’ll keep running and you’ll never have to see me again, I swear.”

Prickle stared down her nose at Palm, flicking her wingtips crossly. Side by side, the two dragons were clearly sisters from the same hatching, with similar patterns of light brown scales freckled across their paler yellow scales. But Palm was rounder, softer, a creature with access to the bread and date sugar cookies of the palace kitchens, while Prickle had the lean, weathered look of a dragon who’d been living on her own in the desert for two years.

“Please,” Palm begged. “Can you help me?”

Prickle surveyed her coldly. Palm remembered the fight they'd had the first day Smolder stopped by the kitchen to compliment the camel stew. Prickle had seen the spark between them long before Palm realized that it was mutual. She'd thought it was innocent enough, having a crush on the handsome SandWing prince, and that Prickle was overreacting.

Until he came back . . . and then came back again . . . and then he invited her for a walk around the courtyards . . . and then they started meeting after dark and whispering about the future. Soon after that, Prickle moved out of the palace overnight, warning Palm to stay away from the royal family if she wanted to live.

"Fine," Prickle said abruptly. "You can stay for *one* night if you give me your earrings."

"What?" Palm reached up to touch the glowing fire opals in her ears. "These? But they were a gift from —"

"I know," said her sister. "They're much too expensive for you to afford on your wages. I'll get a whole lot of gold for them in the Scorpion Den."

My last connection to Smolder, Palm thought sadly.

"Hand them over," said Prickle, "or keep flying right now."

Palm knew her wings and talons couldn't make it another foot.

Her claws were shaking as she reached up,

unclasped the earrings, and dropped them into Prickle's palm.

It's not my last connection, she reminded herself. I have something more important now.

"Pretty," said her sister, examining the opals. "Maybe I'll keep them instead of selling them." She fastened them into her own ears, where they glittered smug little "I told you so" faces at Palm. "Now stop blubbering and tell me what happened."

"We tried to elope," Palm admitted. She wiped her eyes with the towel, leaving trails of sticky wet sand across her face.

Prickle let out a frustrated growl. "You have the brains of a sun-addled camel."

"I know," Palm sniffled. "But . . . we had to."

Prickle's gaze flashed over Palm's figure. "I take it back. Sun-addled camels at least still have a survival instinct." She turned and swept into the hut and Palm hurried after her.

It was blissfully cool inside compared to the scorching heat Palm had been running through for so long. A red curtain covered the only window, casting the room in shades of blood and rubies. Prickle stepped over to a low table, picked up a small mirror, and tilted her head to admire the earrings.

"You brought this on yourself," she pointed out self-righteously.

“But it isn’t fair!” Palm burst out. “Why can’t he fall in love? Why does his whole life have to be wasted just so his mother won’t feel threatened? Other royal families aren’t like this.” She rubbed her eyes angrily. “Besides,” she muttered, “it could be male, and then no one would even care about it.”

Prickle rolled her eyes. “Finish your stupid story.”

“We were supposed to meet by the caravan gate before midnight,” Palm said. “We were going to go west, or maybe south, and find a small oasis where we could live in peace, just like you did.”

“I didn’t bring a prince or a secret potential heir to the throne into *my* hideout,” her sister observed. She took down two bowls from a shelf and began rummaging in a sack. For food, Palm hoped.

“Well, the guards showed up before he did,” Palm said, her wings drooping. “I don’t know how they knew about me or our plans.” She sat down in the corner, twisting the green towel between her claws.

“I have three guesses,” Prickle growled, “and they all begin with B.”

She was probably right. Palm had always felt the eyes of the three SandWing princesses on her — Burn’s ferocious glare, Blister’s malevolent scrutiny, even gossipy Blaze’s watchful curiosity. Smolder tried to meet Palm in secret, but perhaps there was no such thing as a true secret in the palace.

Well . . . maybe one, she thought, touching her stomach.

"I was able to escape," she said. "They heard him coming and got distracted, and I bolted. But I know they're looking for me. Oasis won't let them stop until they find me."

"Smolder's probably already dead," Prickle said heartlessly. "You'll never be able to go back to the palace. If Oasis doesn't get you, one of her daughters will."

"I know," Palm said, her eyes filling with tears again. *Oh, Smolder, I'll miss you so much.*

"Shhh!" Prickle's head shot up. Her ears flicked toward the door of the hut. Her venomous tail lifted slowly, menacingly, over her head.

The two sisters waited in petrified silence for several long heartbeats.

"Are you sure you weren't followed?" Prickle whispered harshly.

"I'm sure!" Palm whispered back.

"Then what was —?" Prickle started, but her question was interrupted by the unmistakable *thump thump thump* of talons landing heavily on the sand outside.

"Oh moons," Palm whispered in terror. She shrank back against the wall as the door was flung open and two SandWing soldiers burst into the room.

“I knew it!” crowed the male soldier. “I told you I heard her sister had a place out here!”

The other soldier winced, and her eyes locked with Palm’s.

She knew this dragon. *Agave* — *she’s the little one who was so scared the first few days in the wingery.* Palm was only a year older, but she’d worried about the frightened dragonet. She’d shared her snacks and convinced Agave to play dragons and vipers until she calmed down.

