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FORGOTTEN REALMS®

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NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



VENGEANCE OF THE IRON DWARF
COMPANIONS CODEX III

VENGEANCE
OF THE
IRON **D**WARF

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**VENGEANCE
OF THE
IRON DWARF**



VENGEANCE OF THE IRON DWARF

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PROLOGUE



IT WAS A SOLEMN GREETING AT THE UNDERGROUND WESTERN GATES OF Citadel Felbarr, on the first day of the second tenday in the eleventh month of Uktar. The first snows had fallen in the Upper Surbrin Vale, and the white coating already reached low among the Rauvin Mountains above the dwarven fortress. But if the orc hordes now controlling what was left of once-mighty Sundabar, or those in sacked Nesmé, or besieging mighty Silverymoon, or camped around the dwarven citadels of Mithral Hall, Felbarr, and Adbar had any intention of packing up and returning to Dark Arrow Keep, or to anywhere else within the accepted boundaries of the Kingdom of Many-Arrows, they didn't show it.

Nor were the vast networks of Upperdark tunnels clearing of invaders, as the procession from Mithral Hall discovered on their journey to the planned council at Citadel Felbarr. For nearly the entire month of Marpenoth and into Uktar, the legion of battle dwarves surrounding King Connerad Brawnnavil and his distinguished entourage had fought their way from waypoint to waypoint, regions the dwarves of Mithral Hall and Felbarr had strongly secured, heavily fortified and well supplied, in their long underground journey to the halls of King Emerus Warcrown.

Emerus himself was there to greet the dwarves of Mithral Hall. They were a tenday overdue. That had all been explained, and the actual arrival announced well in advance, thanks to the cunning dwarves of the Silver Marches, who had set up elaborate messaging systems through their connecting tunnels. Side-slinger ballistae would hurl messages rolled and tucked into hollow darts down long tunnels to be retrieved at the next guard post and there loaded again and sent flying along. Unless a section of the secured tunnels had been

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overrun by orcs and their allies, a message from King Connerad to King Emerus could be sent the two hundred miles in just a few days.

“Well met, King Connerad!” Emerus said as he wrapped his peer in a great hug, to cheers from his fellows gathered at Citadel Felbarr’s gate. “Ah, but we been concerned, me friend.”

“Aye, the vermin are learnin’ o’ our main boulevard, and poking and prodding all about,” Connerad replied. “Me and me boys had to stop and help along the way—or might be that our warriors down there didn’t need our help, but we just wanted to punch a few orcs, eh!”

That brought a cheer from dwarves of both groups.

“Aye, but the meetin’ ye asked for can wait until a few orcs’re killed!” Emerus agreed. “Ye surprised meself and the dwarves o’ Adbar in callin’ it, with such grim news dancing all about.”

Connerad nodded and pulled off his metal gauntlets. “Brought some fellows with me ye might be knowing,” he explained. “And when ye’re seen’ the truth, ye’ll know why I called us all together.”

Emerus nodded, putting a curious look on his face as he glanced past Connerad to the group of newcomers still out in the hallway, just beyond the immediate torchlight. Connerad followed his lead and glanced around. With a knowing grin, King Connerad waved the rogue drow, Drizzt Do’Urden, forward.

“Aye, I expect ye’re knowing this one, then,” Connerad said as Drizzt stepped up and bowed before the old King Emerus.

“Drizzt Do’Urden,” Emerus remarked, nodding. “It has been many years since ye’ve been seen in the Silver Marches, old friend o’ King Bruenor.”

“Too many, it would seem,” the drow answered, and extended his hand, which Emerus clasped and shook warmly. The curious manner in which Emerus had spoken of him, as a friend of Bruenor, surely didn’t slip past Drizzt or Connerad.

“These drow leading the orcs claim—” Emerus began.

“To be of my House, yes,” Drizzt interrupted. “Though I beg to differ. There is no House Do’Urden, good King Emerus, or at least, there is no House Do’Urden of which I have been aware for many decades now.”

“So ye deny these drow be yer kin?”

“Kin, perhaps,” Drizzt replied with a shrug. “I deny any foreknowledge of this attack, if that is what you mean to ask me.”

“And deny that yerself was sent here to bring about the conception o’ Many-Arrows, and so, in the end, to bring about this very war?” the old

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dwarf king asked. Still he held tight to Drizzt's hand. Tighter even, squeezing as if the handshake was as much a test as this blunt line of questioning.

"Bah, but shut yer mouth!" roared a familiar voice from behind—one familiar to Drizzt and Connerad, and also to King Emerus and the dwarf named Ragged Dain, who stood behind the king of Felbarr. All glanced that way to see a young dwarf with a fiery reddish-orange beard hopping out from among the others.

"Little Arr Arr!" Ragged Dain cried, both in surprise and to scold the impetuous young warrior.

The dwarf came forward, looking very much like he would put his fist into King Emerus's old face—until Connerad stopped him with a shout. "It is not time for this, Mister Reginald Roundshield!"

The young dwarf paused and put his hands on his hips. He looked to Drizzt, who nodded, and grumbled as he went back to the group to stand beside a fair-haired human woman.

Ragged Dain continued to glower at the fellow, though he whispered to the others around him, "Ye be at yer ease, Mister Do'Urden. None outside o' the human cities're thinking bad o' King Bruenor and his old friends."

