



CROSSROADS



The Dragon Isles

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The Prophecy

Sunlight streamed over the aquamarine ocean, reflecting from the whitecaps and filling the air with dazzling color, as the Dragon Isles rose majestically from the sea.

Wreathed in fire, they came, but quickly cooled. In an instant, green life took root and covered them to all but the highest, cloudcapped peaks. Fish surrounded them and animals swarmed to their fertile shores. Soon the isles teemed with life.

The azure sky flashed like lightning. A thousand brilliant stars hung in the heavens—silver, orange, yellow, red, golden. No, not stars . . . metallic dragons.

They swarmed over the isles, changing the shape and nature of the land. They pushed up mountains, felled forests, and altered the course of rivers. They built mighty edifices and founded settlements. The good peoples of the world swarmed to their shores.

The people shaped the land now as well. With the help of the dragons, settlements became towns, and towns became

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cities. Metallic dragons soared the skies, and noble ships plied the crystal blue ocean.

Temples sprang up—some dedicated to lost gods, others to the glory of the isles themselves. Treasure flowed into the temples and the towns and the cities, and the Dragon Isles became wealthy.

To protect the isles, a mighty enchantment was raised: the Veil. A special treasure-filled temple was built for the spell at the top of a volcano in a remote corner of the archipelago. The fires in the belly of the isle and the plumes of ash rising to the heavens connected the enchantment to the world below and the sky above: earth, air, and fire, surrounded by water.

At the sacred mountain's base, a second, devotional temple rose up beneath the waves of the placid sea. The dragons and the free peoples of the isles gave their sweat, money, and magic to the effort. A great, bejeweled key in four pieces was made to seal the pact—one piece for each element: diamond for earth, emerald for water, opal for air, and ruby for fire. The dragons set a monstrous blue-white diamond at the upper temple's summit—above a hoard of treasure—to commemorate the deed.

Stone guardians, each in the shape of dragons with glittering diamond eyes, rose from the sea bedrock. The Veil arced up between them, suffusing earth, sky, and sea. The spell set the isles apart from the world—only those who knew its secret, dragons and favored mortals, could pass its defenses.

*The heart beats at the source
Of bastions unveiled
Portends the final course
And stands alone unfailed
Who seeks to find the isles,
Amid the turbid seas
Sail north beyond known lands
To dragon gods appease*

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*'Neath gaze of Palatine
On late midsummer eve
Then trace the chart divine
The pathway to receive
Beyond the palace walls
Where heavens meet the deep
Lie gleaming dragon halls
Your destiny to keep
To seven cities' light
By silver water course
Before the second night
Discover then the source*



PART I

DREAMS & PROPHECIES





Chapter One

A Fateful Voyage

Captain Mikal Vardan sprinted to the rail of *Kingfisher* and dived over the side into the pounding surf. The storm lashed his body, trying to tear away his dagger, as he plunged into the water. Mik gripped the knife tightly between his teeth; if he lost the weapon, his friend would surely die.

The magic from his enchanted fish necklace suffused Mik's body. The gale-tossed water cleared before his sight, and warm, sweet air filled his lungs. One day, Mik knew, the necklace's erratic magic would fail him; thankfully, today was not that day.

He spotted the struggling form of Tripleknot Shellcracker in the azure darkness before him. The kender kicked his small feet and briefly poked his head above the surface before the sea monster pulled him under once more.

The creature circled the kender tightly with its green-scaled tentacles, trying to drag Trip farther into the deep. The creature was like nothing Mik had ever seen before—a

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hideous cross between a serpent and an octopus. Whiplike tendrils surrounded its serpentine head, while a dozen fat tentacles sprang from its slender body. The thing had surged out of the storm onto *Kingfisher's* deck and killed three sailors before retreating over the side with the kender in its grasp.

Fire had driven it off the ship, but Mik could not fight it with fire here. All he had was an enchanted necklace that let him breathe under water, a diver's stout dagger, and his wits. He prayed they would be enough to save his friend.

