

*Cassie and her companions embark on a perilous quest to find the fabled Dragon Prophecies. To find their prize, the heroes must overcome many challenges, including breaking a curse and releasing all the trapped souls in a haunted city.*

**The Dragon Prophecies:  
Book One of the Return of the Dragons**

By M.T. Meiklejohn

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M. T. MEIKLEJOHN

# THE DRAGON PROPHECIES



BOOK ONE  
OF THE RETURN OF THE DRAGONS

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## **Dedication**

To my loving husband, you inspire me to  
keep taking one more step until I reach the top.

I am grateful to walk beside someone who:

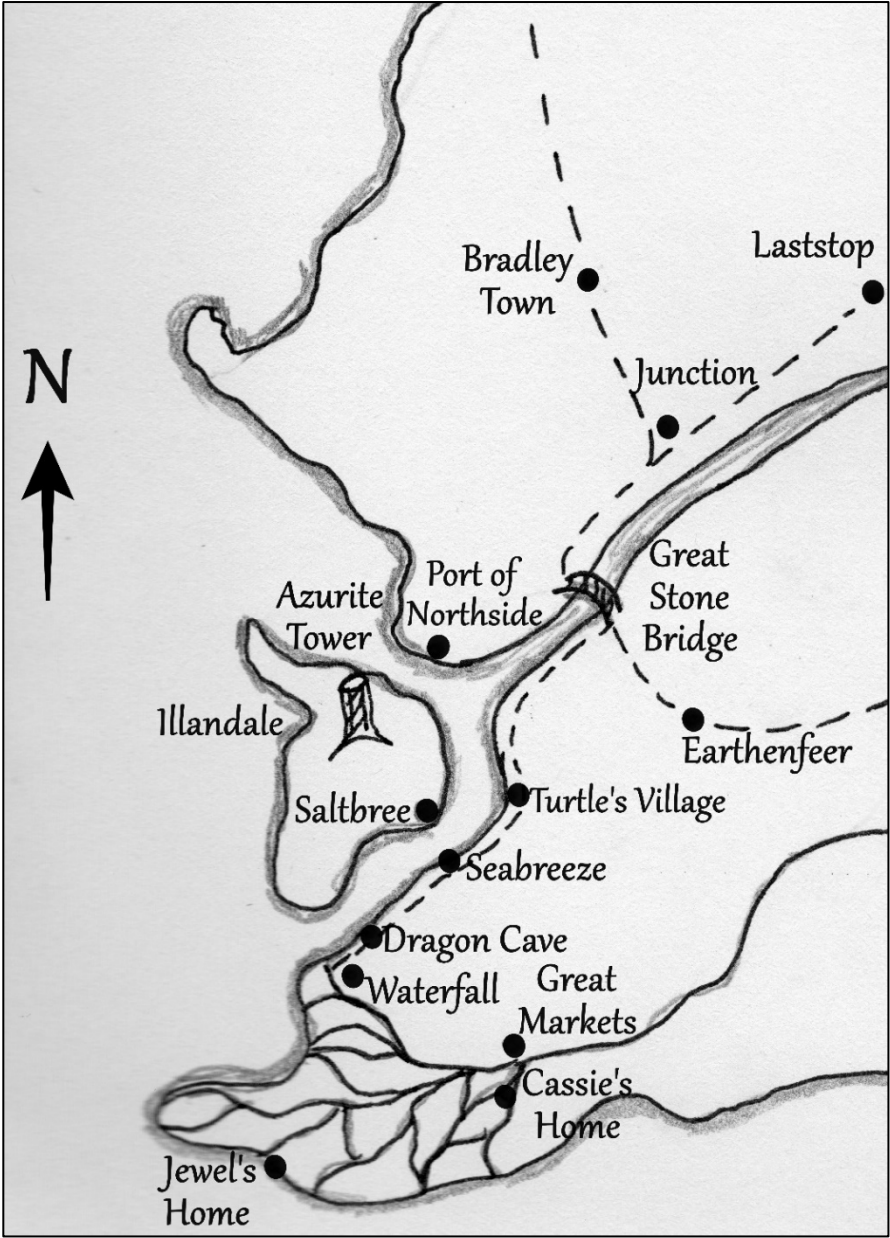
Sees me for who I am,

Supports me for who I am,

Believes in me for who I am,

And loves me for who I am.

Thank you.



## Chapter One

Moonlight broke through the curtains, causing Cassandra to stir slowly; she resisted the urge to open her eyes. She snuggled deeper into the comforting familiarity of her bed, not yet ready to leave its warm embrace. Gradually, she became more alert and interested in each sound intruding on her peace. The gentle rustling of the leaves was in harmony with the metronomic croaking of the frogs, and the slow flowing of the marsh water. Nature was beckoning her, and the Song was as strong as ever.

As the sounds became sharper, Cassandra became more aware of other disturbances that were intent on drawing her further from sleep. The aroma of freshly baked bread started to tickle her nose, as it mingled with the wood smoke from the fire.

With her attention now drawn inside, her thoughts moved toward the source of the enticing smell. The sound of Aunt Jenna's movements suddenly came into focus. Aunt Jenna, Cassandra thought with a smile, was the heart of their home and the rock at the centre of Cassandras' world. She was always the first person up, ensuring everything was ready for the day. Cassandra knew she would have already milked the goat, fed the chickens, and brought in the water before starting on the day's food. The homestead was safe in Aunt Jenna's hands, and Cassandra felt loved and secure.

Aunt Jenna was her father's sister, and Cassandra had come to live with her and Uncle Jom, when her father went missing at sea. Born and bred as Fisherfolk, Cassandra and her father were accustomed to the unpredictable weather. However, there were no signs of the storm brewing that fateful day. Cassandra suddenly realised that it had been

ten years since her world had come crashing down. She recalled how angry she had felt at being left alone and how unfair life was.

She smiled as she fondly recalled her happy years with her father. Somehow, they had managed to make it work in the short time they had together. She remembered he smelt fresh like the ocean, and his beard tickled her and made her giggle; she still missed him. She had no memory of her mother, as she died giving birth to her. All anyone could tell Cassandra, was that she was from the Woodfolk in the north, had kept to herself, and loved her father fiercely.

Then, one day, her father was gone, and she was all alone. She was shuffled from one family to another, getting angrier and more confused as the days passed. She didn't seem to belong anywhere; she drifted from day to day. Then, out of the blue, Aunt Jenna and Uncle Jom turned up at her doorstep and opened their arms to her. Since that day, they had treated her like their own, with protection, love, and guidance. She was a gift to them, as Aunt Jenna had never been able to carry a child full term.

That was the first pivotal moment in Cassandra's life. Everything changed, and her expectations of spending life by the sea were shattered. She was taken to live deep in the marshes, in a small village near the open plains. As time passed, her life with her new family became normal.

'Cassie!' Her aunt's voice broke her thoughts.

'Coming,' she replied. It was time to get up and leave the comforts of her bed. Quickly rising, Cassie threw on her work clothes. Then she moved out of her tiny bedroom and into the kitchen, where Aunt Jenna was waiting.

‘Cassie, what are you wearing? Did you forget that today was the first day of the markets? You need to hurry if you plan on going and setting up with your uncle. Be quick and get changed, or you won't have time to eat,’ Aunt Jenna said, looking at the clothes Cassie had on.

As quickly as she had come into the room, Cassie was out and back into her bedroom to change. How could she have forgotten that this weekend was the start of the week-long markets? They were held twice a year on the nearby plainlands. Everyone would be there. She would see Jewel, her best friend and be able to sell some of the small pieces of work she had been crafting.

Cassie was in the fourth and final year of her glassblowing apprenticeship. When she turned twelve, Uncle Jom had convinced an elderly local Master to take her on. She had six months left to complete her apprenticeship and become a journeyman.

She still didn't know what she would do when that day arrived. Should she stay and care for her declining master? Or venture out on her own? Her pieces were good; somehow, she knew what the glass wanted her to create when crafting. It was like it called to her. The pieces she created were unlike anything else she had seen. She was building a reputation for herself and her work. If she went out on her own, it wouldn't take her long to earn a decent living.

Cassie struggled with her daily work in the shop. During her apprenticeship, she was required to make whatever her Master instructed, and everything created belonged to him. Over the last year, Cassie had done more and more of the work. Master Gareth's declining health had seen to that. He had been unable to see clearly for years, and could no longer work the glass. Cassie was responsible for any orders that came into the shop. She spent her days making glass plane windows, some bowls, cups, and vases.



At home, she had free reign to work the glass and create whatever she wanted. Most apprentices had to live and work in the shop. Cassie was fortunate that Master Gareth was friends with her aunt and uncle, and she was allowed to live with them.

Early on in her apprenticeship, Uncle Jom recognised her skills and passion for glassblowing. He had set up a small kiln for her to practice on at home. She used it whenever possible to create her own pieces from the materials that sang to her as she crafted. She didn't understand how, but if a rock or mineral was nearby, she knew it was there and could find it. Somehow, they gave off an energy that pulled at her until she followed it and found what was calling. She always used what she collected in her work at home, and what was produced was truly magnificent. She would sell those pieces and make money from them at the markets.

