

PREFACE

Picture a planet, giant Earth-swallowing sphere, swaddled green with the color of life, the glare of its giant blue star glistening off its atmosphere in colorful, almost aurora-like, bursts of light. Picture three moons in an eternal cosmic dance around this large orb, the smallest colored the blue of Earth's sky, the next the green of deepest seas, and the largest the yellow of your own home star. Picture the swoop and whirl of these satellites as they leave no part of that orb with a moonless night, yet also none with the multiple romance of more than one. Picture a planet all filled with magic, mystery, and utter strangeness.

Picture Maldene.

Situated in the center of Space, at the Doorway to Time, on the precipice of Fate, such is Maldene. Birthed by the Power of the Eternal Flame, seeded by Chaos, nurtured by the Olden Gods, and brought to fruition by the knowledge of the Ancients, it lies centerwise in a galaxy far from any stars known to the Man of Earth.

Fate and Power of Awesome proportions focus down upon this innocent yet mysterious realm, awaiting for the unfolding of events that will lead the way to the Fate of All.

INTRODUCTION

Well, you came. So, you want to hear my story. Very well; sit down and pull up a drink because this is going to be a long one. What's my name, you ask? Well, that's not important, at least not yet. Suffice it to say for now that I am your narrator, who shall lead you through accounts of certain events, the consequences of which are still being felt to this very rise. View me as a traveler between space and times, a chronicler of events, and a servant of Fate, for I am here to relate unto you the unfolding events that follow...

PROLOGUE

The wizard walked into the velvet-walled room, his blue robe with its gold trim swishing around him as he moves, occasional silver sparks trying to leap off the folds in the magical cloth. He walked across the pastel-carpeted floor to the only chair in the small, luxuriated room. The plush richly decorated chair faced away from the only door and out towards a stone-carved window, looking out over pearly white walls, golden spires, and green fields under a bright purple sky. The person sitting down was only visible by an arm resting on the side of the chair.

"I've just confirmed it all, Sire," the wizard began, "all signs point to it; the optimum time will be as predicted. He must make his move by the time of the Donjflou, and we can do almost nothing about it," he shrugged and sighed.

"And the plan?" came the authoritative but gentle voice from behind the chair.

"Chancy at best, Sire! It's a million to one shot and full of risks. But," he paused, "it does have a chance of working. But only if we choose them very carefully."

"Very good, Mystigir," came the voice looking out the window.

"But, Sire," Mystigir exasperated, "even if we do find... How can we even be sure they'll survive?"

"Don't worry my friend," it said amiably, "I've consulted with a few... Fates... myself. While nothing is guaranteed, we do have a chance."

"Sire, how do we even go about finding some that-"

"That part's already been done," came the now distant-sounding voice, "I've already chosen them..."

BOOK I:

The Dragon

CHAPTER ONE:

The Storm

Distant Crack of Thunder, a portender of events awaiting the eccentricities of mortals.

"Lookout reports: a storm coming down from the North!"

A cold wind from the North was filling the row of five hemispherical sails of the wide ship, as if eager to hurtle its passengers towards whatever Fate awaited them. Lower to the water than most ships, but a lot wider in proportion, a Sleem is built to battle the finicky seas of a large planet with three moons. Having the maneuverability at sea that Nature usually reserves for fish, it slices swiftly through the wind, being the only type of ship that dares venture across this storm-ridden equator.

But this wind seemed to carry with it a message. It heralded a hurrical, that vicious mix of hurricane winds with electrical activity that Nature could be proud of. Although the captain knew that such storms were common at this latitude and that his ship had handled such before, he was worried about the suddenness with which this one had arisen. Almost as if sent by some cosmic hand playing chess, his ship as but a small pawn.

The captain got up from looking at his charts, wiping his brow with the colorful neckerchief that signified his rank, his wide oval eyes taking in his sparse surroundings as he did so. He was Thirdocian: tall, widely built humanoid race, the call of the sea strong in their blood, their prowess at sea legendary. This captain was more experienced with the sea than even most of his race. He'd heard the lookout's report and went over to the small porthole to see for himself.

