

THE LORD DRAGON CHRONICLES

THERE BE
DRAGON

MICHAEL TARS

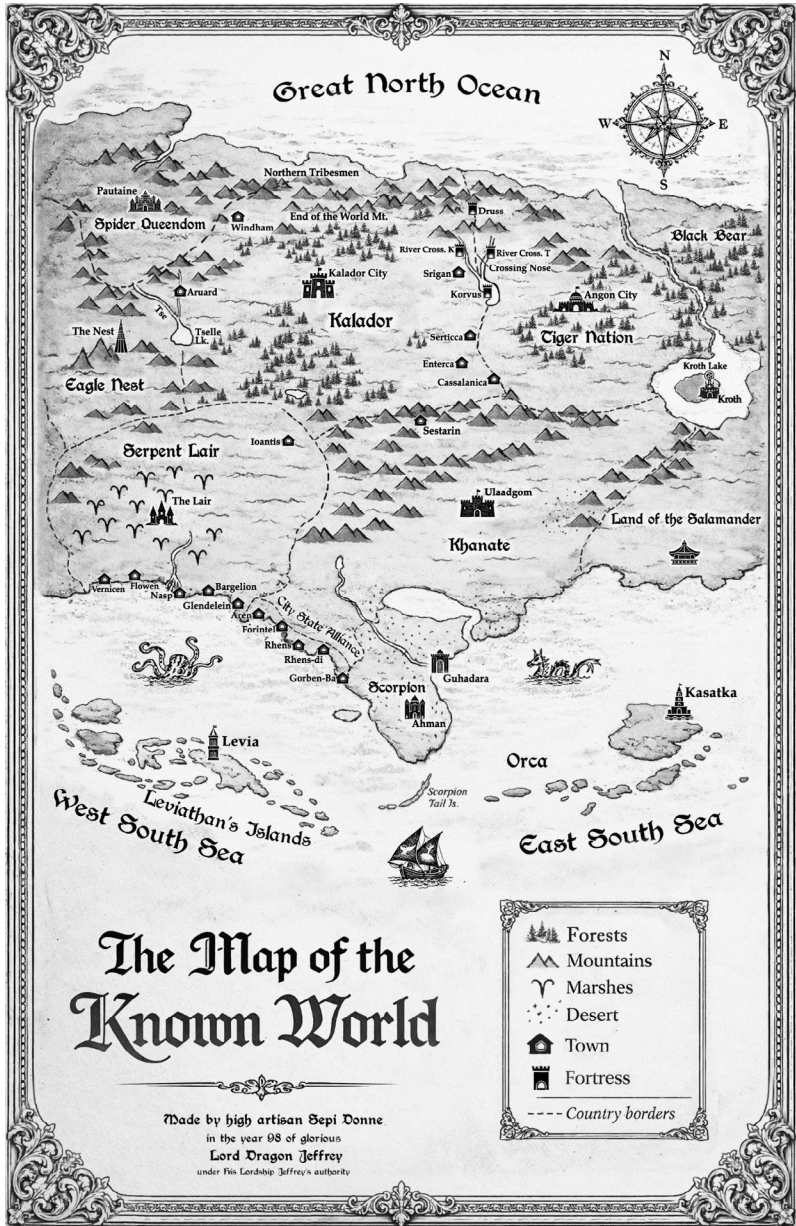
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Great North Ocean



Northern Tribesmen
Pautaine
Spider Queendom
Windham
End of the World Mt.
Aruard
Kalador City
Kalador
Srigan
Korvus
River Cross N
River Cross T
Crossing Nose
Druss
Angon City
Tiger Nation
Sertico
Enterca
Cassalanica
Sestarin
Kroth Lake
Kroth
Black Bear
Land of the Salamander
Ulaadgom
Khanate
Serpent Lair
The Lair
Ioantis
Vornen
Flower
Nasp
Bargelon
Glendelen
City State Alliance
Forintel
Rhens
Rhens-di
Garben-B
Scorpion
Ahman
Guhadara
Levia
West South Sea
Leviathan's Islands
East South Sea
Orca
Scorpion Tail Is.