They would sell as they always did. She would earn some money of her own, and be able to contribute to the family. As she hurriedly got changed, Cassie realised she couldn't remember the last time she had brought any work home from the markets. People from all over came to see and marvel at her exquisite pieces. Once they saw them, they would buy something. They always gasped and asked how she got such vivid details and colours from glass.

As an apprentice, Cassie wondered how she did it sometimes as well, how she could hear the Song of the Stones. She had discovered that she didn't just sense things randomly. She could close her eyes and focus, then follow the energy lines to precisely what was needed. She stayed in the rhythm of the stone while she ground, mixed and worked the glass. She then coaxed the glass, and created the shapes and colours needed, until the creation hidden within emerged. The results were stunning and exquisite pieces. Flowers that you wanted to stop

and smell because they looked so real, and animals that you had to stop yourself from patting.

When she was younger, she had tried to talk to her aunt and uncle about the energy that called to her, but they didn't understand. They had looked at her with vacant expressions, leaving her feeling isolated and alone. She had always wondered why she was so different.

After hurrying down her food, Cassie hugged Aunt Jenna and ran to the boat. The quickest way to the market was to pole through the marshes and canals, but it was slow going with so many people on the water.

'Morning Cassie, have you got everything?' asked Uncle Jom as he untied the rope and pushed them from the bank.

'Of course, we packed last night!' Cassie said, and rolled her eyes; Uncle Jom always asked that.

'Well, we need to get moving; people will be wanting to see what you have on offer. You're more popular than me these days,' he said as he guided the boat into the deeper water of the stream.

'Oh, Unc, people love your stuff,' she said affectionately.

As Cassie settled back into the boat, she peacefully watched her world float by. Uncle Jom hummed quietly, as he poled and guided the boat through the water. They lived on a narrow waterway that connected to a larger one. Following the channels, they could travel directly to the markets by boat. The canals and rivers were the lifeblood of their area, and all manner of goods travelled along them. Uncle Jom had been selling dried herbs and spices at these markets all his life. He learned the trade from his father and took over the business after his passing. Cassie jumped at the idea when he suggested she use a small part of his area, to see if anyone would buy her work.

This was the biggest market in the land, and every six months, people came from far and wide, to buy anything and everything they needed. Wood carvings from the Great Northern Forest, tapestries from distant lands across the desert. Precious stones and gems extracted from deep within the mines of the Dragon Spine Mountains, and shell necklaces from faraway islands with names you had never heard of. You never knew what strange and wonderful goods would turn up. Then, a week later, it was all packed up and vanished overnight, like it had never been there, only to reappear again six months later.

Aunt Jenna and Uncle Jom collected and dried the local herbs to sell. Some of his produce was rare, hard to get, and fetched a good price. Customers had been coming to him and his father before him for years. He had a reputation for selling quality goods and being an honest trader with fair prices. If a label stated a product, that was what you got. He never mixed inferior ingredients into his herbs as many unscrupulous traders did. All of his wares would be sold before the end of the market. He would head home with some coins in his pocket, and a few extras that Aunt Jenna had asked him to pick up. The markets provided the family with a decent living. They lived close enough to travel home each day, but they always stopped the first night, as the business and haggling usually continued well into the evening. That first night, they would catch up with all their friends, and exchange news from across the land. With the celebrations going late into the evening. That was how her aunt and uncle had found her; word came to them at the markets that her father had died.

‘How long do you think it will take to sell your items this time?’ he asked, making casual conversation to pass the time.

‘Master Gareth has only given me two days off, so I must be back home tomorrow night. If I can sell them by noon tomorrow, I can spend some time looking around with Jewel and maybe buy a couple of things,’ she

said, her gaze following the movements of the other boats on the canal, as they also headed towards the markets.

She waved and smiled at a few, keeping an ever-watchful eye out for Jewel and his Da. Jewel would be there with his Da, selling seaweed and dried fish, that his family caught and harvested. When Uncle Jom had taken her with him to help at the market that first year, Cassie had been surprised and delighted to see a familiar face. They had quickly become friends. Since that day, she hadn't missed a market.

Jewel was a year older than Cassie and the third child of nine. One of his jobs was to help his family at the markets. Cassie vaguely remembered meeting Jewel when she lived with her father. His large family had lived a couple of doors down the lane. They had only become true friends when they started spending time together twice a year at the markets. They could catch up and exchange news around the campfire this evening. Then hopefully, he could get away for a couple of hours tomorrow and explore with her.

'How many pieces do you have?' her uncle asked, returning her to the present.

'An owl, a dragon, a few vases, some cape brooches and my new drop pendants. I've been wearing one this past week and everyone who has seen it has commented on how much they like it. Sometimes, I don't know if people are just being nice; I'll see today,' Cassie replied passively.

'Why do you say that?' he asked.

'Sometimes, I think something is wrong with me,' she said slowly. 'I can mix, blend, and create colours in glass and make them come alive, but I don't understand people, and my only friend is Jewel.'

'Give it time, Cassie. We live in a small village, and there are not many people for you to be friends with,' he said, responding to part of her concern.

Cassie looked over at him, feeling yet again that he didn't understand her.

'You read and understand the energy of the elements around you when creating your art. You do it automatically without thought or hesitation. In time, you'll learn to look inside and extend that focus to include all areas of your life,' he replied. 'Then you'll know who is being truthful, no matter the situation. Developing trust is the key.'

Cassie turned and looked at her uncle in surprise. He wasn't looking at her, just puffing away on his pipe and gently poling down the water. She couldn't remember the last time he had said that much at once. Was he right, was it the same? Maybe he did understand more than she thought.

Before she could answer, they arrived and were thrown into the frantic unpacking and preparing for the day. The markets didn't officially start until later, but people always came early, looking for the new and unusual or to grab a bargain. They were set up quickly, with only small light objects to arrange. Once complete, Cassie told her uncle she needed to drop off the Wise Woman's commission, and she would pay the rent on the way back.

She set out purposefully, heading in the direction that Jewel and his Da would be. When he saw her coming, Jewel yelled in excitement and rushed out, picking her up and swinging her around in a big hug. She hugged him back just as tightly; seeing him was so good.

'I'm off to drop off a commission and pay the rent. Have you done yours yet?' she asked in way of greeting, hoping he could slip away with her.

'No, I was waiting for you. Let me ask Da what he wants me to say. Money is tight right now, and we might need to negotiate payment. It's been a good harvest these last six months, with fewer storms than recently, so we should make up for the previous bad season,' he replied.

'Go ask, be quick. I've something for you,' she said, shooing him off affectionately. She then followed him slowly, allowing him enough time to talk privately with his father about the rent. Cassie would have enough to cover it once she dropped off the Wise Woman's Rune Stones. But she knew Jewels' Da would never accept a loan from her. She stopped a short distance away and raised her hand in a wave, letting him know she was there but giving them the privacy to talk.

'Cassandra, how are you? And your aunt?' he asked her when they concluded their discussion.

'She's well and sends her best. She also gave me some of that poppy cake you like so much, to have with supper tonight,' she replied with a smile. Aunt Jenna would always be grateful for Jewel's father and the role he played in bringing Cassie into their lives. She always sent some homemade local delicacy along to the markets, as a treat for Jewel and his Da.

'Send her my thanks,' he replied before turning to Jewel and saying, 'Don't be long. A quick catch-up and see about the rent, then straight back. There's work to be done.' Before he turned back and continued unloading his seaweed barrels, he had the bent shoulders of a man used to hauling heavy loads.

'It's getting harder and harder to feed us all,' Jewel said, as they walked away. 'The weather is changing and becoming more and more unpredictable. Da says it started around the time your Da disappeared. Sometimes, I think it would be better if I were to leave; at least then, the little ones would get more food,' he said gloomily, not looking at her. Jewel was the most easygoing, optimistic person that Cassie knew, but sometimes he struggled with his position in life.

'Jewel, I've something for you', Cassie said, interrupting his current line of thought. She had heard his struggles previously and had to break the pattern before he became too deep in worry. When he got lost in the gloom, he could get stuck in the pattern and have trouble breaking it. She was determined to prevent that, as they had such a short time together. She turned towards him and pulled out one of her new pendants to gift him. As the sun caught the sparkling colours, his eyes lit up in wonder at the swirling blues and greens. It had so much depth. Cassie had somehow captured the power in the curl of the wave, just before it broke. He had never seen anything so wonderful, and it took him straight back to the sea he loved.

Cassie had made the pendant for Jewel with his love of the ocean in mind. She was sure she would hear everything about him learning to ride a wooden board down a wave tonight. A friend had bought one back from one of his fishing trips to the outer islands just before the last market. Jewel had been excited to give it a go when he got home. She held her breath, anxiously awaiting his response; she hoped he would like it.