"Bring yer boys in," Emerus bade Connerad. "All of 'em. We'll show ye to yer rooms and show ye proper Felbarr hospitality, don't ye doubt."

"Show me boys to their rooms," Connerad replied. "For meself and a few others, show us to the gatherin' at yer table. I've much to tell ye, and it's not for waitin'. Get King Harnoth and his boys, and let's get to talking!"

King Emerus shook his head. "King Harnoth didn't come," he explained, and Connerad's eyes went wide.

"I begged ye all . . ."

"His seconds're here," King Emerus explained. "And we'll collect them for yer talk." He looked to Ragged Dain and nodded. "Take Connerad and them he wants aside him to the table."



Huffing and puffing, Franko Olbert stumbled up against the thick trunk of a tree. He dared a glance back across the snowy field to the distant wall of the town that had been his home for most of his life.

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But though the skyline of Nesmé was surely familiar, Franko could not look upon that blasted and cursed place as his home. Not since the orcs had come. Not since the drow had come.

Not since Duke Tiago Do'Urden had come.

He started away once more, determined to get to the Uthgardt tribes, to raise an army, to find some way to repay the monstrous scum. His mother was Uthgardt. He knew their language, their ways, their pride. The proud barbarians would not suffer the orcs and dark elves to hold a city so near their borders.

Franko slipped away from the tree to another, then made a short run to a copse not far from there. He paused when he saw the human form lying on the ground facedown. The fallen man was dressed in armor: plate mail, mostly, and with a full helm, like some knight from Everlund.

The escapee hesitated and looked around cautiously. There were no signs of a struggle, other than the clear implications that this man was quite dead. He wasn't moving at all, set in the snow in an awkward and broken pose, with the stillness Franko had seen all too often since the monstrous horde had poured over Nesmé.

Seeing no one around, the escapee inched his way toward the fallen knight. He gingerly grabbed the dead warrior by his arm and turned him a bit so he could look into the man's face.

He shuddered at the gruesome visage. One eye had been pecked out, with more than half the poor man's face shredded and torn. Franko dropped the corpse back down to the snow, then fell back into a sitting position, forcing some deep breaths to help steady himself.

He noted the man's sword poking out from under one hip, and he was fast to it, easing it out of its sheath. Franko was an accomplished warrior, had ridden with the Riders of Nesmé, and he knew weapons. This one was fine indeed! And so was the armor, he noted, and the man was almost exactly his size.

"Thank you, brother," he said with respect, and he went to the man and began his looting.

With every piece he put on—the greaves, the breastplate, the pauldrons—Franko grew more confident. He strapped on the sword belt and breathed a sigh of relief. Even if his pursuers caught up to him now, he knew he would die a warrior, and Franko could ask for no more than that, particularly given the torturous executions he had witnessed in

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Nesmé under the cruel gaze of the tyrant Duke Tiago. The city stank of bloated corpses.

“I should bury you, friend, but I haven’t the time,” he whispered. “Please forgive me, leaving you to the crows. Please forgive me, stealing your sword. But never would I steal your honor.”

He knelt and said an Uthgardt prayer for the spirit of the dead man, then removed the dead man’s helmet, gently and respectfully pulling it free of the torn head.

Before Franko had even brought it back, he understood something was amiss.

He plopped the helmet on his head and jumped to his feet, determined to be away quickly, but even as he took his first stride, he was stopped by curiosity and turned back.

Something nagged at him, just beyond his conscious recognition.

The wounds on the back?

He turned back to the corpse and this time suppressed his revulsion to take a good look at the poor man. The corpse had been rolled over in the process of looting it and that shredded face was clear to see.

“Marquen?” he gasped, and he looked closer, confirming his suspicion. “Marquen,” he said, for surely this was the warrior Marquen of Silverymoon, who had moved to Nesmé a decade before. Franko’s shock turned quickly to confusion. He had seen Marquen die, just a tenday earlier, as part of the executions in the open square in Nesmé.

Marquen had been tied to a pair of stakes and beaten mercilessly by Tiago’s wife. Franko had watched as the vile Duchess Saribel Do’Urden had put her awful, venomous snake-headed whip to its cruel work. Again and again, the serpents struck, tearing Marquen’s shirt, tearing his flesh, filling him with poisonous fire.

And there was the tattered, bloody shirt, and Franko didn’t have to pull the ripped strands aside to know that the viper wounds were there in the flesh. Aye, this was Marquen, and Franko had watched Marquen die.

So how was he out here in the snow, a mile from the city, dressed in armor and carrying a sword?

“By the gods,” Franko whispered, figuring it out, and he leaped to his feet and ran off at full speed.

He neared a small ravine, and didn’t dare slow.

Not until he was struck blind.

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No, not blind, Franko realized, as he stumbled over the ledge and tumbled down, falling out of the globe of magical darkness.

He felt his shoulder pop out as he crashed into the rocky dell, but came right up and threw himself hard into a tree, jamming his limb back in place. He ignored the waves of nausea and the dimming consciousness. He had no time for that.

Indeed, Franko had no time at all, as he learned when he spun to find a small but deadly figure standing in front of him, looking quite amused.

Duke Tiago of Nesmé.

The drow smiled and raised his gloved hands, his small, translucent buckler strapped to his left forearm, and began to clap.

“You did well, *ibliith*,” Tiago said. “You traveled farther than I expected. A most worthy hunt, considering my prey is no more than a pathetic human.”