The Map of the Known World

- Forests
- Mountains
- Marshes
- Desert
- Town
- Fortress
- Country borders

Made by high artisan Sepi Donne
in the year 98 of glorious
Lord Dragon Jeffrey
under His Lordship Jeffrey's authority

FROM THE LEGEND OF THE DRAGON

In the time Before the Dragon, the land of Kalador was sorely besieged.

Without a divine Protector, no army could stop the ruthless Tiger of the East, the merciless Eagle of the West, or the terrible Serpent of the South. Its cities were in ruin, its soldiers massacred, and its royals caught and executed. With fathers and sons chained in the mines, and wives and daughters becoming playthings for the invaders, the people of Kalador cried out to the Gods for help. Hearing their desperate pleas, Gods from the world beyond the sky, in their infinite Grace, sent them the Dragon.

He was wrathful for being torn from his realm, his family, and the life he loved. He cared not for the world he was now in or for the country of Kalador. Nothing would avail against his fury, and all would have been turned to ash, but for the three Kalador maidens.

They pleaded with the Dragon for succor, and their plight touched the Dragon's heart. He looked at the maidens and, finding them most fair, claimed them as his own, to serve him and only him. And of the three, he chose one to receive a part of his fiery soul, binding himself to the land of Kalador.

The Dragon roared his challenge to the sky, and all other demigods knew that Kalador had gained a mighty Lord and a fierce Protector. And hearing his roar, Tiger trembled in his lair, Eagle huddled low in his nest, and Serpent hissed and coiled, looking for a crevice to hide in...

CHAPTER I

Under-armor—check. Ballistic armor—locks engaged. Battery capacity—full. Legs and arms actuators—functional. Communication and navigation—check and check. Check for Medical. Charged with keeping Kwe alive, this separate semi-sentient AI continuously monitored all body functions. Its drugs and pressure tourniquets had saved Kwe’s life a couple of times, so he could live with it being fussy over his serotonin levels. It worried that Kwe may have depression. Old news, that. Hopefully, he wouldn’t need Medical’s help tonight.

Assault rifle—check. Fingerprint lock engaged. Standard load: a mix of anti-personnel, incendiary, and high explosive. Good stuff, especially when paired with Friend-or-Foe designators. Assuming that their enemies didn’t hack the markers that prevented friendly fire. Six main magazines, fifty shots each. The ammo was steadily getting smaller and smaller. If the trend continued, you’d need a magnifying glass to load the rounds. Wouldn’t that be peachy?

“Hey, Kwe, you ready, man?” James, his second-in-command, was running through his own pre-engagement checklist.

“Just about.”

Two memory-metal daggers that looked like black-on-black decorations were strapped along Kwe's forearms. A touch of current in response to his fingerprint, and the metal of each decoration would condense into its other remembered form, that of a dagger with a monomolecular-edged blade. They would even attach to his under-armor. It was an optional load, and Kwe smiled, remembering the time when he thought the daggers were useless. Boy, was he naïve. It never harms to have a couple of surprises up your sleeves.

Back-up Lessy, Lethal Electro-Shock System, was nearly flat and well hidden in his boot. It was a last-ditch, two-shot close-combat weapon that fired a cloud of nanowires tipped with barbed micro-needles. In all his years of service, Kwe had never used it and hoped to never have the need. Full charge on both batteries—check.

Last, but not least, camouflage—check. Two solar-powered mini drones—check. That was all. His locker in the mobile command carrier was empty.

Kwe clipped on the hood with its night-vision visor and a rebreather to cover his face. They didn't expect gas, but it was better to be safe than sorry. "Alpha one, engagement check."