Staring into the pendant, Cassie could see his eyes well up. He looked up at her, and she saw it all. His family never had enough money to buy anything he could call his own. Being Fisherfolk, they always had food on the table and love in the home. But there was rarely any money left for niceties. Realising that he had something in his hands

that he didn't have to share, something he could call his own, hit him hard. He worked long, demanding days fishing on the water with his family, with no break, apart from the twice-yearly markets. He felt trapped, never getting ahead or having anything of his own, and endlessly stuck in the same cycle.

'Here,' she said, taking the pendant back from his reluctant hands. 'Turn around. I made this to be worn up around your neck. Shakra says the colour matches the old energy point taught by the Dragons and will work best if worn there. See mine,' she said, pulling her pendant from under her blouse. It was lovely shades of green, with what looked like tiny dewdrops on the morning leaves, preserved in the glass for eternity.

'It should be worn here,' she said, placing her hand over his heart. 'The colours and stones used in it, work best through my heart,' she said as she quickly dropped her hand and looked away in embarrassment. Why had she done that? She had always considered Jewel, an older brother, and touching him just now had butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

'Cassie, I love it. Thank you,' he said emotionally, and Cassie knew that was all he needed or could say right now. Watching him, she saw the doubt and guilt kick in, and he started to take it off.

'I can't accept this. People will pay good money for it. Your family needs the coins,' he said, looking down at the pendant like it was a dream that had been stolen from him and lost forever.

She placed her hand over his, stopping him from removing the pendant. 'Jewel, it's sand and stones that are worth little money. Please accept it.' She emphasised with words, 'You're my best friend, and I made it for you. It would not suit anyone or work as well for anyone else.' Cassie could see how true that was, from looking at the



energy lines connecting him to the pendant. They were strong and thick.

Jewel drew her into a big hug. It pushed the breath right out of her. He held her for so long that she was scared he would never let go. When he released her, he carefully fastened his new pendant around his neck. Then, he gently kissed her forehead before he turned and continued down the lane.

‘I need to drop off a commission I received last markets. Do you remember Shakra the Wise Woman? She had me craft a set of Dragon Stones for her, each with a different stone combination to create matching rune stone colours. It was a challenging project, and I learned a lot as each rune seemed to call for a different combination. Come, she’s this way,’ Cassie said excitedly, leading him in the right direction.

As they approached her stall, Shakra emerged from her tent and was waiting. ‘Cassie, you’re here. I’ve felt your energy and that of what you hold drawing closer all morning.’

Cassie took a pouch out of her pocket and handed it to Shakra. Shakra took it in both hands and read the energy with closed eyes. Satisfied with what she felt, she opened her eyes and said. ‘Thank you. You have done well in this task. Here is your promised payment. I’ll miss you. Already, I feel you being drawn away on a great journey with danger and many challenges. Be aware of who you meet today; everything will change for you both. You move towards your true path, and it will change the land as we know it. The Dragon Stones have spoken, and I’ve finally fulfilled my purpose in this life. My mountain home calls me back with open arms; I can retire in peace,’ she said with a long sigh full of gratitude. Then, looking up at Cassie, she continued. ‘Our paths will cross again; until that time, be true to your

purpose and take note of the signs that will guide you.’ With those words, she turned and disappeared back into her tent.

Cassie and Jewel turned and looked at each other, and a shiver rose up their arms. Wise Woman's words were not to be taken lightly, particularly when Dragon Stones were involved. It was whispered that they could foresee the future and set people on their true path.

‘What did that mean? Why did you take on that commission?’ Jewel asked, agitated over what had been said, while he made a sign to ward off evil.

‘She asked me to do it. She said my energy was strong, and it was time to move on a new path and explore different things. How could I say no? I can hear the stones and crystals speaking to me, and she understands that and has tried to guide me. No one else understands what I can do,’ Cassie said before she turned away in embarrassment and filled with uncertainty. People never understood her Song, she thought sadly, not even Jewel.

Turning back to him in anger and frustration, she said, ‘You have that pendant because of her. Her commission helped me discover a new technique that allowed me to create it. Are you not grateful for what I’ve learned?’

Jewel gazed at her, then at the pendant she had made for him, lost in thought at her words. He remembered the old legends he had heard throughout his childhood, and pondered the significance of the object he held in his hands. ‘I’m grateful and love it,’ he said. Not knowing what else to say, he fell back onto safer ground with, ‘Come, we must see about rent.’

Cassie felt relieved as they continued to see the rent master in silence. She didn't lose her temper often and regretted the words the second they were out of her mouth.

With rent paid and a deal struck over Jewel and his family, they moved back towards his Da's stall. The previous encounter with the Wise Woman, and their words, faded away as they laughed and caught up. Deep in conversation and oblivious to their surroundings, Jewel rounded a corner and crashed into a finely dressed lady.

'My pardon madam. I didn't see you and meant no harm,' Jewel said quickly and humbly, taking off his hat and bowing his head low. The tight financial situation of his family's business, couldn't afford any damage caused by his careless actions.

'Where are you going in such a hurry that you don't notice those around you?' the lady asked, in a tone that suggested she was not used to going unnoticed. Cassie stepped back in surprise. This person's Aura shone with a unique blend of intense colours and energies, the likes of which she had never seen before. Surprise and fright overtook her. She quickly turned and left, needing to escape.

'I'm returning to my Da and our family stall. I meant no harm. I was lost in conversation with my friend,' he said, as he glanced over to where Cassie had been and realised she was gone. He looked around frantically, trying to find her. Where did she go, why would she leave him?

'Where is this friend of yours? I see no one,' she said, looking over Jewel's shoulder. She stared down the lane intently in the direction that Cassie would have gone. He wondered how her eyes could track her movements, even though she couldn't see her.

'I don't know, my Lady, she was right here,' he answered in confusion.

'It doesn't matter,' she said, dismissing the subject as if it wasn't important. 'Where did you get that pendant?' she asked, taking a closer look at his new treasure. Jewel suddenly realised she was not alone, and a tall, muscular man was behind her. He was watching him closely with a menacing look on his face. He looked intimidating, his hood drawn low, shadowing his features. His hand was on a giant sword at his side, and a bow slung across his back. A ranger from the eastern plains, Jewel thought with awe. They rarely venture this far from their homeland.

'It was a gift from a friend,' he replied, raising his hand to protect his new pendant.

'From a friend that has now disappeared?' the lady asked with certainty.

'Yes. She said she had made more of them. I'm sure she would sell you one if you were interested,' he replied, thinking of sending Cassie more business.

'Interesting. Where would I find this friend of yours?' she asked, while the ranger behind seemed to relax and take his hand off the hilt of his sword. Jewel noticed his eyes and the way they continued to move, taking in everything around them. He looked relaxed, yet he was constantly alert.

Excited now to be helping his friend, Jewel gladly offered to show her the way. If first, he could let his father know. The lady agreed and walked with him, asking questions as they went.

Cassie was out of breath as she hurried away. She was sorry she had ditched Jewel, she would have to make it up to him later. Something about that woman unsettled her; her energy field was so strong that

Cassie had to escape it. Somehow, she needed to block or shield herself before their next encounter. She was certain that their paths would cross again, and sooner rather than later. Ominously, the Wise Woman's words came flooding back to her.

She returned to the stall, ducked behind it, and smiled at her uncle, trying to catch her breath.

'All done, Cassie?' he asked without looking up from his task.

'Yes,' she answered, avoiding looking in his direction. Trying to gather her thoughts, she rearranged her display in an effort to keep her hands busy. She could feel the energy of each piece and see the energy lines going out from them. They would attract the exact person they were meant to go to. Looking up, she saw all the lines flowing, weaving, and pulsating strongly around everything. It was like a door opening, and a sudden rush of energy flooded her, exposing her to all the power surrounding them. She fell back and landed on her bottom, overwhelmed and feeling dizzy by the intensity.

'What happened, Cassie? Are you ok?' Uncle Jom asked in concern, kneeling beside her.

'I don't know. My head started to spin, and I felt faint. Give me a second to catch my breath. I'll be okay.' As quickly as the energy flow had come, it passed, and Cassie got up. She realised what had just happened. She had opened herself entirely to the energy surrounding everything.

She had discovered that everything had energy and gave off a different vibration long ago. She had always seen and heard the rhythm of its flow. She could see the lines of energy and hear their Song as they moved between everything. It was like a massive system of roads connecting all things. Sometimes, the lines got more substantial, and

sometimes, they faded over time. Early on, she thought this was natural, and everyone could see it, but she was wrong. She had discovered that most people only caught a glimpse of it without understanding what they saw. Make a choice and brush it off without realising the energy was guiding them. Most people only had fleeting glimpses into Cassie's world, into her Song.

Shakra was the only person who seemed to understand it, and had offered her any insight into what it was. Most people would make a sign to ward against evil when dealing with a Wise Woman. Then they would run the other way, unless they needed her help or guidance. Cassie had been apprehensive when Shakra had first approached her, but quickly realised she could help her understand why she felt so different. That was really why she had taken on the commission.

Cassie's thought pattern was broken as a person approached her stall. She could see the line connecting her to the gold and red vase. That was what had drawn her and the piece she would buy.