"Aerg! There's nothing like it," he muttered to himself in his native tongue of Osan, "the winds are all wrong for it, as well as the season. But,

nevertheless, it's here; the biggest storm I've seen."

Looking out towards the gathering dark clouds, he wondered at what evil force could be responsible.

"'Tis unnatural," he whispered to himself.

He paced back towards his desk and patted the ancient mounted sextant that he kept there.

"Yes, this is going to be a rough time for my poor vessel."

He glanced around his cabin, "Hold together my proud ship."

Thunderous crack, as a peel of lightning cast a transitory scar across the face of the sky.

They were on the deck as the wind sprang up from the direction out of which they had come, as if eager to be rid of them. Leaning casually on the rail, elven face in the breeze, was Eldar, with his mischievous twinkly eyes, shapely pointed ears, bright shoulder-length silver hair, and hairless chin. Beneath his common earthen-colored attire he wore his ever-present but silent elven-wrought chain mail, it fitting like liquid-silver upon his body, while his sword waited under his cape. Not caring about the impending storm, he was looking into the sky as if waiting for whatever Fate might have in mind for them and their foolishnesses.

Beside him was his young Human friend, Sabu; rumpled brown hair, eyes alert with intelligence, his brown robes flapping in the cool breeze, plain but for the few markings signifying him as a recently graduated wizard of the lowest ranks. Sabu was of the white-skinned Katoan stock, having come from the middle of the large continent of Cenivar, with its plush forests and single large central mountain range; a few hundred miles north of the Harbor Of The World.

Sabu was making his first entry in a diary that he'd recently decided to start.

R.K. 9990, 41 Juxor.

I am starting this diary because of a vague sense of impending events beyond our control. Though it's nothing that I can specifically point to, I still have a feeling that our carefree lifestyle shall soon change. Thus do I write this.

Since this is my first entry, I'll start with a brief introduction. I am Sabu, recently former apprentice to the archmage Thesdil, hoping someday to make my magical arts as good as are his.

I travel with my friends, the elf Eldar, born, he says, in the Elven Woodlands

in the northern part of the continent of Degaloth, and Bronto, of the same Katoan stock as myself but of a more barbaric exterior. The truth of it is, though, that Bronto's more civilized than he likes to let on.

We all met on Cenivar about four rels ago, our wanderings then eventually bringing us to the fabled Harbor Of the World, home of the largest assemblage of sailing ships of all types in the world. There we joined up with our mutual friend Candol, priest of Indra, and a tough little orphaned Destir kid named Kilgar. Despite his young age of eight, I feel that the tough little desert boy can well hold his own, like all of his race.

Well, we got together and claimed a small island for ourselves, among the many in The Sea Of A Thousand Islands, to established it as a sort of a home, far away from the perils of our time. Actually, we've never really seen it yet, having made the deal through a broker, and there's nothing more there than a few huts for now, but we have hopes of someday building it up into a proper home. It'll take time though, considering its extreme distance from civilization and the difficulty in getting supplies there.

We now travel with a group of mercenaries towards an island rumored once to have been a lair of that dread wizard, Miro; myth or not, some say that even the gods fear him. The mercenaries go there for promised plunder, but me and Eldar have a different reason.

*While we were in the Harbor Of The World, we went to see a blind old gypsy soothsayer just for fun. She foretold that our destinies were intertwined along with a third person we were going to meet, and that the key to our destinies lay within the very island towards which we now sail. We would have ignored it, but she seemed quite sincere and had this way of looking right **through** you with her solid gold eyes, even though she was totally blind! She also mentioned something about three nameless beings, or such, that we'd encounter. All rather mysterious, especially considering that she was of that rather rare gold-skinned race of Humans called the Vina.*

All considered, we had a feeling that we'd better take her seriously. So, we pooled our money, hired the mercenaries for the long journey, and then found a ship to take us south. The only real odd ball in our company is a guy named Filmar that hired on with us for a rather low, but extremely acceptable, price. He keeps pretty much to himself, staying pretty clean and innocent, if you know what I mean.

For now, though, I'm just going to take things as they come and worry about Fates and stuff a bit later.