The responses came quickly, one after another. First from James, as it should be: "Bravo standing by." Then, one by one, from the others. A twelve-member assault team was loaded and ready to roll. This was the culmination of two years of their work. They had finally traced the source of the new bioweapons to Taoyuan City's gleaming towers and a corporation doing brisk business with would-be terrorists. Tonight's raid would secure the final piece of evidence to take it down.

Beside Kwe, James kissed a picture before carefully putting it back into his locker. Kwe didn't need to see whose picture it was. *Lorraine*.

Even after all that time, he still felt a gut-wrenching sensation thinking of her. *Damn. Just what I need right now.*

If ever Kwe wished to have MPC, Multiple Personalities Condition, it was right now. Most of his colleagues had MPC, with each persona mastering a different skill, allowing them to easily adapt to whatever role the mission might require. Full memory lapse MPC, when different personas wouldn't even remember each other, offered extra security. In normal life, running multiple personas in memory-lapse mode was considered extreme, and most civilians used a single memory line for all their personalities. After all, in full lapse, you wouldn't even know that you had other personas.

Memory lapse MPC was Kwe's worst nightmare, and he kept his memory line secured and triple-verified as unbroken using Cerberus mem-vault wetware that kept watch even when he slept. Except that right now, having a second personality would've been a blessing. Then, at least in his Agency persona, he could've focused on the mission, setting aside the guy who just couldn't forget how badly he'd messed up in his personal life. Nothing to it.

"Go code Moonlight," Kwe commanded. The mission was a go.

"Wilco," from James.

Next week, James was getting married, and Kwe, as the "best man," would smile and support his friend. Tonight, Kwe felt a faint unease, a premonition, that made him wish that James would've stayed back but his friend had insisted on going. Kwe understood. They both needed closure on this case, and it would feel wrong to leave at the very end of the long chase. Still, he would've preferred James to stay home, helping Lorraine select flowers or order a cake.

The assault started as planned, with the ground team making easy progress through the lobby and up to the building security office. No

alarms. The streets of Taoyuan City's business center were alive even during the night. The public front was devoted to bars, clubs, restaurants, and other places where tired third-shift office workers could relax before heading home. They were oblivious to the black shadows that incapacitated the security guards and took control of the defenses of the building above their heads.

"Bravo Zulu," Kwe sent to the ground team, acknowledging a job well done. "Charlie Mike," he told the rest of the team. *Go-go-go*. Curious how military jargon remained unchanged over the ages.

With roof detectors disabled, they glided in and, cutting through the armored glass skylights, penetrated the top-level atrium. It was a beautiful place with meandering paths through the bamboo growth leading to tables by the pond, which was surely full of colorful koi fish. Executives of several multinationals with offices in the building could enjoy their lunch far from the bustle of city streets. These privileged few reached the atrium through a restricted-access elevator. Prying open its doors, Kwe's men rappelled down the shaft. Still no surprises. All clear from the ground team. They exited on the 159th floor, home of the satellite offices of Mitoko Corporation.

Everything remained green. No guards. No alarms. No automated defenses or constructs to block their progress. Still, Kwe's intuition whispered, *Danger*.

"Passive IR only," he sent over the secure channel. "Wilco," came in response. It was an unnecessary command. Of course, the men wouldn't use active infrared that could trigger some well-hidden alarm. The mission was going so smoothly, it made Kwe nervous.

Two agents peeled off to guard the ends of the long office corridor. Muted lighting over the paintings on the walls. Something modern. They didn't look like anything to Kwe, but they'd likely cost millions.

Wouldn't be hanging here otherwise. Thick carpet under his feet. Another two agents took fireteam support positions at the main office entrance. Kwe and James crept towards the target—a safe, built into the massive Chairman's desk squatting by the tall floor-to-ceiling window. Black glassy top—a communication interface. Screens sat flat on the three walls. When necessary, they'd rotate into a semicircle facing the desk.

It was pitch-black outside the window with the high-riding fog, or maybe low clouds, hiding the neon of the street below. Neighboring skyscrapers, no lights on at that hour, poked out of the fog like broken teeth gnashing at the star-filled sky. James woke up the interface and started typing in an override code to access the safe's controls. It was a long code, but they both knew it by heart.