‘What amazing colours, did you make this?’ the woman asked. Cassie chatted happily with her, enjoying the distraction after everything that had happened. She made the sale, wrapped the item, and the woman continued on her way happy with her purchase. Another couple of sales were done in quick succession; it would be a good morning.

She paused. Something wasn't right; she could feel eyes on her like someone was watching. Cassie searched around the area, trying to find where the nagging feeling was coming from. She followed all the energy lines back to their origins, and nothing seemed amiss, but she couldn't shake the feeling. So she used her eyes to look around the square, and then she spotted him. A hooded man tucked into the shadows across the lane, and he was looking directly at her. Something about the man made her uncomfortable. Why was he

watching her so intently? Then she realised he had no lines coming or going from him. It was like he was cut off from the energy completely. Seeing her attention on him, he gave a half smile that left an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. Then he turned slowly and walked away without a backward glance. Cassie was struggling to keep up with everything that had happened. It had been such an unsettling morning, with too much for her to take in and fully comprehend.

‘Cassie,’ her attention was drawn to Jewels’ voice. What was he doing here, how had she not felt him approaching? Surprised, she turned around and saw he was not alone. The lady from earlier was with him, and their energy was somehow muted and shielded from her, increasing her confusion.

‘Cassie, this is Lady Adriana and her man Bolkin. They admired the pendant you made me. They asked to meet you and see your work. Where did you go earlier? I turned, and you were gone,’ he asked with concern at her strange behaviour.

Lady Adriana gently touched his shoulder, immediately drawing his attention to her uncle. He went and started talking to him, he seemed to have entirely forgotten the question he had asked.

‘Cassandra, your work intrigues me. I would like to see more of it. What have you got here?’ Adriana asked in a friendly manner, looking down at the items on the table.

Cassie could find no words to respond immediately, so instead picked up the nearest piece. A lovely blue pendant, and showed it to Adriana, making small talk. ‘This would suit your colouring, my Lady, and go well with your dress.’

‘Such deep wonderful colours,’ she said without touching the pendant. ‘But is there not a different piece you think would suit me better?’

Somehow, the energy lines had come back and were pulsing with more intensity again. Cassandra could now see the piece she was meant to have. Strong lines flowed to both her and Bolkin. What had just happened? She could now see something that was not there a moment ago.

‘My Lady, this flower would hold your cape securely, and your man would suit this one. If you look closely, they are made to fit together as a pair or can be worn separately,’ Cassie said, demonstrating how the two clipped together in delicate unison and then came apart easily. A stunning single purple and blue flower, that now had a green leaf joined to it perfectly.

‘What amazing craftsmanship. You’re very gifted,’ she said, looking at Cassie thoughtfully.

‘I can give you a good deal. I’m sure you wearing them would let many a fine person know about my wares,’ she said, separating the two brooches, she then handed the leaf to Bolkin and the flower to Adriana.

‘Such complex patterning and colours. What do you use to create such marvellous pieces?’ she asked, looking intensely into Cassie’s eyes.

‘I find all of my craft material locally. I’m under an apprenticeship with a Master that I’ll complete in the next six months. I currently make all the goods in his shop, as he can no longer see properly to craft. These are made in my home kiln that Uncle Jom set up for me,’ she said, referring to the items on the table in front of them. ‘The stones call, and I follow the Song and weave the colours and designs. It has become stronger since I did the set of Dragon Stones, for Shakra the Wise Woman.’ Cassie stopped in wonder. Why had she said all of that? It was like she was under some sort of compulsion to answer this lady’s questions. Looking around, she saw the fine lines of energy that



Adriana was weaving around her. Somehow, that was what was making her do it. She sent her own energy back, blocking the lines, and her compulsion to keep talking lessened; she needed to focus and maintain control.

Cassie looked up slowly and took in all the colours radiating from Adriana and creating her energy field. She tried to read it and understand Adriana's intent, but it was too complicated to comprehend.

Adriana saw the shift and said, 'What do you see when you look at me?'

Cassie dropped her eyes and pretended not to understand the real meaning of the question. 'My Lady, I meant no offence; I didn't mean to stare. It's not often that one of your standing comes to my stall,' she said as humbly as possible.

'Don't play games with me child. I asked you a question.' With those words said, Cassie saw the energy lines moving towards her, thicker than before, and her compulsion to obey grew stronger. She focused her inner thoughts and sent out her own energy. Using the same technique as when she crafted glass, she tangled the lines and stopped the flow around her. She was determined to stop the compulsion.

'Where did you learn to do that? Don't lie to me. I see what you're doing and will have the truth. Who taught you that skill?' Adriana asked with more force and direction in her voice than before.

'The only teacher I've is my old Master, and he is instructing me in the skill of glass,' she said, stronger than ever, the need to tell this person everything returned. 'My Aunt Jenna has taught me my letters, and my Uncle Jom has taught me numbers while working with him at the stall. Shakra, the Wise Woman, has taught me the Ancient Dragon

Stone symbols, so I could make her a set of runes. I've had no other teachers,' she finished, and the stress of needing to talk left her; she felt exhausted, looking down with slumped shoulders.

When she heard no response to her answer, Cassie slowly looked up, and all she could see were two sets of eyes looking at her with a soul-penetrating stare. She straightened her shoulders, stood tall, and slowly centred her energy, saying firmly and with forceful determination. 'I've done you no wrong and am trying to make some money selling my craft here at these markets. I don't understand why you question me this way. If you don't like what I offer and don't want to purchase anything, please move on.'

With her words, the pair turned and started to move away. They seemed to be moving on peacefully when suddenly, Adriana stopped in surprise and turned and said, 'My name is Lady Adriana of the Azurite Tower, this is my guide and protector, Bolkin of the eastern plains. He's notably the most talented tracker in all the lands and has assisted me in finding you. I came from the Tower to find the cause of the energy disruptions in this area. They are wild and erratic; echoes are being felt across the land. My search led me to you, and my questions confirmed my suspicions. You, Cassandra, are a wild with great power and must be trained. You might not understand my words and their meaning, but if you look down at our energy lines, you'll see we are already bonded. I know you can see them,' she said, 'so look for yourself.'

Cassie looked down and saw strong energy lines flowing between them, confirming her words. The lines were interwoven to form a thick rope or bridge, one of the thickest Cassie had ever seen. With such an intense energy bond, she realised they were destined to move forward together. Upon closer inspection, she noticed lines connecting herself

to the individuals in front of her, and Jewel as well. She was right, and Jewel was included in their energy circle.

'I don't understand' she said, seeking answers about what was happening.

'The full extent of this, only time will tell. You need knowledge and training to understand your gift and not hurt those around you. Don't take this lightly; if you're not given the most basic training to control your abilities, you'll likely not make it past 20 years. Tower knowledge is not something to be talked about in the open, with so many eyes watching and ears listening,' she said, looking around the area.

'Why?' Cassie asked in confusion.

'I can say the land is changing, and a dark energy is growing. Whispers in the night, abnormal weather patterns, and strangers moving through the land in search of something. If you know the signs, they are there. Your natural abilities could help stabilise and make our land a better place. Is that not something that would give your life purpose?' she asked, as she looked directly into Cassie's eyes.

'Yes,' Cassie answered with conviction, she knew she spoke the truth and answered without hesitation. She enjoyed giving back to others, and the idea of doing so on a larger scale filled her with excitement.

Even in their brief time together, Cassie had learnt so much and now understood a greater depth of reading the Song. Maybe it was time to trust herself and her heart, like her uncle had told her. Cassie had reached the second turning point in her life. She would no longer be a glass blower's apprentice from the marshes. What she was to be, or where she was to go, she didn't know.

## Chapter 2

Before leaving, Adriana purchased the two brooches recommended for her and Bolkin by Cassie, as well as the miniature figurine of the Dragon. Cassie was surprised by the last purchase, as she hadn't sensed any energy lines to indicate a direct connection. She paid generously for all the pieces, then made plans for them to meet after the markets concluded. The rest of the day rushed by in a whirl of activity, giving Cassie no time to ponder what had transpired. Her last piece sold just as the sun was setting. Cassie slowly packed up, lost in a jumble of confusing thoughts, she wondered what would happen next.

Behind the bustling market stalls was a vast open area, a temporary home for the traders during the markets. The twilight was adorned with multiple fires, their flickering lights casting a warm glow. The air was heavy with the scent of smoke, a testament to the celebrations around the area. Merriment and laughter echoed across the space as traders revelled in the success of the day. Coins jingled in their pockets, tangible proof of the day's prosperity.

Cassie bent down and lit the fire, then settling comfortably near its warmth, she stared into the flames, lost in its hypnotic movement and crackling sound. What was she going to say to Uncle Jom and Aunt Jenna? How would she break the news to Master Gareth that she was leaving? While she pondered her situation, Cassie suddenly realised she didn't know what was going to happen. First, she needed some answers. Feeling an energy shift, she looked up and noticed two shadows approaching her fire: Lady Adriana and Bolkin were moving through the twilight towards her.

She had no fancy seats to offer, so she pulled out a spare blanket for them to rest on. She formally welcomed them, saying, 'My fire is yours; may it bring you light, warmth, and protection from the darkness.'