But that was a long time ago. Agave was a full-grown soldier now, big-shouldered and long-clawed. She flicked her tail up and frowned at Palm.

“Yeah, you were right, Torch,” she said. “Good thinking. All right, you prince-loving traitor, time to come with us.”

She stepped forward and snapped a pair of shackles around Prickle’s wrists.

Palm’s gasp was drowned out by the snarl of outrage from her sister.

“I’m not Palm!” Prickle roared. “*She is!* I’m not stupid enough to sneak around with a sand snorter like Smolder! Take these off!”

“Nice try,” Agave said, seizing Prickle’s neck and slamming her back into the wall. The two bowls wobbled and one fell, spilling coconut milk into the sand.

"I'm *not*," Prickle wheezed. She clawed at Agave's talons. "Palm, *tell them.*"

Palm couldn't find her voice. She couldn't breathe. Did Agave really think —?

"Are you sure about this?" asked the other soldier nervously. "They do look alike. But I would have guessed that the other one was Palm — I mean — it's hard to tell — but —"

"This one is Palm," said Agave calmly. "I knew her in the wingery. Besides, look at her earrings." She turned Prickle's head so the jewels glowed in the dim red light. "Those came from the prince, no doubt about it. I hear she's been wearing them around the palace."

"Oh, yes." The other guard exhaled with relief. "I heard that, too. Asking for trouble, flaunting a gift like that. You're right, that must be her."

"NO!" Prickle shrieked, trying to throw Agave off her. "They're not mine! She gave them to me! I'm not Palm!" The male soldier leaped forward and locked a heavy collar around Prickle's neck, attached to a chain, which he held while Agave shackled Prickle's back legs as well.

"*Palm,*" Prickle screamed. "Don't let them do this to me!"

I should stop them, Palm thought in a panic. She's my sister. I have to save her.

But . . . I also have to save my dragonet.

If she admitted the truth and they took her back to the palace, the queen would find out quickly that she was with egg — and she would never let Smolder's dragonet live.

What can I do? How can I choose between my sister and my egg?

Palm stumbled to her feet as the soldiers began to drag Prickle to the door.

"Wh-what's going to happen to her?" Palm asked.

"Queen Oasis wants her locked in the deepest dungeon," said the male soldier. "Where no one will ever find her."

"As for you," Agave said, meeting her eyes at last, "you might be accused of helping her. I'd suggest you run."

Her gaze flickered slightly, down to the small scar on Palm's left wing — the one she got falling off the wingery roof.

She does know I'm me. She's trying to save me.

"Palm," Prickle growled. "Tell them the truth, or so help me I'll set the moons on fire and drop them on your head."

It's not just my life that needs saving, though.

I have to save my egg . . . I'm the only one who can.

"I'm sorry, Palm." She lifted her head and tilted it in exactly her sister's usual condescending way. "You brought this upon yourself."

“WHAT?” Prickle roared a blast of fire that Palm barely managed to duck. Flames caught and flared all around the hut: the small bed, the box beside it, the shelf, the bowls. The curtain blazed into a curling flag of red-white-gold.

The soldiers yanked Prickle out the door and Palm rushed out after them, coughing and blinking the smoke away. As her sight cleared, she saw them clamping iron around Prickle’s snout. She wouldn’t be breathing any more fire today — or shouting about her innocence. She’d have to fly back to the palace in livid silence.

And then someone there will recognize her, Palm thought. They’ll set her free. They’ll think it was all a mistake.

I hope. I hope Agave doesn’t get in trouble.

She stood beside the oasis pool, watching the three dragons fly away, feeling the heat of the burning hut as it collapsed inward.

Prickle will never forgive me for this. But once the queen sees her, she’ll know she’s not me and let her go. And by then I’ll be long gone.

Me and my dragonet.

This is the head start I needed.

She whirled to plunge herself into the pool, washing off the sand and taking huge gulps. She found two

camelskin pouches hanging from one of the trees, filled them with water, and slung them across her chest.

Barely a minute later, she was flying. Up in the sky this time, south and east, toward the mountains. She'd hide in the forests and hills, maybe in the rainforest for a while — somewhere sheltered where she could have her egg in safety.

Then she'd keep moving. She'd keep her dragonet alive, and one day she'd tell her the truth about her heritage, and — if it was a girl — it felt like a girl — she'd teach her that the throne wasn't worth it. That it was better to hide and live. That she didn't need power or treasure. How to survive, that was all she needed to know.

Far below, sand whirled around something small, moving fast. Palm's heart gave a little nervous jump and she squinted down at it.

Scavengers — three of them, on horseback. Riding into the desert, toward the queen's palace.

That's odd, she thought. *Don't they know there are dragons out here?*

A moment later, she'd forgotten them again. Her mind was full of dreams of her dragonet.

I'm sorry you never got to meet her, Smolder, she thought sorrowfully. *But I remember the names we talked about, don't worry.*

If it is a girl — it feels like a girl — then I shall give her the name you chose and hide her away somewhere secret and safe.

She'll get the chance to be ordinary that you never had.

By the moons of Pyrrhia, I swear she will never have anything to do with thrones or queens or battles or crowns, for as long as we both shall live.