There was nothing Kwe could put his finger on, but his feeling that things were amiss was only getting stronger. It was something arising from a subconscious amalgam of impressions he didn't have the capacity or time to analyze. It didn't matter how, but without a shred of doubt, he knew that this was a trap. *Abort, abort, abort...* In their place, how would he set it up? Not a full building demolition, no. Something more subtle, to pay Kwe's team back for all the trouble they had caused. Something personal. *How...*

The only definitive target would be the table with its access terminal. Right where James was standing, focused on the softly glowing screen. It would be a bomb. He had a second. Perhaps even less. Kwe was likely outside the blast area, but James wasn't. He would never make it, and then Lorraine...then he could...no, he could not. Lorraine, waiting for her love to come back. Lorraine, trying on a gorgeous dress for the wedding next week. Kwe would have to look her in the eyes and tell her that James was dead. That, Kwe couldn't do.

He didn't think. Leg actuators set to maximum, he jumped, slamming full speed into James and hurling him forward; he stopped dead in his place. You cannot defy Newton. He ruled that momentum should be conserved, and that was the Law. With both of them moving, they wouldn't be fast enough. But he could get James out of the blast zone. Maybe.

Click.

So that's what it was, thought Kwe the moment he heard and saw the explosion. *Bastards, they used a Claymore.* At least it wasn't a SABOT dart type. Nothing else was likely to get through his armor. But the blast, as was clearly intended, hurled him through the shattered window in a cloud of glittering dust and glass shards.

For a moment, Kwe floated in space, frozen, but unlike Bugs Bunny, he couldn't run on air to get back. All he could do was to fall. His armor might survive the impact with the ground 159 floors below. The man inside wouldn't. No Medical could save him from that.

He burst through the clouds over the rows of city lights. Far below, invisible in the night, were people, cars, cyclists, and moto-rickshas. Taoyuan City's business district, like all such places around the globe, never slept. He could already see phones happily uploading clips of the black-armored soldier crashing in the middle of the street, in a ring of shattered asphalt. That would make someone's day...or night, to be correct. He felt his sight dimming, stretching, tunneling...

His last thought was hope—hope that James had survived. Then darkness.



Death was not a new experience to Kwe. If death was defined not just as a lack of respiration, but as the cessation of all brain activity,

then in the course of his career, Kwe had died twice. Twice before, in addition to organ regeneration, his persona was rebooted from the wet backup—brain stem-located nanoparticle mem-clusters. There were risks with the procedure and even the military used it sparingly, but in the Agency, as they say, death was an occupational hazard. Twice before, Kwe had opened his eyes to hospital whites, the hum of machinery, long persona verification checklists, and no recollection of anything in between.

This time was different. The darkness had a texture, a presence, a certain duration. He had no body, just pure consciousness sunk in sensory deprivation. *I think, therefore, I am.* Was he not dead then? That was hardly possible. After his fall, there'd be nothing to reboot and nothing to reboot from. Despite that, he still somehow existed.

With the inevitability of gravity, Kwe's thoughts turned to Lorraine. Lorraine and James. Kwe hoped that James would survive, even if just for Lorraine's sake.

Kwe had met James in the Agency's mandatory combat course. What they were taught didn't follow any particular martial art tradition but combined Karate-style kicks and punches, Kung-fu blocks, Judo holds and throws, and Aikido joint-locks with many other techniques. The trainees were expected to change fighting styles to match mission objectives. Those could range from "kill them all" to "subduing with no damage," or even just "get through." It was the get-through-fast challenge that Kwe failed that day. His performance was deemed "poor" because of the two extra minutes he spent taking out an annoyingly resilient James.

"But if I'd left him, I would've had a knife in my back in ten seconds flat," complained Kwe.

“That’s true, but you could’ve finished two minutes sooner.” Yeah, in the Agency, staying alive was secondary to the success of the mission.