'May the light shine bright and protect us all,' they replied in unison.

'Cassie,' Adriana said with a smile. 'How did your trade end up?' she asked. It seemed like small talk, but somehow, Cassie knew every word from this lady's mouth was precise and said for a reason.

'I sold my last piece on close,' she replied quietly, as she looked up. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the brooches fastening their cloaks; they were wearing the ones she had made, she realised with a smile. Glancing down she saw the miniature dragon was nowhere in sight.

'First, we must get to know each other,' Adriana said gently in a reassuring tone. 'Please tell me about yourself.'

Cassie saw her sending out energy as she spoke and felt betrayed. 'Your words seem to be spoken in kindness, yet you send energy towards me. How can I trust you? If you truly wish to get to know me, then I'll not be manipulated by the energy you send at me,' Cassie said with forceful conviction.

Adriana's back went rigid in surprise at her words. Cassie got the impression that not many people spoke to her that way. Her tension was released with a breath before Adriana replied. 'It seems I must step back and explain the basics of energy reading to you. With your power and abilities, I had thought you would already be able to read the intent of an energy line. I was not manipulating your answers or words. I was placing a privacy and protection shield around us. So we could talk without being disturbed,' she said before she continued. 'First lesson. Calm yourself, look into the fire, and draw in a deep slow

breath, allow all the tension, anger, and uncertainty to leave your body. Slow your breath and find your calm centre. Learning to control your emotions is key to focusing and reading the energy flow.'

Cassie looked Adriana straight in the eye for a minute longer than necessary. She was determined not to back down on her stance. Then she followed her instructions, and slowly released all the tension and emotion she was holding.

'Good. Now focus on the energy lines. Look deep into them and read their colour, strength, and movement. Take in all that they are and what they are being used for,' she said, as she paused to give Cassie time to follow her instructions. 'When you're ready, tell me what you sense.'

'They're white with a slight lavender tinge. You've placed a fine net that radiates out and around us and has formed a barrier,' Cassie said slowly, having suddenly gained a deeper understanding of how to read energy. She looked up and gave Adriana a considering look, and her feelings shifted. Was this person the way forward, she wondered. After such a short time with her, Cassie's knowledge had grown quicker than ever.

'Well done. Over time, you'll get better at reading the purpose behind an energy flow. That is our first lesson and something you must practice. When you sense a line, don't just follow it; learn to understand it. This will help you in any situation,' Adriana said with satisfaction at the results from their first lesson.

Taking a deeper look at the net around them, Cassie replied surprisingly, 'You're directing it the same way I direct the patterns and colours when crafting glass.'

‘Yes. Everything is made of energy, and how the flow is directed determines the outcome. I did give you an energetic nudge earlier today, so that you would be truthful and forthcoming with me. That won’t be needed between us from this point. We’re now strongly bonded and will be able to tell if there is any deception. I’m sure you have experienced this previously. Someone said something to you, and you knew it wasn’t true but didn’t know why. The closer the bond, the better the natural reading of any emotion is.’

Cassie looked up in dismay. She had always been a closed and private person, and she didn’t want to share that level of personal information with anyone.

‘I’ll also show you how to control and shield your emotions, so they’re private when needed. By learning to shield yourself, you won’t project out wildly and erratically like you do now,’ Adriana said.

‘Your friend Jewel is approaching. Can you feel his energy getting closer?’ she asked.

Cassie reached out and felt his presence. ‘Yes,’ she replied.

‘Before he arrives, how much does he know of what you can do, and how is he involved?’ Adriana asked in a hurried voice. ‘He has a strong bond not just to you but to both of us. This is unexpected and a complication we will have to work around.’

‘He’s my best friend and the person I trust most in the world. However, I cannot share information about knowledge I don’t possess. I was only recently given more energy information from Shakra, the Wise Woman. She showed me the Dragon Symbols and asked me to make her a set of Casting Stones. That helped to open me to different flows and patterns.’

Adriana listened intently and took in all that Cassie said. Pausing, she gathered her thoughts and replied, 'He will be here momentarily, and the energy says he has an important role to play in your future. We will be open and allow the fates to decide what happens next.'

Jewel walked straight up to Cassie and through the energy shield like it didn't affect him. Cassie looked at Adriana in surprise. 'Energy will only go so far in shielding. It can be broken or penetrated if the bond or intent is strong enough. He was determined to find you, and so he did,' she replied evenly, before Cassie could ask how it had happened.

Jewel jumped in surprise. He turned towards the sound, and saw Adriana and Bolkin sitting by the fire. He had been so focused on seeing Cassie that he hadn't realised she had company.

'My lady, once again, I didn't see you and find myself apologising,' he said in embarrassment.

'It's of no matter. Cassie and I were getting to know each other. Please join us,' Adriana said, while she indicated with her hand for him to sit beside Cassie.

'I don't wish to intrude,' he said sadly. The thought of not being able to catch up with Cassie on their only night together distressed him greatly.

'You're more than welcome, sit,' Adriana replied, as she waited for Jewel to make himself comfortable beside Cassie before continuing. 'First, let me introduce myself properly. I'm Lady Adriana of the Azurite Tower, an Energy Wielder of the 7th Order, Master Scribe and a Dragon Mystic of the Land.'

Jewel's eyes widened as she completed her title, and he instinctively started to back away. 'You're a witch?' he asked, as he made the sign to ward off evil. 'Everyone says witches are more dangerous than Wise



Women and should be avoided and not trusted. People say they can make you do anything they command and even make you disappear.'

Cassie smiled, and shook her head; Fisherfolk were so superstitious, they distrusted anything they didn't understand, and Jewel's was Fisherfolk through and through.

'Boy, I've held my tongue through all of this out of respect for Lady Adriana, but unless you put aside your silly talk and listen, I'll beat some sense into you. Do we understand each other?' Jewel nodded slowly, his eyes wide open in fear at Bolkins threat. Adriana's look held amusement, as she placed a gentle hand on Bolkin's arm to calm him.

'I'm still Adriana, the same person you chatted to earlier. Was I so scary and frightening then?' she asked, as she gave him a moment to consider her words. 'Yes, I can wield energy. Does that make me so scary? I've come here to help Cassie learn how to control hers, as she has the same ability. Would you look at her differently and make a sign to ward off evil, now that you have this knowledge? Or is she still Cassie, your friend? Being able to wield energy doesn't change who you are. It allows you to do and see things differently,' she said, as she gave him time to reflect on her words.

Jewel looked thoughtfully at the three of them before he answered. 'Cassie is my friend, and that won't change. I'll always be there for her,' he said slowly as he looked at her and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

'Cassie must learn to control this power, or she could hurt those around her and eventually burn out. That's a fate I wish on no person. It leaves but a shell. Someone, still there physically but walks with no thought or mind of their own. I'm sure you've encountered people like this before, and wondered why this life had dealt them such a cruel blow. They're the ones that have the ability, and the Tower didn't find

in time,' she said with great sadness. 'Unless they're found and taught, the energy slowly overcomes them, until they're stuck in the flow and can find no way out. They walk like ghosts on the land with no comprehensible thought or purpose. The ones we find we return to the Tower for protection and rehabilitation. A few come back to us to some extent; however, many are lost forever. That's why I'm here. Is that the fate you would want Cassie to have?' she asked Jewel with conviction.

'Never!' he replied fiercely.

'Good, now, put aside your silly superstitions. Sit and listen with a more open mind, and you might learn something,' she said, as she returned her full attention to Cassie. 'I can teach you the basics to protect yourself, but to fully learn, the Azurite Tower is the best place for you. There, you can develop your abilities and ascend the ranks. There are seven levels of ascension in Tower teachings. Once you reach a new level, the colour is added to your energy field. What's needed to ascend a level is unique to each person, as we're all individuals and have different abilities when wielding energy. Does that make sense?' she asked.

Cassie slowly nodded her head, taking in the information before answering. 'Yes, but I'm confused. The Azurite Tower is reputed to be the best place to study and learn a craft,' she said, pausing as she collected her thoughts before she continued. 'Are you telling me that all who study there can wield energy?'

'Excellent Cassandra. You've a quick mind. You're right; all who attend the Tower can wield energy to some degree. It's our cover, so we're not persecuted or worse due to our abilities,' she said, as she looked meaningfully at Jewel. 'We're a school as well, and all that learn to wield power must learn a craft to hide their abilities; the finest Masters

in all the land teach in our ancient halls. If you're to enter, you must first be invited to come and train. You can't buy your way in; we make our fees so high that that way is unobtainable.'

Adriana stopped and sipped her wine, as she allowed Cassie and Jewel the time to absorb all the information provided. 'I asked earlier what you saw when you looked at me, and you didn't reply. I ask again. What do you see in my Aura?'

Cassie looked at Adriana and slowly replied. 'You shine brightly with seven layers, like a rainbow pulsing out from your body.'

