

DRAGON REPUBLIC

THE POPPY WAR, BOOK TWO

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Dedication

To 匡为华 匡萌芽 冯海潮 钟辉英 杜华 冯宝兰

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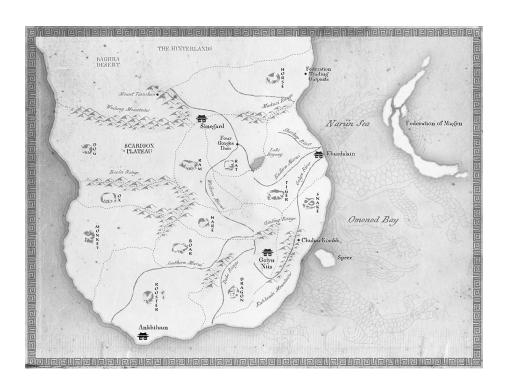
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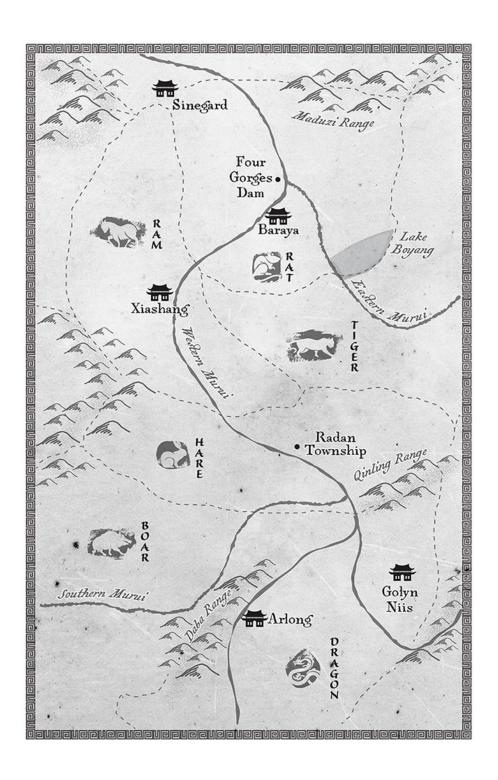
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About the Publisher

Map 1



Map 2



Arlong, Eight Years Prior

"Come on," Mingzha begged. "Please, I want to see."

Nezha seized his brother by his chubby wrist and pulled him back from the shallows. "We're not allowed to go past the lily pads."

"But don't you want to know?" Mingzha whined.

Nezha hesitated. He, too, wanted to see what lay in the caves around the bend. The grottoes of the Nine Curves River had been mysteries to the Yin children since they were born. They'd grown up with warnings of dark, dormant evils concealed behind the cave mouths; of monsters that lurked inside, eager for foolish children to stumble into their jaws.

That alone would have been enough to entice the Yin children, all of whom were adventurous to a fault. But they'd heard rumors of great treasures, too; of underwater piles of pearls, jade, and gold. Nezha's Classics tutor had once told him that every piece of jewelry lost in the water inevitably wound up in those river grottoes. And sometimes, on a clear day, Nezha thought he could see the glimmer of sunlight on sparkling metal in the cave mouths from the window of his room.

He'd desperately wanted to explore those caves for years—and today would be the day to do it, when everyone was too busy to pay attention. But it was his responsibility to protect Mingzha. He'd never been trusted to watch his brother alone before; until today he'd

always been too young. But this week Father was in the capital, Jinzha was at the Academy, Muzha was abroad at the Gray Towers in Hesperia, and the rest of the palace was so frazzled over Mother's sudden illness that the servants had hastily passed Mingzha into Nezha's arms and told them both to keep out of trouble. Nezha wanted to prove he was up to the task.

"Mingzha!"

His brother had wandered back into the shallows. Nezha cursed and dashed into the water behind him. How could a six-year-old move so quickly?

"Come *on,*" Mingzha pleaded when Nezha grabbed him by the waist.

"We can't," Nezha said. "We'll get in trouble."