Franko glanced around, expecting to see some orc archers or a giant holding a boulder nearby. Or other drow.

“It is just me,” Tiago assured him. “Why would I need more?” As he finished, he held out his arms.

And Franko leaped at him, sword cutting for the foul drow’s head.

But up came the shield, and its edge spiraled magically as it did. With each turn, the magnificent shield enlarged, and behind it, Tiago easily ducked the blow.

And out came the drow’s sword, so fast that Franko didn’t register the movement, or hear the star-filled blade sliding free of its scabbard.

Franko felt the bite of the tip, though, as it pierced his thigh. He grimaced and fell back into a defensive crouch, his sword slashing out sidelong to keep his enemy at bay.

But Tiago wasn’t advancing. Instead, he moved easily, circling Franko, just out of reach.

“Fight,” the drow said. “There is only me. I’ve no friends nearby. Only me, only Tiago, standing between you and your freedom.”

“You think this sport?” Franko spat at him, and he rushed and chopped with his sword, cleverly—he thought—pulling up short and breaking his momentum to stab straight ahead.

“Is it anything less?” a laughing Tiago said from back the other way, having somehow eluded Franko’s attack so fully that the stabbing sword was farther from Tiago’s flesh than it had been before Franko began the strike.

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Franko licked his lips. The extent of that miss wasn't promising.

"Just me," Tiago teased, circling back the other way.

Franko, too, began to circle, studying the area to see if he might find some advantage in the uneven ground, trees, and rocks.

"Is that not a fair game, human?" Tiago asked. "I even armed and armored you, finely so! I could have struck you dead while you robbed the corpse. I could have stopped you from fleeing Nesmé—a dozen archers watched you run out. They had their bows trained upon you even as you squeezed through the crack in the wall. I held their shots. I gave you a chance. All you need to do is defeat me, and as you're nearly twice my size, that should prove simple enough."

His voice never strained, never lost its composure, even though Franko came on in midspeech, ferociously chopping and stabbing, pressing ahead, trying to simply overwhelm the diminutive drow.

"Though I admit you are a bit clumsy," Tiago added, and that last sentence was spoken from behind Franko, as the drow's sword slashed across the man's calf, tearing a painful line.

Franko turned and slashed with his blade, and staggered, hopping up on one foot as fiery agony filled his other leg.

Ahead sprang Tiago, his sword poking forward and turning subtly to avoid the desperate parry, slipping past to prod Franko in the shoulder, in the crease between breastplate and pauldron. The blade came again, stabbing a second time in the same place, and ahead yet again, and this time, as Franko wildly tried to protect that burning shoulder, Tiago shifted Vidrinath the other way, taking Franko in the crease between his right pauldron and breastplate.

The man fell back, waving his sword wildly to fend off the drow, who was not pursuing. As Franko's weight came down on his torn leg, he stumbled and fell over backward, wildly trying to right himself, slashing his blade, desperate to keep the drow at bay.

Except the drow was still standing, back where he had stabbed the man.

Franko stared at him, hard and determined, pulling himself back to his feet, hating this drow all the more. Tiago was playing with him, taunting him by refusing to press the advantage.

Supremely confident.

Franko silently berated himself. He was overplaying his hand. Perhaps it was the size difference, as Tiago had hinted. Or maybe Franko's supreme

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hatred of this false tyrant duke had stolen his better judgment. He knew he was a better fighter by far than he was showing against Tiago. He was a Rider of Nesmé, finely trained, and he knew better than to give in to his anger.

He told himself all of that, replayed the drow's maneuvers, and nodded quietly as he considered a better approach to engage this skilled swordsman.

He moved ahead slowly.

Tiago stood there, his left hand on his hip, his sword tip down to the ground at his right side.

Tiago's posture invited a fierce attack.

But Franko paced himself this time, eased his way forward, and kept his sword in tight, defensively. He understood now that Tiago's seemingly unprepared posture was just that, "seemingly." The drow reacted too quickly for him to hope for an open strike, and indeed, the overbalancing thrust would get him stabbed yet again.

But now he knew.

He stepped his sword ahead in a measured and balanced thrust, a lazy and meaningless attack.

Too lazy, Franko thought.

Too slow.

And his arms were too heavy.

He didn't understand. He didn't know the more common name of Tiago's sword, Lullaby, and didn't know that each strike had sent sleeping poison coursing into his body and blood.

But he knew that he was sluggish, and so he reached his sword out once more to keep the drow at bay until he could sort it out.

The drow wasn't there.

Franko heard a laugh behind him, and he swung around as quickly as he could manage, sweeping his sword.

It got halfway around but no more, met with a sudden and vicious uppercut by Vidrinath.

Franko's sword went flying away, his severed hand still gripping it. The man brought the stump of his arm in close, crying in pain and shock, hugging tight his bloody wrist.

"Run away," Tiago said teasingly, and stabbed him again, this time in his fleshy rump. "Flee, you fool!"

He stuck Franko again, and the man began his run and Tiago was close behind, poking him painfully. Then Tiago was beside him,

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taunting him, sticking him repeatedly, but never deeply, never a wound to kill him.

Desperate now, Franko threw himself at the drow. But the drow was too quick, and kicked out his ankles, dropping him hard to the ground.

And in came Vidrinath, and a sizable piece of Franko's right ear flew away.