'Excellent, I'm at the seventh level of ascension. Next, my energy will evolve into pure white as all the colours combine to form one. Like a raindrop, the colours are hidden within, and can be seen as a rainbow if you know how,' she replied before she continued. 'Much knowledge was lost at the end of the last age when the Dragons disappeared from our land. We know of one remaining Dragon: Fanir. Fanir, the greatest of the Knowledge Dragons, concealed himself and his last clutch of eggs in a Diamond Glass casing for protection. We await the awakening, and rejoice that Dragons will once more be part of our world, and lost knowledge will be returned to us.'

As she said this, she brought her hands up to her mouth and kissed her fingertips. Then, with her head bent, she touched her forehead and looked up, releasing the energy to the universe. Doing the same actions, Bolkin answered, 'We await the Return.'

'Now,' she said, bringing out a small, safely wrapped parcel. 'That brings me to my next question.' She slowly and carefully unwrapped the tiny dragon Cassie had made. As it entered the light, its red and gold colouring lit up brilliantly, making it come alive, it seemed to dance in the light. 'When did you travel to the cave that Fanir is concealed in?' she asked, holding up the glass dragon.

'I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't travelled to any cave,' she replied, confused.

'Then how do you make such a fine replica of Fanir?' Adriana asked with surprise.

'It's silly. I don't know if you'll believe me,' she paused, trying to find the courage to continue sharing such fanciful information. 'He sometimes comes to me in my dreams and talks to me,' she said fondly, as she looked at the replica of her dream friend with a smile. 'I didn't know if he was real or not.'

'A Dragon that looks like this comes to you in your dreams?' Adriana asked her urgently. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' she replied calmly.

'What does he say to you?' she asked with her earlier urgency back.

'Not a lot. Mostly, he keeps me company,' Cassie replied casually, not understanding the importance of the question. 'Lately, he's been quite persistent in saying that I must show people dragons. That's why I made this little guy. He insists that dragons will fly this world again, and that people must start to remember and prepare for their return.'

Taking in her reply, Adriana asked, 'How long has he been visiting your dreams?'

'I don't know. I've known him since I was little, and I've always called him Grandpa Dragon. He used to laugh when I said the name,' she recalled fondly. 'Sometimes I look for him in my dreams, but I can never find him unless he comes to me. It's like he's hidden,' she replied, as she glanced over at Jewel, who was staring at her in wonder.

'You're a Dreamwalker who has been touched by a Dragon. This is one of the signs in the Dragon Prophecies. It heralds the ending of this age

and the dawn of the next. It's said that Dragons will return, and Fanir's last clutch will be born to the new age. We must leave as soon as possible and travel to the Tower. I need to consult my order,' Adriana said with a new urgency.

'I can't leave my family,' Cassie said with apprehension.

'You must. What you have told me is more important than you realise. We enter a time of disruption and danger before the return. Some don't want to see the Dragons come back, but keep us in the dark. The last Dreamwalker on record was nearly 800 years ago, just after the Dragons vanished. He was the one who foretold the Dragon Prophecies and of their return,' Adriana replied.

At that moment, Uncle Jom and Jewels' Da came into the circle of firelight, looking for them. The haggling and work were done for the day; it was now time to relax, celebrate, and have a bite to eat. A jug of the local fortified wine, while smoking a pipe would move the festivities late into the evening.

'There you two are,' Uncle Jom said happily. 'It's been a great day with profits all around. Cassie, I saw you sold all your pieces today. It was the quickest ever! Well done, my girl,' he said proudly. Upon seeing Adriana and Bolkin, he was taken aback and patiently waited for introductions.

'I'm Lady Adriana of the Azurite Tower. This is my travelling companion, Bolkin. I bought some pieces from Cassie earlier and came to find out more about her and her work. She's very talented, and I've offered her a position to learn and further her training at the Azurite Tower. We take on apprentices of true talent and guide them in their journey to become some of the most talented in the world,' she said with an air of pride.

Uncle Jom was taken aback and speechless for a moment. 'You're welcome to share our fire,' he said formally before he continued, 'From early on, we have recognised Cassie's talent. We found and paid for her to enter an apprenticeship that she will soon complete. I'm sorry, Lady Adriana. We don't have the funds to pay for her to go to the Tower,' he said, as he lowered his head in shame.

'It would cost you nothing. The Tower has a limited number of positions per year offered under scholarship. With the backing of a member who will vouch for the person's talent, there is no cost. I've seen Cassandras' work and will vouch for her,' Adriana replied smoothly.

'My wife and I've always wanted the best for Cassandra. We had thought of the Tower when we saw how talented she was, as all have heard of its reputation for excellence. We were heartbroken when we discovered the amount needed and realised we couldn't afford to send her,' Uncle Jom said, as he looked over at Cassie in embarrassment. Cassie squeezed his hand reassuringly, surprised at his words and the level of emotion he spoke them with. Looking back at her, he asked. 'Cassie, my girl, you're close to sixteen now, and must make this decision yourself. What do you want to do?'

'Uncle, I've learnt nothing but what I've taught myself over recent years. Master Gareth is old and can't see clearly enough to work the glass. I yearn to become the best I can be and grow. If Lady Adriana thinks I'm talented enough, I would travel to the Tower and learn,' she said with more conviction in her voice than she felt.

'It's done then. We must raise a toast in celebration. To Cassie and her future!' he said, as he poured drinks into everyone's cups. They then started to raise their glasses to seal the deal in trader fashion. But before the deal could be done, Jewel interrupted.

'Da, you know my position. I've expressed my intention to you on more than one occasion,' Jewel said, as he glanced meaningfully over at Cassie. 'You'll understand why I must leave and travel with her. I would have no harm come to Cassie. No lady should travel the land without someone's protection.' Cassie's mouth dropped open in surprise at his words, and she lowered her eyes, blushing at the attention.

'Son, your mother and I've always known that one day you would leave us. Your sights have always been somewhere else,' he said, as he glanced at Cassie. 'We will miss you and the hands you bring to the table, but you go with our blessings. May the wind always be at your back, and the waters give you safe travel,' he said formally.

'May the shores come quickly into sight and bring good fortune to you and your family,' Jewel said in proper response to the old Fisherfolk saying.

'When do you leave?' Jewels' Da asked, as he looked over at Adriana.

'We must leave tomorrow morning, as the road is long and winter is coming. Before the first fall of snow, I intend to have us safely in the Tower,' Adriana replied.

'I can't leave without saying goodbye to Aunt Jenna,' Cassie protested, apprehensive about how fast things were moving.

'Cassie, this is your future. Your aunt will understand the haste, and you can see her when you come back to visit next. The Tower is not so far away that we're beyond your grasp,' he replied, giving a meaningful look at Adriana.

'But what about Master Gareth, who will help him in the shop?' Cassie asked, desperately looking for any reason to slow things down.

‘Cassandra, he was ready to retire years ago. He only stayed in business to teach you as a favour to us. He will sell the shop and retire to the peaceful life he longs for,’ Uncle Jom said gently. ‘I know you’re scared. Change can be unsettling. If this is what you really want. Then stop making excuses and do it.’

‘But I’ll miss you so much,’ Cassie said as tears formed in her eyes.

‘And we will miss you. You were an unexpected gift to us, but you know we would never hold you back from following your dreams. You need to ask yourself. Is this my true path forward? And then listen to your heart’s answer,’ he replied, waiting for her to ask herself the question.

‘It is,’ she said. Going over to him, she drew him into a tight hug, trying to express all of her gratitude for his wisdom and understanding in one action. Not just for tonight’s guidance but for everything given to her throughout her life. She held on longer than expected as a single tear hit his shoulder.

He gently released her, and said, ‘The deal is struck.’ Then, in trader fashion, he turned to Adriana and held out his hand.

‘The deal is struck,’ Adriana replied, spitting on her hand and shaking hands with Uncle Jom and Jewels’ Da. ‘We’ll take both under our care and guide them to the Tower. Even though we only came for one, we see they will not be separated and agree to take the pair. Now, I require a bath and a hot meal. The day has been long, and we set out early on the morrow. We’ll be back with everything needed in the morning. Please be ready to leave after breakfast.’ With that said, Adriana turned and left quickly, with Bolkin walking beside her, their heads bent in conversation.



It seemed to take forever for morning to come. With sleep eluding them, Cassie and Jewel stayed up late talking about everything that had happened. When Cassie finally settled on her bedroll, sleep had not come to her. She had laid there tossing and turning with anxiety over whether she was doing the right thing. Fear mixed with excitement had filled her. She was moving into the unknown, leaving everything safe and secure behind her. At least she would have Jewel at her side. With that reassuring thought, she finally drifted off to sleep.

Over breakfast, she quickly packed all her things for the journey. Wrapping them carefully, she took care of her work tools, the most precious things she owned. She could craft wherever she went if she had her tools, as sand was plentiful and all minerals sang to her. She sat pondering on what Adriana had said. All the talk about Dreamwalkers and Dragons seemed so fanciful in the morning light. Regardless of anything else, the chance to study her craft at the Azurite Tower, was an opportunity more incredible than anything she had ever imagined.