Winds blow fierce, as large watery fists rumble across the endless sea of churning inky blackness.

"Lookout reports: the storm's going to be a BIG one!"

The frothy wind was kicking up the waves like some angry kid.

Sabu could feel an unnatural presence about it, an almost feeling of magic that his skills couldn't quite pin down. The bright blue sky was quickly turning to an angry violet as clouds rapidly began to assemble, with only the bright yellow of the largest moon, Gamro, balefully shining through the encroaching cover. He looked a bit distant as he thought a few things through.

Eldar broke his friend's reverie with a slap on his back. "Why so serious a look?" he grinned widely.

The Elf had shown courtesy enough to speak to his Human friend in the latter's native tongue of Selgish. That being the language spoken by most of the Humans in this part of the world, and Sabu not being too well versed in the elf's own elvish tongue, he'd made quite a bit of use of that language recently.

Sabu looked off into the wind and then up at Eldar, "It's the wind. There's something wrong about it, something unnatural."

"The wind is the wind," Eldar shrugged with a grin, "what can be unnatural about it."

"Well, its speed and direction are all wrong. For this latitude and longitude and climatory season, a storm of this type should only have a magnitude of about thirty-six percent as much, and a directional-"

"Hold it!" Eldar waved his hands back and forth. "How do you figure all of this?"

Sabu looked at him and replied innocently, "Why, I just did the figures for it in my head a few *trids* ago. It's fairly simple, really. You see, there's a set of equations that-"

Eldar interrupted his friend before he could get any further, "Never mind, I'm sorry that I asked!"

Sabu shrugged and went back to his thinking. Eldar just shook his head; he never ceased to be amazed at his companion's continued display of intellectual ability. Nevertheless, he offered his own solution for the situation.

"Forget the winds. There's nothing that can't be solved with a large enough mug of fine elven wine and a well-filled female!" he smiled.

He never *did* ever hold back on his opinions, thought Sabu.

Bursting, then, up from one of the deck hatches, carrying a large coil of rope and a pail of large nails, came a nine or ten foot tall ham-fisted ogre, half as wide as he was tall, with a number of severed heads and skulls hanging from his belt. The solid deck creaked, as if in protest, under his weight.

"Who's he?" Sabu asked.

"His name's Blag-ak," Eldar said, turning to answer. "I heard he got hired on as a deck hand for a working passage."

"Blag-ak? Well,... a good enough name for an ogre, I suppose. What's with his supply of old heads?" Sabu asked, as the ogre began lashing things down with his large coil of rope.

"Don't know. Every time I ask him he just gives this big toothy smile. Past victims probably."

Eldar grinned at him as Sabu made a mental note to stay on the ogre's **good** side.

"Lookout report: secure the ship for a big blow!"

The Northern Wind had a deathly cold chill to it, which was quite odd since they were just south of the equator. Sabu was certain that it was unnatural, if to judge by the way the crew members now hurried to their duties. Crew were trying to bring down the sails as quickly as possible while the lookout was trying to get down from the crow's nest as fast as he could.

A sudden flurry then swirled rapidly around and around the lookout, who grabbed frantically at the mast he was climbing down. The frigid gust seemed to whirl around him at the speed of sound and then just as quickly blow off into the air, but leaving in its place the lookout as a frozen statue of ice, to then fall down and shatter upon the deck in a hundred pieces like a cheap glass vase. The few members of the crew that were nearby were too busy keeping the ship afloat to notice this, though Sabu and Eldar were impressed enough to try to find shelter below. Eldar was halfway to the nearest hatch when he noticed that he had to go back and grab Sabu, as Sabu had delayed to look into the wind to figure something out.

Eldar thought about having a long talk with his companion sometime.

With a horrendous ripping sound, conflicting gusts of wind tore one of the main masts in half down to its base. This **did** catch the crew's notice as even the fiercest of winds wasn't supposed to be able to do this. Some passengers went scurrying about securing their possessions, while others tried to help out with the crew as more and more sails were shredded by the suddenness and ferocity of the storm. The storm had been too fast and powerful to bring down any of the sails in time.