He was crying, frustrated and angry and hurt, but he stubbornly got his legs under him and began stumbling away.

And again Tiago paced him.

"You, human," the drow said. "You, yes you, you fool!" His sword tapped Franko on the shoulder, but didn't cut into any flesh this time, but rather, pointed ahead.

"You see that clearing beyond the birch?" Tiago asked. "Run, fool. If you get there, I will not pursue you further!"

He ended with a hard slap across Franko's rump with the flat of his blade.

"Ah, but you are too tired," Tiago teased, pacing the man just behind, close enough to kill Franko with an easy thrust. "Your legs are heavy. Aye, you can barely stay upright! Oh fie, but then I'll have to kill you!"

He poked Franko in the rump again, and twisted his blade painfully for good measure.

Tiago's laugh chased him.

But Franko had an idea now. He felt as though he'd gained some insight into the sadistic drow. He slowed even more and staggered sideways as much as forward with every step. He didn't think Tiago would kill him until the last moment, until he reached the birch tree, and he used that knowledge to change the cadence of the pursuit.

He got stabbed again, repeatedly, but never more than superficially, never intended to inflict true damage, but always to inflict more pain. But he held his course, his ruse. The birch was close now.

Franko stumbled and started to fall, enough to look good, but he burst ahead suddenly, using every ounce of weary strength he could muster to propel him to the birch tree and past it, diving out into the clearing.

He rolled onto his back, expecting the treacherous drow to be right above him, ready to kill him. To his surprise, though—indeed to his shock—Tiago had not come out past the birch.

"Well played!" the self-proclaimed Duke of Nesmé said, and he tipped his sword in salute.

"Come on, then!" Franko yelled at him, certain it was all a cruel taunt.

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"I am a drow of my word, fool," Tiago said. "I am a royal duke, after all. I promised that I would pursue you no further, and so I shan't. Indeed, you are free of my blade, though I expect your wounds to take you in the forest. If not, then you'll come back, of course, with some pitiful army, and I will find you again and finish my kill. Next time, I will start with your eyes, so that you will not see the next blow falling.

"Ah, but you will hear me, and that voice, my voice, will frighten you, for it will portend the fall of Vidrinath upon your exposed flesh."

And he laughed an awful laugh as Franko stumbled away across the wide field. He kept looking back, but Tiago was not pursuing.

So he turned ahead, determined to find the Uthgardt, determined—

The ground erupted in front of him, and a beast, gleaming stark white and colder than winter itself, came up from the snow.

"Oh fie," Tiago lamented behind him. "Did I not warn you that my dragon was waiting?"

Franko screamed, feeling the warmth of his own piss running down his leg when those terrible jaws opened wide, spear-like teeth closing around him. Up he went into the air, sidelong in the dragon's maw, legs hanging out one side, head and shoulders out the other.

He kept screaming, but the dragon didn't bite down, or maybe it did and he was already dead and just hadn't realized it yet. He couldn't know.

"I do find this enjoyable," Tiago whispered in his ear.

Jolted by the voice so near, Franko composed himself just enough to turn and look the drow in the eye.

And in came the sword, surgically, and Franko's right eye flipped free into the drow's waiting hand.

"Dear Arauthator," Tiago said to the dragon. "Pray do not bite the life from him. Nay, swallow this proud one whole, that he can lay pressed in your belly, your juices melting him to nothingness."

The dragon issued a long, low growl.

"He has no blade, I promise!" Tiago assured the beast.

Up went the head, tossing poor Franko inside—and down he went into the beast, helpless.

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"I feel more a snake than a wyrm," Arauthator complained.

"Is he wriggling?" the drow asked.

The dragon paused in a pensive pose. "Whimpering, I think," he answered.

"Good, good," said Tiago.

"Are you done with your silly game, Husband?" asked another voice, and Tiago turned to see the approach of Saribel.

"I must find my pleasure where I can!" he said. "Would that I could fly the Old White Death over Silverymoon to drop stones on the fools within! Would that I could assail Everlund—"

"You cannot!" Saribel scolded. Tiago couldn't argue; that command had come from Matron Mother Quenthel Baenre herself.

They were to sit quietly in their conquered lands and vast encampments. "Let the folk of the Silver Marches take hope that the spring will bring relief" was Matron Mother Quenthel's command.

Tiago understood the implications all too well, as did Saribel. The matron mother was making sure that no other surface kingdoms from beyond the Silver Marches' alliance of Luruar became involved in this war. The drow incursion could inspire no terror beyond the North; they would involve none but those kingdoms they had used their orc fodder to assail.

No one would raise an army and fight here because there was no ultimate victory, no lasting gains of land and conquest, to be found here, not on the battlefield at least. The campaign had never been about that.

"We have pressed them to the edge of doom, and we will let them wriggle free," Tiago said. He turned to the dragon. "But that one will not!"

Arauthator laughed, a strange and unnerving rumble, then belched, and from deep inside, a muffled cry of hopelessness and pain accompanied the burp.

"It is not about victory," Tiago said accusatorily.

Saribel held her ground and even looked at him rather condescendingly.

"Define victory," she said.

"It is about Matron Mother Quenthel securing her hold on Menzoberranzan," said Tiago.

"You would wish differently? She is our benefactor, our reason for existence. House Do'Urden is the domain of the matron mother as surely as are the halls of House Baenre you walked as a child."