The Tower had Masters in all crafts, and their wares and performances were legendary. Any artist that had Tower training could choose their posting once they reached Master level. They were considered the best and most talented in the land. She had once heard a travelling Harper, sing a song so beautiful, that her eyes had welled up with emotion from the words and its haunting melody. The song had lingered long with her after he finished his performance. Her uncle had told her later how privileged they were to hear him perform, as he was a tower-trained journeyman. He was required under the Harper Guild law, to spend a year wandering and travelling the land to sing for anyone who asked. Once he had completed that task he would be a Master of his trade. He could then perform for the highest in the

land, her uncle had informed her. Tower-trained artists were few and far between. After what Adriana had told her last night, she now understood why.

Jewel returned with his bag as Cassie finished packing and sat beside her. He looked at her with uncertainty, hoping she would reassure him they were doing the right thing.

‘So.....’ they said simultaneously and then burst out laughing, looking at one another with genuine affection. They were together, and that made everything okay. They sat quietly side by side, comfortable in the silence, as they waited for Adriana and Bolkin to arrive. The market day had already started. Uncle Jom had told her over breakfast that there was nothing worse than a long goodbye, and they had said their peace last night. He then kissed her forehead, hugged her tightly and left without a word. She had noticed his eyes welling up with emotion as he turned and left to tend his stall. She understood the depth of his feelings as she felt the same.

The sound of approaching horses broke the silence. Cassie spotted Adriana and Bolkin heading towards them at a fast pace. They were riding two of the most magnificent horses Cassie had ever seen, and leading another couple of finely bred ones behind them. Cassie had never been on a horse as she had always travelled by foot or boat. What need for a horse has a person who lives in the Marshes? She felt intimidated by their size and wondered how she could ever climb on one.

‘We must leave and travel west along the marshes and then north to Seabreeze. That will be our next night with a roof over our heads. We then take the ferry to the Port of Saltsbree, then overland to the Tower. We must move quickly and be away from these markets post haste.

Grab your belongings and mount up; we ride,' she said without dismounting.

Cassie was startled by the urgency and moved quickly toward one of the horses Bolkin had been leading. She looked around for clues on what to do next. Jewel was no help as he had already mounted his horse, and she had missed him doing it.

'Cassie, what are you doing? We need to leave,' Adriana said in frustration at Cassie's slowness.

Cassie looked around, embarrassed, and said quietly. 'I've never ridden a horse before. He's so tall, and I don't know how to get on.'

Adriana chuckled softly, nodding her head in understanding. Bolkin jumped off his horse and lifted her into the saddle before she could protest.

'Your feet go in here to steady yourself, sit tall and hold onto the reins but not too tightly. I know the person who raised these horses. They're well-trained and will follow our lead. You must hold on using your legs and hands; we travel fast. I'm sorry to say you'll be saddle sore for a while, but that cannot be helped.' Having ensured she was secure and her pack strapped down, Bolkin jumped back into his saddle and led them away at a slower pace.

Once they reached the outskirts of the markets, they could travel faster without putting anyone in danger or drawing attention to themselves. They rode slowly at first, allowing Cassie time to adjust to the movement, and then they gradually picked up speed.

The next week passed in a blur of weariness and pain for Cassie. Falling off her horse, exhausted at the end of each day. She could barely eat the food put in front of her and quickly descended into an exhausted sleep. What transpired during that frantic ride she had no

clear recollection of. On the seventh evening, they came down a horse-shoes-shaped valley with the sound of flowing water before them. Following an animal trail through the trees, they came upon a magnificent vista. A sparkling pool at the bottom of a thirty foot waterfall, with lush green forest all around it. Cassie felt like she had found her slice of heaven and embraced the peaceful energy.

Dismounting quickly, she kicked off her shoes and headed toward the inviting pool to soak her weary feet. The others were quickly forgotten, with her only thoughts on the glorious scene before her. She sat on the water's edge and slowly slipped her feet into the cool liquid. With a weary sigh, she leaned back, closed her eyes, and let the water refresh her. After a moment, Cassie realised she was sitting on sand. They must be nearing the coastline; had they come that far in such a short time, she wondered. Reaching down, she sank her hands into the powdery, cool white sand at her side. She opened her energy to it and realised it was of excellent quality and would make fine glass. Extending her energy field, she discovered that this little spot was rich in minerals, and the Song overtook her. Did she have the energy to make the fire hot enough to craft something tonight, she wondered. No, it would have to wait.

'How are you, Cassie? We have been pushing hard and fast since we started, and I was wondering how you're feeling?' Adriana asked as she settled beside her and trailed her hand in the cool water.

For the first time in a while, Cassie stopped and took note of how her body was. She suddenly realised she felt good, and all the soreness and muscle cramps of the past week were fading. She could feel a new strength in her body from the steady exercise of the last week. She had always been slight and light on her feet, but with an underlined strength from working the fire. But now, after a week of riding hard, she had a new strength.

‘Good,’ Cassie replied, looking up in surprise. ‘This place is really beautiful,’ she said, taking in the sight before her.

‘Yes, it is. We have stopped here before. I’ve always found the energy refreshing. I thought it would be a good place to rest for a few nights. We can start your training,’ Cassie nodded slowly in confirmation, as Adriana continued. ‘Bolkin and Jewel can set up camp while we begin.’

Cassie sat up slowly and asked herself why she was hesitant and felt fear over Adriana's words. Then it dawned on her, she would be fully committed once she said yes. There would be no turning back. She stood at a life-changing precipice. She looked at Adriana and saw understanding in her eyes.

‘I’ve walked in your shoes and know what you’re going through. I’ve tried to give you time to adjust during our journey here. But now we must begin, you need to learn control. You’ve been projecting your emotions like a bright beacon since we met. Our first lesson must be about shielding and controlling your energy flow,’ she said.

‘How do I do that?’ Cassie asked.

‘Like with all energy work, we’ll start with meditation. It’s the most basic skill needed to control and project energy. I’m sure you go into an awake, meditative state when you work the glass, but you must be able to do it at anytime. It will become quicker and easier with practice. Once you learn the skills, you’ll automatically slip into the flow when needed,’ Adriana replied before continuing.

‘Relax and find a comfortable position, then close your eyes.’ Cassie shut her eyes, listening to the rhythmic sound of the water tumbling over the falls, feeling relaxed. ‘Take a deep breath and release it slowly, allowing all the emotion you’re carrying to flow out of your body with your breath. Focus completely on your breathing, feeling

your chest rise and fall in a calming rhythm. Inhale slowly while embracing how peaceful you feel, and exhale gently, releasing all emotion you're holding,' Adriana stopped talking and allowed Cassie to become fully immersed in the stillness that surrounded her. All else faded away but the flow of her breath.

'Keeping your eyes closed, look down at the energy and into your Aura. The only thing you can see is the energy around you; take in every detail of how it pulses and radiates. What colours and frequency swirl and fill the space near you.' Again, she stopped talking and gave Cassie enough time to observe all that she was holding. Just at the point where she felt she could take in no more. Adriana continued, 'Now look out and see where that energy is going and how far it's being projected.'

Cassie followed the energy flow and for the first time, realised how far away from her it travelled. Unlike Adriana's Aura, which was bright but fully contained in a field about 3-5 feet around her, hers didn't stop. It kept on going as far as she could see. Holy Dragon, she thought, suddenly realising she had been affecting everything around her with her energy. That was why people would emulate her and the way she was feeling. If she felt happy and moved along, singing joyfully, others would follow suit and do the same. Everyone would come in grumpy if she was having a bad day in the shop. How had she not seen this before? How could she stop herself from affecting everyone around her?

'Now that you understand your energy and how far it travels, I want you to draw it back,' Adriana continued. 'Picture yourself as a lantern in the middle of a dark room. You're the only light in the area, and you're shining out brightly. Slowly, turn it down. Take your time and allow yourself to adjust to the new brightness level. The light of the lantern is you and your energy. Keep turning it down until you have a

nice enclosed glow around you. Not too far, make it around 3-5 feet out from your body. Now, set the light at that level and leave it. You have a lovely new glow that is comfortable and feels right. Take a few deep breaths, basking in its gentle light and feeling how comfortable it is.' Adriana's reassuring words let Cassie adjust easily to her new energy level.

'I want you to come back to the present now. Start to become aware of the sounds around you. Hear the movements over by the fire as the boys set up camp and prepare dinner. Become aware of the water gently cascading over the waterfall as it tumbles over the rocks and reaches the pond below. Feel the light, refreshing spray of water on your face, coaxing you back fully. When you're ready, return to your body and open your eyes,' she said before falling silent, as she waited for Cassie to return.

Cassie opened her eyes and looked at Adriana, not knowing what to say.

'This is the first step. You must repeat this exercise until you're set at this level automatically. When your Aura is not turned down, you're a beacon shining brightly that anyone sensitive to energy will be able to see and follow. Learning control will keep you and those around you safe,' Adriana said.

Finally able to express her feelings, Cassie said a heartfelt, 'Thank you, I didn't realise I was doing it. I'm sorry if I caused you any discomfort.'