He and James soon became good friends, sharing interests in dancing and remastered old movies. Kwe liked to cook, and James, who wouldn’t set foot in the kitchen without a court order, was man enough to try Kwe’s culinary experiments. At least, James’s off-duty persona did. He also had a service one and what he called off-off-duty dude. All three of them never tired of wondering how Kwe managed as a single persona entity. But for Kwe, MPC was never a choice.

He was eleven when his mom and dad were killed in the Golden Bridge bombing, and therapists first suggested MPC. Splitting off his screaming and sobbing personality, they said, would help him deal with the trauma. He’d still have the memory—it just wouldn’t be as personal. Some other Kwe would take most of his grief and an unreasonable—he understood it even then—guilt for choosing a summer camp instead of the vacation with his parents. Back then he, of course, heard of the bombing, but it didn’t even occur to him to worry. It took two weeks for the authorities to identify the bodies, and all that time, he was enjoying himself with his friends and sneaking out to see the pig-tailed Arin who didn’t even like him that much. Getting MPC felt like it would be a betrayal—of his parents, and of that other Kwe—so, he refused. He kept refusing later when the Agency’s psychs again suggested MPC to deal with his PTSD-induced nightmares. He wouldn’t put his problems on anyone else—not even on another himself. He did accept mem-blockers, though, to make the recollections less intense. A person can only take so much.

Kwe and James met Lorraine at the same time, at a birthday party for a mutual friend. Kwe and Lorraine had danced a slow waltz followed by a sultry rumba, and he was in love. Then it was a bolero, which Kwe didn’t really know, but James was happy to take over. Lorraine was

an amazing dancer, not surprisingly, as she was doing it professionally, performing and teaching. Unlike them, she had two personalities, both answering to the same name. In the privacy of his mind, Kwe called them Lorraine White and Lorraine Red. Lorraine White dressed conservatively in pastel colors and was a part-time instructor in smooth dances. Lorraine Red liked loud colors and preferred Latin dances like Cha-Cha or Samba.

Civilians most often used MPC to separate their work persona from a personal one, with some extras for things that required a particular mindset, skills, or ingrained habits. Like extreme sports, playing poker, or doing health maintenance. Lorraine's two personalities seemed so similar that Kwe couldn't see why she even bothered. He wouldn't have believed that she even had MPC, except that it was confirmed by her ID chip. Implanted at birth, ID chips served as passports did in the past, and Lorraine's proclaimed two legal entities. However, Lorraine's reasons for running two personas were her own and none of Kwe's business. He was happy to date either one of them.

He tried to play it cool, keeping the relationship casual, pretending that he didn't want to see Lorraine every minute of every day. With his Agency training, he could play anything and make it convincing. Maybe he was too convincing.

He took her on dates—to the latest musical she so much wanted to see and that, despite his reservations, turned out to be surprisingly decent; a scuba outing to the shipwrecks in the Great Lakes—a dive that Lorraine enjoyed but to Kwe felt like his underwater combat exercises. They took a class learning to bake French desserts, which Kwe thought was great, but for Red Lorraine, it was redeemed only at the very end by eating his eclairs and crème brûlée. That was Kwe's mistake. He should've brought Lorraine White for that one. They three—him and the two Lorraines, who were, legally at least, two

separate women—got along well, and several times each Lorraine invited him to stay the night. Kwe thought they had a connection there as well. Maybe they did, or maybe he was only imagining things. The hardest lies to see are those you tell yourself.

Kwe tried not to rush things. In retrospect, trying not to look obsessive or needy, he instead came across as “not ready to commit.” Or maybe he was indeed afraid to commit, afraid of losing the woman he loved before even proposing. Despite all reason, he still felt the guilt of “abandoning” his parents, failing to somehow protect them, as if coming along on that fatal vacation would’ve changed anything. In his PTSD-fueled nightmares, he saw himself losing Lorraine to enemy fire, landmines, and suicide bombers, just like he’d lost so many good men and women during his years in service. It was a totally unreasonable fear, but his subconsciousness seemed to disagree, making Kwe hesitate. Waiting and hoping that time would help, he missed his chance.