Tiago muttered a curse under his breath and turned away. He was full of battle lust, craving victory and glory, and these pitiful hunting games

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he allowed himself with the captives of Nesmé were growing older and more boring with each tormented kill.

“We have already achieved victory,” Saribel said.

“Quentel has!” Tiago spat before he could properly voice the name, and he blanched when the whip appeared in Saribel’s hand, and when Arauthator’s toothy maw moved right beside him, reminding him so poignantly that the word of the matron mother, and thus, the word of her priestesses, outranked the demands of the Duke of Nesmé.

“Matron Mother Quentel,” he said and lowered his eyes. He silently told himself, though, that if Saribel struck at him with that whip, he would kill her then and there, and hopefully be done with the witch before the dragon ate him. In that event, with Saribel, the only witness, lying dead, perhaps he could convince great Arauthator that eating him would only complicate things.

But the blow from Saribel’s whip did not fall.

“Be of good spirit, Husband, for we too have won!” Saribel said, and replaced the weapon on her belt.

Tiago looked up at her and growled, “We will be recalled soon.”

Saribel nodded. “And even now, we can return to the city with dignity, as heroes of Menzoberranzan, victorious in the glorious campaign, and so take our place as royals of House Do’Urden.”

Tiago started to respond, but paused as he considered the lighthearted, joyous tone of Saribel. His eyes widened as he figured it out.

“You expect to replace her,” he said. “*Darthiir*, Matron Mother of House Do’Urden. You expect . . .”

He stopped and stared, Saribel’s expression giving no indication that she meant to argue the point. And as he thought of it, as he thought of broken Dahlia, he found that he, too, could come to no other conclusion as to where all of this was leading. For Dahlia was *darthiir*, a surface elf, and her appointment as Matron Mother of House Do’Urden had been no more than a cruel joke Matron Mother Quentel had perpetrated on the Ruling Council. An insult to the very traditions of the drow, of the unending hatred the dark elves held for their surface cousins. Quentel had elevated Dahlia for no better reason than to prove that she could, and to prove, even more poignantly, that there was nothing the other matron mothers could do about it.

And so, yes, it all made sense that Saribel, noble daughter of House Xorlarrin, would ascend to House Do’Urden’s ruling seat when the filthy Dahlia had outlived her usefulness.

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“Ha, but sure ye’re to fit in the line o’ Battlehammer kings,” Ragged Dain said to King Connerad as they made their way to the Court of Citadel Felbarr, Connerad’s chosen entourage in tow. General Dagnabbet and Bungalow Thump were among that group, along with Little Arr Arr and another tough, black-bearded fellow Ragged Dain did not know.

But so were Drizzt Do’Urden and a human lass.

“Never could stick to yer own kind, ye danged Battlehammers!” Ragged Dain teased. “Even when old King Bruenor went huntin’ for Mithral Hall. Bah, but he was the only dwarf among that group what found the place!”

Connerad laughed the good-natured jab away, but he knew it was true enough. In the war with the first Obould a century before, Connerad’s own father, the great Banak, had been overlooked as steward when Bruenor had fallen in battle. On Bruenor’s orders, a halfling had taken control of Mithral Hall.

A halfling! And with an army of decorated dwarves ready to step in!

Connerad couldn’t suppress a glance back at the dwarf he knew to be Bruenor as he considered the insult to his father. Banak Brawnnavil had brushed the whole incident away, mitigating the sting, and reminding his son that Regis had been beside Bruenor as friend and confidant for years and knew the old dwarf’s heart better than anyone.

The young dwarf in the procession noted Connerad’s glance and offered him a knowing wink, and Connerad found that his anger, what little there was, couldn’t hold. Bruenor had honored his father and family in the end, elevating the Brawnnavils to the throne of Mithral Hall.

“And how ’bout yerself, Little Arr Arr?” Ragged Dain said when they entered the gathering hall. “Ye done good for yerself, so it’s seemin’. So are ye meanin’ to sit with the Battlehammers or with yer own o’ Felbarr? And when’re ye to go and see yer dear Ma, Uween? Did ye even send word to her, then? Tell her that ye’ve returned?”

The young dwarf nodded. “Battlehammers,” he said gruffly. “That’s me place above all.”

“Yer Ma might not be agreein’,” Ragged Dain teased.

“Me Ma’s to find a lot to scramble her brain, don’t ye doubt,” the red-bearded young dwarf replied, and he snorted in emphasis.

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The seven representatives of Mithral Hall took their seats on their appointed side of the triangular table King Emerus had constructed specifically for meetings of the three citadels. General Dagnabbet, Bungalow Thump, and Bruenor sat to Connerad's right, Athrogate, Drizzt, and Catti-brie to the young king's left.

King Emerus entered soon after and took his place, flanked by Ragged Dain and Parson Glaive, and last came the delegation, six dwarf officers from Citadel Adbar, led by the fierce Oretheo Spikes of the battleraging Wilddwarves.

After proper greetings, promises of friendship, eternal alliance, and no small amount of ale, King Emerus called the chamber to order and turned the proceedings over to King Connerad.

"What news from Mithral Hall, then?" Emerus bade his young but respected peer. "Ye promised us great tidings, and I'm meanin' to hold ye to 'em!"

"Aye, but we could all use a bit o' good news then," Oretheo Spikes added, and lifted his tankard in toast.

"Ye see that me friend here, Drizzt Do'Urden, has returned to our side," King Connerad began, and he paused and looked to the dark elf ranger.