'Cassie, you have done well. Always be aware of the level of your emotions until it becomes second nature, and you have it permanently set. You're training yourself to recognise a new setting. It'll take time. Remember, you must always ground yourself after coming out of energy work. For now, walk around on the earth barefoot and have a bite to eat, and you'll be fully grounded back in this world,' she said.

Scrunching her toes in the sand, Cassie felt the intense colours and sounds of the world around her begin to fade and return to normal.

‘Did you recognise the same feeling you experienced when you worked the glass, while meditating just now?’ Adriana asked her.

‘Yes, the same as when I’m in my Song,’ Cassie replied.

‘Meditation is an integral part of energy work. It’s a state of being that allows you to connect with all around you and direct your will as needed. You need to learn to enter the flow no matter what your circumstances are. That’s the most important thing you must do to begin your training,’ she said, before getting up and moving back towards the campfire.

Cassie took a moment to scrunch her toes in the sand one last time; it really was very fine, and would make excellent glass, she thought again. Feeling more grounded, she put her shoes back on, got up, and moved towards their campfire. Around the fire, they talked and chatted easily, Cassie noticed how much stronger Jewel and Bolkin’s bond had become in their time travelling together. Jewel’s energy shone much brighter, and he had a new confidence. He was enjoying their adventure and revelling in learning new skills from such a talented person. Cassie felt reassured that they were on the right path, and the last of her doubts dropped away.

As darkness fell, Cassie settled back and smiled while listening to Jewel and Bolkin recount the adventure they’d had while catching dinner. Bolkin had discovered that Jewel was a skilled hunter. He was nearly as proficient with his little sling as Bolkin was with his bow and arrow. After years of hunting sea birds and small game to supplement his family’s food, his shots were exceedingly accurate. The festive atmosphere made the meal all the more enjoyable. Content with her world, sleep started to overtake Cassie. Such long days had left her



feeling exhausted, her eyelids drifted close, and she fell into a deep sleep. In her exhausted state, she felt like someone was trying to find her, but she was too tired to see who. She pushed them away and slept long and soundly.

Just as dawn broke, Cassie woke with a start; something wasn't right. Someone needed her help. She sat up and looked around, noticing the others were all still asleep. She wondered what had woken her. Closing her eyes, she listened but couldn't hear anything. She opened her eyes and looked around, she couldn't see anything either. Where was the feeling coming from, she wondered.

Cassie took a deep breath and released it, feeling herself drift into a meditative state. She centred and opened herself to the energy as Adriana had shown her. Ahhhh, there it was, a lost little cry for help. A pitiful wail of being all alone. Emotions of sadness and fear on the verge of exhaustion. She stood up and started following the energy while sending soothing, comforting waves back. I'm coming, don't be afraid, I'll help you. Over and over again, she sent the message down the energy line.

She had wandered quite a way when she came to a cliff edge that went straight down to the ocean. Had someone fallen over and gotten lost? That was the only thing that made sense as the energy line went straight down the rocks. No wonder he was scared.

Cassie looked for a safe way down. When she was young, she had loved walking the beach and climbing the cliffs with her father. Unsteady at first, then finding her rhythm, she moved down the side of the cliff. She found herself on a ledge about halfway down and stopped. This was where the energy was coming from, she looked around and couldn't see anyone. Confusion overtook her, all that work and effort for nothing. She sat down, overwhelmed by her emotions,

and started to cry softly. How had she gotten herself into this position? Going off rashly all alone, she hadn't woken the others or told anyone where she was going. What had she been thinking?

The nagging continued, what was she missing? Looking around, Cassie saw fragments of broken shells scattered around a nest. It was tucked deep into a crevice at the back of the ledge. She picked up some pieces, wondering what bird had laid them. Cassie leaned forward and peered into the nest; a single egg remained. She suddenly realised that was where the energy was coming from. Such intelligence from a bird, she had to help the little guy. Getting down on her stomach, she reached in as far as she could. She could just touch the egg with the tip of her finger. Slowly and gently, she rolled it out inch by inch until she could pick it up, then placed it safely into her lap.

'Hello, little man. Are you coming out, or do you need help?' she asked out loud.

'Help, help, help,' was the reply she felt.

Cassie gently tapped the shell to see how hard it was. It was quite solid. Not wanting to hurt whatever was inside, she held the egg securely and picked up a small stone from beside her. Tap tap tap, ever so gently on the top of the shell. Her gentle taps made a small crack down the side, and a tiny bit popped out. Little claws with talons started to push through, then a head started to appear, and suddenly, the eggshell exploded out. Leaving a perfect miniature red Dragon, sitting among the shell fragments. Cassie stared in awe at the little Dragon, having never seen anything so wonderful before.

Suddenly, an overwhelming feeling of hunger cascaded over her. 'Hungry, hungry, hungry.'

Looking at the little Dragon, Cassie said, 'You're so hungry, aren't you? What do little Dragons eat, I wonder?' Images of lovely fresh fish jumping in the water came into Cassie's mind.

'Well, I don't have any fish to give you, but how about a nice piece of dried rabbit?' she said, as she reached into her pocket and drew out a piece of jerky. Slowly, she moved the piece towards his little mouth, not wanting to get bitten. He moved forward, grabbed the offering in his talons, and gobbled it down. Smiling, she gave him the next piece. Scolding him softly for his haste, she said. 'Now eat this one more slowly. You don't want to choke on it,'

Once her pocket was emptied, she could feel he was still hungry. She noticed a few fishtails and heads around the broken eggshells. Mama Dragon must have bought them back for the younglings, and thinking this guy wouldn't hatch, left him. She picked them up one by one and fed them to him slowly. Once they were all gone, he was still asking for more. How much could so little a creature eat, she wondered. Looking around for something else to feed him, Cassie spied a couple of crabs scurrying on the ledge. Focused on catching them, she was surprised to hear her name being called long and slowly, 'Casssssie, Casssssie.'

She turned to him and asked, 'How do you know my name?'

He tilted his head silently without answering, before he turned and hopped towards the crabs she had spied earlier, intent on catching them himself. She looked upwards, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from, and realised it was being carried on the wind. She discovered with surprise that it was midday, and she had been gone for hours. Her friends must be trying to find her.

'Are you coming?' she asked the little Dragon, putting her hand out to her new friend. 'It will be a long climb up, and I can't hold you, so

you'll have to find a secure place.' He jumped onto her hand, did a small flap of his wings, and landed on her shoulder. Snuggling safely into his new spot, he wrapped his tail around her neck, curled up and promptly went to sleep. Feelings of safety and contentment and a full belly radiated out from him.

'Well, you're not going to be any help, are you?' she said, listening to his soft breathing with a tender smile. Looking up the cliff, she reached up and started climbing with her new friend.



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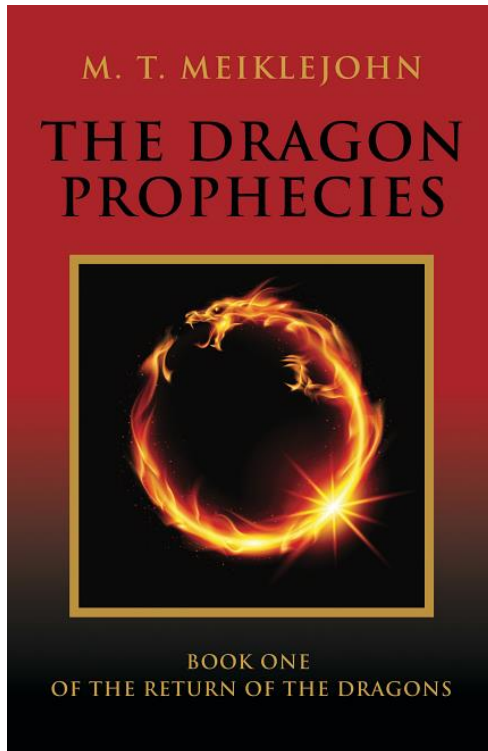
**SCAN ME**

## About The Author

M T Meiklejohn owns Energy In Balance, an online business selling crystals and crystal jewellery. She resides on the beautiful Sunshine Coast in Qld, Australia. She is an avid hiker and outdoors enthusiast, spending most weekends hitting the trails and exploring nature. Having spent the last fifteen years writing and expanding her knowledge through her website, she has now taken the steps to develop her writing and create her first fantasy series, 'The Return of the Dragons'. Michelle's work is a transformative journey, intertwining her profound knowledge and creating a soul-searching experience.

M T Meiklejohn's passion for travel and exploration is evident in her work. Having lived in the UK for four years, she developed a desire to see the world and experience different cultures. Her travels have taken her to over 40 unique countries, where she stopped, listened, and learned from the diverse cultures she encountered. Through her travels and work, she explored different areas of energy work, dealing with crystals, sound therapy, energy healers, shamans and psychics. This rich tapestry of experiences and knowledge is woven into her first novel, 'The Dragon Prophecies', the first book in 'The Return of the Dragons' series.





*Cassie and her companions embark on a perilous quest to find the fabled Dragon Prophecies. To find their prize, the heroes must overcome many challenges, including breaking a curse and releasing all the trapped souls in a haunted city.*

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