"Mother's been in bed all week. She won't find out." Mingzha twisted around in Nezha's grip and shot him an impish smile. "I won't tell. The servants won't tell. Will you?"

"You're a little demon," Nezha said.

"I just want to see the entrance." Mingzha beamed hopefully at him. "We don't have to go in. *Please?*"

Nezha relented. "We'll just go around the bend. We can look at the cave mouths from a distance. And then we're turning back, do you understand?"

Mingzha shouted with delight and splashed into the water. Nezha followed, stooping down to grab his brother's hand.

No one had ever been able to deny Mingzha anything. Who could? He was so fat and happy, a bouncing ball of giggles and delight, the absolute treasure of the palace. Father adored him. Jinzha and Muzha played with him whenever he wanted, and they never told him to get lost the way Jinzha had done so often to Nezha.

Mother doted on him most of all—perhaps because her other sons were destined to be soldiers, but she could keep Mingzha all to herself. She dressed him in finely embroidered silks and adorned him with so many lucky amulets of gold and jade that Mingzha clinked everywhere he walked, weighed down with the burden of good fortune. The palace servants liked to joke that they could always hear Mingzha before they saw him. Nezha wanted to make Mingzha

stop to remove his jewelry now, worried it might drag him down under waves that already came up to his chest, but Mingzha charged forward like he was weightless.

"We're stopping here," Nezha said.

They'd gotten closer to the grottoes than they had ever been in their lives. The cave mouths were so dark inside that Nezha couldn't see more than two feet past the entrances, but their walls looked beautifully smooth, glimmering with a million different colors like fish scales.

"Look." Mingzha pointed at something in the water. "It's Father's cloak."

Nezha frowned. "What's Father's cloak doing at the bottom of the river?"

Yet the heavy garment lying half-buried in the sand was undeniably Yin Vaisra's. Nezha could see the crest of the dragon embroidered in silver thread against the rich cerulean-blue dye that only members of the House of Yin were permitted to wear.

Mingzha pointed to the closest grotto. "It came from in there."

An inexplicable, chilly dread crept through Nezha's veins.

"Mingzha, get away from there."

"Why?" Mingzha, stubborn and fearless, waded closer to the cave. The water began to ripple.

Nezha reached out to pull his brother back. "Mingzha, wait—" Something enormous burst out of the water.

Nezha saw a huge dark shape—something muscled and coiled like a serpent—before a massive wave rose above him and slammed him facedown into the water.

The river shouldn't have been deep. The water had only come up to Nezha's waist and Mingzha's shoulders, had only been getting shallower the closer they moved to the grotto. But when Nezha opened his eyes underwater, the surface seemed miles away, and the bottom of the grotto seemed as vast as the palace of Arlong itself.

He saw a pale green light shining from the grotto floor. He saw faces, beautiful, but eyeless. Human faces embedded in the sand and coral, and an endless mosaic studded with silver coins, porcelain vases, and golden ingots—a bed of treasures that stretched on and on into the grotto as far as the light went.

He saw a blink of movement, dark against the light, that disappeared as quickly as it came.

Something was wrong with the water here. Something had stretched and altered its dimensions. What should have been shallow and bright was deep; deep, dark, and terribly, hypnotically quiet.

Through the silence Nezha heard the faint sound of his brother screaming.

He kicked frantically for the surface. It seemed miles away.

When at last he emerged from the water, the shallows were mere shallows again.

Nezha wiped the river water from his eyes, gasping. "Mingzha?" His brother was gone. Crimson streaks stained the river. Some of the streaks were solid, lumpy masses. Nezha knew what they were. "Mingzha?"

The waters were quiet. Nezha stumbled to his knees and retched. Vomit mixed into bloodstained water.

He heard a clink against the rocks.

He looked down and saw a golden anklet.

Then he saw a dark shape rising before the grottoes, and heard a voice that came from nowhere and vibrated his very bones.

"Hello, little one."

Nezha screamed.