The dwarves at the other sides of the triangular table did bristle a bit, but ultimately lifted their tankards in toast to Drizzt.

Connerad offered Drizzt the floor.

"I fought at the defense of Nesmé," Drizzt began.

"Nesmé has fallen," King Emerus interrupted, and the expressions on the faces of the Battlehammer contingent and those from Citadel Adbar showed that to be new information indeed.

"Bah!" Athrogate snorted. "But we knowed she couldn't be holdin' for long."

"A dragon arrived to bolster the Many-Arrows horde," King Emerus explained. "One ridden by a drow elf callin' himself Do'Urden."

More grumbles came from the Adbar dwarves at that, but the Felbarrans remained stoic, having clearly already digested the news.

"I can say nothing to that claim," Drizzt replied honestly. "There is no surviving House Do'Urden that I know of, but I have not been to the city of my birth in long over a century now, and have no hopes or desires to ever return."

He paused, and all eyes went to King Emerus, who nodded solemnly, indicating his acceptance of the explanation.

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"My party was returning to Mithral Hall when we encountered this strange, darkened sky," Drizzt explained. "Then we encountered the western flank of the orc line camped outside of Nesmé."

"Tricked 'em good," Athrogate put in.

"Good enough for them to sack the town, so it's seeming," King Emerus said dryly.

"Bah, but it taked 'em long enough!" Athrogate roared in protest. "And know that the fields're filled with orc dead!"

"The town has fallen, so you say, and so it must be," Drizzt interjected. "It had not when my friends and I left through the tunnels of the Upperdark to get to Mithral Hall. Be assured that the taking of Nesmé was no easy task for the hordes of Many-Arrows. Thousands of goblins and orcs were slaughtered at her walls before we departed, and with the rotting stench of dead ogres and giants among them. They came against Nesmé's walls day after day, and day after day, they were slaughtered."

"This I have heard," Emerus admitted. "And yerself played a role in that?"

"Aye," said Drizzt. "As did Athrogate of Felbarr here." He patted Athrogate's strong shoulder, but the dwarf's eyes widened, and he looked up at Drizzt, seeming near panic.

"Felbarr?" King Emerus said, obviously caught by surprise. He looked to Parson Glaive, who could only shrug in confusion.

"I be so much older than I'm lookin'," Athrogate admitted. "Was here when Obould took the place. Didn't e'er return."

The Felbarr dwarves all glanced around, exchanging doubtful looks indeed.

"Not for mattering," Athrogate said. "Ain't called Felbarr me home in two dwarves' lifetimes. Just Athrogate now. Just Athrogate."

"We will talk, yerself and meself," King Emerus said, and Athrogate looked back over his shoulder and cast a sour glance at Drizzt, who just patted him on the shoulder again.

"Athrogate was a hero of Nesmé," Drizzt said, and he moved to stand behind Catti-brie, dropping his hands on her strong shoulders. "As was this woman, my wife."

"Ye seem to be favorin' human lasses with that fire hair, what ho!" Ragged Dain declared, and he lifted his tankard in toast to the woman.

"Indeed," Drizzt agreed. "And that will be explained shortly, I expect. Perhaps even by the fourth of my party who joins us this day." He stepped

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to the side of Catti-brie and leaned over the table, nodding down the other end of the Battlehammer line to his dear friend, who nodded back.

“Little Arr Arr?” King Emerus asked with surprise. “So ye’re with this one now, then, and not with the Battlehammers?”

“With both,” Bruenor replied.

Emerus gave a snort and shook his head.

“Tale’s already got me head spinnin’,” Oretheo Spikes said from the Adbar side.

“Oh, but ye ain’t heard nothin’ yet,” King Connerad assured him, assured all of them, and he lifted his pack from the floor and plopped it on the table in front of him, then reverently opened it to reveal a peculiar one-horned helmet.

“Ye e’er seen one akin to it?” he asked King Emerus.

“Looks like Bruenor’s own,” the king of Felbarr replied.

Connerad nodded, then suddenly slid the fabled item along the table to his right, past Dagnabbet and Bungalow Thump to the waiting hands of Little Arr Arr.

“Eh?” King Emerus and several others asked together.

Little Arr Arr lifted the one-horned helm in his strong hands and rolled it around, looking it over from every angle. Then, looking straight at Emerus, he plopped the helm, the old crown of Mithral Hall, atop his head.

“’Ere now, what’re ye about?” King Emerus demanded.

“Ye’re not knowin’ me, then?” Bruenor asked slyly. “After all we been through together?”

Emerus wore a curious expression and turned to Connerad for an answer.

“That one there, the one ye were knowin’ as Little Arr Arr, son o’ Reginald Roundshield and Uween,” Connerad began, and he paused and collected his breath, even shaking his head as if he, too, could hardly believe what he was about to declare.

“Me name’s Bruenor,” the young dwarf in the one-horned helm interjected. “Bruenor Battlehammer, Eighth King and Tenth King o’ Mithral Hall. Son o’ Bangor, me Da, who ye knowed well, me friend Emerus. Aye, son o’ Bangor, that’d be me!”

“Ye dishonor yer Ma!” Ragged Dain scolded and came forward over the table threateningly. But Bruenor didn’t blink.

“And so too son o’ Reginald Roundshield,” he said. “And born again of Uween, me Ma, and she’s a fine one, don’t ye doubt.”