They were like brothers, but Kwe had little contact with James’s third persona, so it was a complete surprise when his best friend announced that his off-off-duty self had proposed to Lorraine, and that she’d accepted. Kwe should’ve considered that possibility, but somehow, he never did.

James hit him with the news when they were watching the recently remastered *Star Wars*. It was a slick production in full-immersion 3D, which allowed the viewer to see the action from any angle, feeling the desert heat or the winter’s cold, and smelling the stink of swamp water. Walking among the characters, you could speak with them, ask them questions, and even offer suggestions that could, in small ways, affect the plot. On the set, Luke Skywalker had just met Princess Leia when James casually asked Kwe to be his best man at the wedding. Kwe agreed before even inquiring who the bride was. Then he kept smiling and acted as if nothing had happened, because what could he

say? Inside, Kwe felt like Luke likely did upon learning that he could never marry Leia. Luke, at least, had nobody to blame. Kwe, on the other hand, could and did blame himself. One of the Lorraines was going to marry James, and maybe the other Lorraine was waiting for Kwe's proposal, or maybe she'd end up marrying another of James's personas. It didn't matter.

The laws didn't restrict marital arrangements between consenting adults, and it wasn't unusual for a woman to have two or more husbands. That was before you threw in MPC, with each persona recognized as an individual with their own right to make family arrangements. Unfortunately, Kwe was a throwback to the Stone Age. Even if he would've been welcomed, Kwe never would've been able to accept it. In this, he needed to have it all and just could not share. There were still people like him, just as there were others, who felt suffocated being the subject of someone's undivided attention. Most people didn't care and would say that it all depended on the circumstances. Kwe could only envy their mental flexibility. He...he just couldn't feel that way. As a result, he never opened up to Lorraine and never said anything to James. There seemed to be no point.

His thoughts were losing cohesion, dissolving in encroaching darkness, and he knew this was the end.



Kwe awoke feeling very cold. He was alive. Somehow. He heard whispers and then something touched his hand—once, twice, a third time. On the third one, lightning jolted through him like a defibrillator charge. He knew that they'd used defibrillators on him in the past, but he didn't remember it. He would never forget this time. Finding

that he could, he screamed out his pain. *Why do people scream? Does it help?* He didn't know.

His eyes snapped open. The pain passed as fast as it came, leaving behind only tingling in his fingers and toes and a dull ache in the abused muscles. Bright blue sky above. *How?* It was night in Taoyuan City. The faces of three girls hovered over him. Snow coated the ground. *Snow?* It was summer in Taiwan. Was this a dream? A hallucination? No dream could be this painful. Physical feeling was an anchor rooting him to reality. Had he dreamed up these girls? They looked nice. What were they doing in this realistic, and so agonizing, delusion?

In an unknown situation, you don't move unless you must. Something-or-other 101. "Jack?" he sub-vocalized. No answer. His suit was dead or disabled. "Gun?" No response from his rifle. That was bad. He couldn't breathe. 101 could go to Hell. He was down without an operational suit or a weapon in unfamiliar, potentially unfriendly territory. Screw the rule book.

He ripped off his mask and inhaled the cold, unfiltered winter air. No city smells, no pollution. The air was clean and sharp, fragrant with the nearby greenery and water. Maybe with a hint of wood smoke. *Who burns wood these days?* No place on Earth smelled that nice.

The sky also looked wrong. At first, he couldn't put his finger on it. *What's with the color?* Compounds released in the upper atmosphere to reverse the greenhouse effect gave the sky a subtle silvery tint. For the last forty years, it was like that everywhere, from the Amazonian jungles to the North Pole. He grew up with it, but this sky was clear blue, the tint missing.

His mind reeled. *Where am I?* Vertigo swept over him, and mercifully, the darkness returned.