Trip had weapons of his own, but the creature held the kender's arms pinned against his sides. Though he struggled mightily, Trip couldn't reach his slender pearl-handled knives.

Mik swam toward his friend as rapidly as he could, fighting against the heaving waters. The storm's fury slowed the monster as well. Gigantic waves surged up from the deep and thrust the beast back toward the surface.

A tentacle flashed by the sea captain's head. Mik grabbed it and pulled himself hand-over-hand, like a sailor scaling the rigging, toward the creature's bloated body.

The monster spewed smaller tendrils at the sailor. Mik pulled his dagger from between his teeth and slashed, severing the limbs before they could grab him. Purplish blood clouded the ocean, swirling before Mik's eyes.

"Hang on, Trip!" he called. "I'm coming!" The sea garbled his words, and he couldn't tell whether the kender heard him. He could barely make out his friend through the turbulent waters.

A tentacle clouted Mik on the back of the head, and lights danced before his eyes. He felt a snake-like appendage wrap around his mid-section, trying to squeeze the life out of him. Even with his necklace turning the water to air, he still needed to breathe. Black unconsciousness closed in around him.

Fighting back the darkness, he plunged his knife into the tentacle at his waist and tore sideways. The tentacle ripped nearly in half and lost its grip. Mik swam free and shot across the gap separating him from his friend.

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Trip could hold his breath for longer than almost anyone Mik knew, but he was looking pale and blue as the ship captain reached him. Mik thrust his dagger into the tentacles holding the kender and quickly cut them away.

The sea monster shrieked, its piercing wail audible even above the crashing surf and the raging storm.

Mik pushed Trip upward, and the kender kicked weakly toward the surface.

The beast thrashed in the surging water, stirring up whirlpools of bubbles and staining the water with its purplish blood. Tendrils whipped against the sea captain, biting into his skin as he clawed for the surface.

Two thick tentacles wrapped around Mik's ankles and dragged him down as the monster lurched back into the deep. Mik stabbed at them with his dagger, but as he did, another tentacle wrapped around his arm. He tried to wriggle out of the thing's grip, but the creature's strength was too great.

He grappled with the ensnaring limb, trying to free his knife as they sank ever deeper into the brine.

Another tentacle came to seize him, and another, and another. He twisted from side to side, trying to deny their deadly grip. One brushed across his throat, threatening to rip away his enchanted necklace. Mik imagined himself drowning even as the creature crushed him to death.

He refused to give up.

Using both hands, he twisted his dagger sideways and slashed it across the ensnaring arm. The tentacle's flesh tore, but it did not let go.

Something flashed by him in the storm-tossed gloom—a shark, perhaps, or sharp-toothed razorfish. A grim smile crossed the sailor's bearded face. So many ways to die in the deep.

A bright shape flitted out of the bubbling, blood-stained darkness. It slashed down and across the monster's tentacle, near Mik's ensnared hand. The tentacle fell away and Mik found himself free.

"Thanks, Trip!" Mik burbled, recognizing the pale shape in the water nearby.

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The kender, his cheeks puffed out with fresh air, nodded and slashed swiftly again with his twin pearl-handled daggers. In moments, they severed all the rubbery arms holding the ship captain.

Trip darted aside and headed for the surface again as the enraged creature reached out to grab them once more. Instead of following the kender, though, Mik dived straight for the center of the flailing mass.

The creature's pale green eyes, large as dinner plates, swiveled toward the sailor. The arms turned inward in a futile attempt to stop his descent.

Mik seized the creature's flabby, scale-covered skin with one hand to anchor himself. With his other hand he plunged his dagger as far as it would go into the monster's center.

The creature's distressed cries rang in his ears as he twisted the knife sideways, cutting across the bony ridge between the thing's eyes. The monster flailed at him.

He ripped out the dagger, bursting one of the greenish eyes as the weapon pulled free. The creature's tendrils waved frantically around him like a mass of angry snakes. He kicked away from it and burst free. Mortally wounded, the monster sank slowly into the depths.

Just before Mik reached the storm-tossed surface, he saw Trip diving down once more.

The kender spotted him, grinned, and then turned back toward the waves above.