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"Delusion!" Ragged Dain insisted.

"Blasphemy!" added Oretheo Spikes.

"Truth in tellin'!" Bruenor spat at both of them. "Bruenor's me name, the one gived me by me Da, Bangor!"

"Ye canno' believe this," King Emerus said to Connerad. He turned fast to Drizzt, though, as he spoke. "Surely yerself's knowin' better!"

"Bruenor," Drizzt said slowly and deliberately, nodding. "It is."

"Don't you know him, then, King Emerus?" asked the woman beside Drizzt. "And don't you recognize me?"

"Now, how might I be doing that?" Emerus asked, or almost asked. The last word caught in his throat as he took a closer look at this auburn-haired young woman sitting beside the dark elf.

"By the gods," he muttered.

"Catti-brie?" Ragged Dain added, just as breathlessly.

"Aye, by the gods," the woman answered. "By Mielikki, most of all."

"And with the blessings o' Moradin, Dumathoin, and Clangeddin, don't ye doubt," Bruenor added. "I been to their throne in Gauntlgrym, I tell ye. Thought I'd be drinking at their hall, but they had other plans."

"And so we're here, in this time of need," Catti-brie added.

The others started to cheer, but King Emerus cut that short. "No, canno' be," he said. "No, but I knowed ye when ye were here, I did! Little Arr Arr! I went to yer Ma and saw ye schooled in the fightin' . . ."

The King of Citadel Felbarr paused there, the memory catching him by surprise. He looked to Parson Glaive and Ragged Dain, and they each smiled and nodded, also recalling the way this young dwarf, the son of Reginald Roundshield, had toyed with dwarflings years beyond his age.

"No, but it couldn't be all a lie," Emerus insisted. "Ye was right under me eyes! Yer Da was me friend, captain o' me guard! Ye canno' dishonor him now in such a way!"

"Ain't no dishonor," Bruenor insisted, shaking his head. "I done what needed doin'. I could no' tell ye, though don't ye doubt but I wanted to!"

"Blasphemy!" Emerus shouted.

"Wait," Ragged Dain interrupted, and it seemed a fortunate coincidence that the old dwarf picked that time to slow down the momentum of King Emerus. Ragged Dain turned to Emerus and nodded an apology, and when the king bade him continue, he spun back on Bruenor. "Then ye're sayin' it was King Bruenor who threw himself at that giant in the

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Rauvins? King Bruenor who gived all but his life so that his fellows could get away?"

"Seen a giant, sticked a giant," Bruenor said matter-of-factly and with a shrug, though he did wince a bit at the painful memory. "And aye, Mandarina Dobberbright?" he asked, looking to Emerus. "Know that she saved me, as did yer second there, good Parson Glaive."

Ragged Dain, King Emerus, and Bruenor looked to the high priest of Felbarr together, finding Parson Glaive standing and staring dumbfounded then, his jaw hanging open. "It's true," he whispered breathlessly.

"Aye, so I said," Bruenor replied. "Mandarina tended me, and Dain and the boys bringed me back, though I'm not for rememberin' much o' that part!"

"No," Parson Glaive said. "Yerself . . . ye're Bruenor, and ye were Bruenor then."

"Always been," Bruenor answered, but King Emerus waved him to silence.

"What'd'ye know?" the king demanded of his high priest.

"When ye waked up after the fight in the Rauvins, back in Felbarr," Parson Glaive said to Bruenor, "I telled ye that ye might've been goin' to meet yer Da, and I was meanin' Arr Arr, course, as he went off to the table o' Moradin. But ye were half out o' yer wits, and ye said . . ."

"Bangor," Bruenor replied.

King Emerus blinked repeatedly, turning from Parson Glaive to Bruenor and back again.

"Even then, ye knowed," Ragged Dain whispered.

"Always knowed, from the day o' me birth."

"Always knowed? And ye didn't tell me?" Emerus demanded.

Bruenor stood and bowed. "Weren't yer worry," was all he offered.

"And was yerself that got yerself to Mithral Hall, to train with them Gutbusters, so ye said," Ragged Dain added.

"Heigh ho!" Bungalow Thump had to put in.

The three from Citadel Felbarr exchanged looks, and Parson Glaive said with complete confidence, "By the gods, but it's him."

"By the gods!" Oretheo Spikes and the rest of the Adbar contingent, King Emerus and Ragged Dain all shouted together, and they came to their feet as one, shaking their hairy heads, clapping each other on the back and crying, "Huzzah to King Bruenor!"

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"Aye, but the hopes just brightened and the dark sky ain't so dark!" King Emerus proclaimed. "Bruenor, me old friend, but how is it so?" He crawled across the table to offer a firm handshake, then pushed in closer and wrapped King Bruenor in a great hug.

"Drinks! Drinks!" he yelled to the attendants. "Oh, but we'll be puttin' 'em back for a tenday and more. Huzzah for Bruenor!"

And the cheering began anew, and the attendants came rushing in, foam flying, and the somber council quickly became a cacophony of toasts and cheers. Bruenor let the celebration go on for a while, but finally begged them all to take their seats once more.

"Not much to be cheerin' if the Silver Marches're to fall," he warned.

"And ye're King o' Mithral Hall again?" Emerus asked Bruenor as soon as they had all settled back into their seats. The King of Citadel Felbarr looked to Connerad as he spoke the dangerous question.