The captain came out of his cabin shouting orders, the well trained crew following them despite their ever-growing fear. The captain was going

to use every sailing trick that he knew to save his ship, the crew fulfilling his orders so efficiently that it was almost as if they could read his mind. Strive, he did, for a safe direction to sail from the winds, but they came from everywhere at once. Orders were shouted, as his legs held him to the deck as if rooted there. The ship became an extension of himself, its crew just but different parts of the whole.

Then, as the captain was valiantly defying the storm, an elderly woman dressed in robes colored the blues and greens of the sea came up on deck from one of the hatches. She also had the wide oval eyes and build of the Thirdocian race, but with limbs just starting to get gnarled with age.

"You're supposed to be the ship's sea-mage," he shouted at her above the roar of the wind, "so do something about this storm!"

She just but nodded, muttering to herself in her creaking voice as she then walked up the steps to the topmost section of the deck, the wind seeming to have no effect on either her robes or her aged hair. She then planted herself firmly on the deck, feet spread apart, arms outstretched as she tried to focus her magic and ability on controlling the storm. Her voice rang out in craggy incantations, in words that seemed to sound like waves breaking upon a rocky shore. Winds rose up from around her to fling out against the storm to do battle with it. Loud thunder cracked with each large windy fist that she sent out.

But it was still like trying to put out a forest fire with but a single pail of water.

As dozens of fingers of lightning lit up the darkened sky like flashes of noontime, a single stroke hit the central main mast and split it down the middle in a loud peel of thunder. Blag-ak, who'd been trying to beat back the waves by hitting them with his fists, ran over and wrapped his tree-trunk-like arms around the split mast to try and hold it together at the base. Despite the winds, he held it, growling with all his strength.

Then another crack of lightning hit upon the next largest mast, cleaving it also in two, as it then creaked and threatened to topple. Blag-ak looked over at it trying to get his small brain to figure out how his large body could handle the second mast.

As if in answer, bursting over from amongst the busying crew, ran a large dark-haired white-skinned Human, body steel-hard with muscles, dressed only in furs and skins, with a large sword strapped to his back. It was Bronto, running over to the second mast. The ogre wondered at this Human, big though he was but still a fraction of his own size and weight,

trying to hold the other mast. But Bronto grabbed around the second mast and, growling with effort, managed to hold the mighty mast together.

The ogre half smiled, half growled, his appreciation at the strong Human he now respected, as they both then growled their defiance, human and ogre, echoing into the unforgiving winds.

Winds and lightning were crackling from the old lady, but try as she might, the storm seemed undefeatable. She'd safely guided many a ship through storms, gales, and bad weather in her time, being always the practice of Thirdocian ships to have at least one of her ocean-oriented magic skills on board of any ship that they sailed. She'd considered herself quite good in such magics, but this storm was beating her.

She knew this was to be her last storm.

Immense stroke of lightning, as an old lady is picked up by the stationary arc of a large electrical hand, held suspended in mid air for a brief eternity, screaming out her pain and torture as a death-shriek into the wind, followed by a second stroke of electrical death that, hitting with the bang of creation, turns her into pyrotechnic confetti drifting upon the wind.

Below decks, sent scurrying into a cabin by the electrical report, a richly garbed merchant clung selfishly to his purse of gold and gems. That is, until a sharp pain on the back of his skull relieved him of life's miseries. The only witness to this deed, a darkly-cloaked human figure, then quickly grabbed the purse and left to take further advantage of the situation. Thus did the passenger known as Kor-Lebear begin the road to *his* own destiny.

The storm came down with a vengeance, buffeting the mighty ship like no toy in a hurricanal had ever been so treated, much less a sleem. The captain stood firm upon his ship, breathing his defiance into the sky, as he determined to either save his ship, or make it quite costly for the unnatural storm to take it away from him. The one sound heard above the winds, for miles away, is that of the captain shouting his rage into a vindictive storm.

But when the storm finally did end so had the mighty ship, along with her captain and most of her crew. Left in its wake were some bits of driftwood strewn along a sandy beach, with the light from the bright blue sun overhead shining down upon the unconscious bodies of those that survived.