They broke through the surf an arm's-length apart.

"Hey, thanks for saving my life!" Trip gasped, spitting salt water from his lips.

"Don't mention it," Mik replied.

They gazed through the storm and spotted *Kingfisher's* three tawny sails bobbing over the waves a short distance away.

"Can you make it?" Mik asked.

The kender nodded, and they both fought across the breakers toward the caravel. *Kingfisher* rolled nimbly on the ocean, her raised bow and high stern deck staying well

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above the surging seas. The ship's red sides glistened in the rain as though they'd been freshly painted. The great blue eye painted on the bow for good luck seemed to stare at the castaway mariners as they returned.

The crew dropped a boarding net over *Kingfisher's* side, and the kender and the captain grabbed hold when a wave swept them near. They clung as the storm alternately tried to pound them into the gunwales or rip them back into the sea.

Crewmen aboard the aging caravel pulled on the net as Mik and Trip climbed up, and the castaways soon tumbled to the sodden deck, exhausted. They lay on the well-worn planking, panting to regain their strength. Driving rain and sea spray washed over their faces.

A shudder ran through Mik's body and he felt suddenly cold. He glanced down and saw one of the jeweled scales of his enchanted necklace crumble into dust. The price of the magic seemed higher every time he used it. Magic was fading from Ansalon and soon even artifacts like the necklace would be nothing more than fancy jewelry.

A shadow fell over Mik's face and he gazed up at Karista Meinor. Lightning flashed. The pale brilliance reflected from the aristocrat's steely eyes and illuminated her well-rounded form. She looked beautiful, even amid the storm, even with her billowing silks soaked and clinging to her tanned skin.

She eyed the drenched sailor angrily. "That was a foolish thing to do, captain," Karista said. "You could have been killed. I didn't hire you to get sacrifice yourself for a kender. I hired you to do a job."

"I didn't sign on to watch my friends die," Mik replied. His brown eyes narrowed. "Or even my enemies."

Bok, Karista's huge bodyguard and paramour, stepped forward and helped Mik to his feet. "The kender's a stowaway," he said, "of no value to milady's expedition. We should have tossed him overboard when we first discovered him."

Trip, still sputtering on the rain-soaked deck, glared at Bok, uncharacteristically holding his tongue.

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"I'm still the captain here," Mik replied. "It's my decision who stays aboard and who takes up company with the razorfish. Unless, of course, you'd care to hire someone else to complete this little errand of yours."

Karista waved one bejeweled hand at him dismissively. "You know that's impossible," she said.

"We'd never find another captain before the typhoon season hits," Bok added.

Mik smiled. "How unfortunate."

Karista's ruby red lips pulled tight across her straight white teeth. "Your experience makes you uniquely valuable to this expedition, captain," she said. "As you well know."

Mik nodded.

"Nevertheless," she continued, "I hired this crew, and supplied this ship, and . . . *forgave* the considerable debts you owed my family."

"That's not the only reason I agreed to do this," Mik countered.

"Be that as it may," she said, "our agreement is not fulfilled until this mission arrives at a satisfactory conclusion."

"I signed to sail you where you want to go," Mik said. "Whether you find what you're looking for when we get there . . . ? That's your gamble."

Karista nodded slowly. "Indeed," the aristocrat said. "But if the legends are true, you stand to gain nearly as much as I."

"That's the other reason I came."

"So we're in agreement, then?" Karista asked, arching one thin eyebrow.

"Just so long as I make the decisions aboard this ship," Mik replied.

Karista bowed slightly and rain ran in long rivulets from her wavy brown hair. She cast an indifferent glance at the kender, still fuming silently. "Insofar as running the ship," she said, "I accede to your superior knowledge."

Thunder crashed.

"Well, *we* ain't so sure about that," boomed a loud voice.

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A tall man with a scar pushed through the group of sailors surrounding the rescued mariners. He was nearly as large as Bok and looked even meaner. A lanky woman with short blond hair stepped up beside him.

“Some of us think,” she said, “that it might be time for a *new* captain.”