Bruenor, too, glanced over at Connerad, who nodded. In that moment, it looked to all that Connerad would go along with whatever Bruenor decided. That subservience was not lost on King Emerus and Ragged Dain, both of whom gasped at the sight.

"Nah," said Bruenor. "Best choice meself ever made as king was giving me crown to Banak Brawnnavil, and him, to his boy Connerad. Mithral Hall's got a king, and as fine a king as she's e'er known. An ungrateful wretch I'd be if I called for me throne back now!"

"Then what?" asked Emerus.

"I been to Nesmé, and left Nesmé right afore she fell, so ye're sayin'," Bruenor answered. "Me and me friends've come to tell ye to get out o' yer holes. Now's the time, or there's no time to be found! The land's crawling with orcs, and they ain't meanin' to go back to their holes. Nah, they're taking it all, I tell ye."

"We've heared as much from the couriers of the Knights in Silver," Connerad added.

"Bah! But what'd we care for them human lands?" King Emerus spouted. "Layin' all the blame at our feet—at yer own feet, if ye're who ye claim to be and who we think ye to be!"

"I am, and so they will, and so I won't be caring!" Bruenor declared. "I'm knowin' better. Me name's on that damned treaty, aye, but was th' other kingdoms what put it there a hunnerd years ago, and yerself's knowin' the truth o' that, me friend."

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King Emerus nodded.

“But now’s no time for blamin’,” Bruenor went on. “We got thousands o’ orcs to kill, me boys! Tens o’ thousands! All o’ Luruar stands together, or all o’ Luruar’s sure to fall!”

“Ain’t no Luruar,” said Oretheo Spikes. He rose up from his seat and slowly walked around the sharp-angled corner of the table, moving deliberately for Bruenor. “Just a bunch o’ elves and humans dancing about three dwarf forts. Aye, and they’re to fall,” he said when he got right up to Bruenor, and he began carefully looking over the strange dwarf. “All of ’em, and there ain’t a durned thing we can do to stop it.”

“We put our three as one and hammer them orcs . . .” Bruenor started.

“We canno’ get out,” Oretheo Spikes explained, and still he looked the strange dwarf up and down, once again looking for some sign that the dwarf was an imposter, it seemed.

And who could blame him?

Into the midst of a besieged and battered trio of citadels comes a young dwarf claiming to be a long-dead king, and telling the dwarves to come out of their impregnable fortresses.

“Oh, but we tried,” Oretheo went on, and he started back for his seat. “King Harnoth won’t stay in his hall, so full o’ grief is he for his brother, Bromm, who got himself murdered to death in the Cold Vale. I seen that murder, aye, me king frozen to death by the blow of a white dragon! Aye, a true dragon, I tell ye, and then me dear king got his head cut away by th’ ugliest orc, Warlord Hartusk of Dark Arrow Keep. Oh, aye, young Bruenor, if that’s to be yer name,” he added and looked past Bruenor to Drizzt, “and riding the wyrm was a drow elf, much akin to the one ye bringed in with ye.”

He turned his eye squarely on Bruenor. “We’d lose half our dwarves and more tryin’ to get out o’ Adbar. Damned orcs canno’ get in, but me boys canno’ get out—and I ain’t for losing half o’ them trying. Or might that be what ye’re lookin’ to see?”

The thick suspicion in Oretheo’s voice was not lost on Bruenor or any of the others from Mithral Hall.

And again, who could blame him?

“I’m hearin’ ye,” Bruenor assured him, nodding solemnly. “And me old heart’s breaking for yer King Bromm. A good one, I hear, though I knowed his Da better, to be sure.”

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With a glance at Connerad, Bruenor leaped upon the table and stood to address them all. "And I ain't sayin', and let none be sayin', that we're to crawl out and lose half our boys. Not for the Silver Marches, nay. But we're better off by far in saving what's left o' the place and not giving all the land above us to them damned orcs."

"How, then?" asked Oretheo Spikes. "Adbar canno' get out, and the rings about Felbarr and Mithral Hall ain't any thinner."

"One's got to lead," Bruenor said. "One to break out and go to help the next in line. If we're talkin' smart back and forth, we can coax th' orcs off the next and smash 'em from both sides."

"Then two free go to the third—Adbar'd be me guess—and we're out an' runnin'," said King Emerus.

Bruenor nodded.

"Aye, but who, then?" asked Oretheo Spikes. "Who's first out? For sure that hall's to suffer like none've been punched since Obould first came down from the Spine o' the World!"

Emerus nodded grimly at Oretheo's reasoning, then slowly swung around to regard Bruenor.

"It'll be the boys from Mithral Hall," Connerad answered before Bruenor could, and all three turned to him with surprise.

"Aye," Connerad said, nodding. "I know none o' ye're blamin' Mithral Hall and me friend Bruenor for what's come crashin' down on us, but it's right that me and me boys find our way out—out and over to Felbarr is me guess."

Emerus looked to Bruenor, who shrugged and deferred back to the rightful king of Mithral Hall.

"We'll find a way," Connerad insisted, "or I'm a bearded gnome!"

Bruenor started to agree, but that last remark, once his trademark vow, caught him off guard so completely that he nearly toppled off the table. He stared at Connerad, who offered him a grin and a wink in explanation.

"Well, huzzah and heigh-ho to Mithral Hall then," said King Emerus. "And if ye're findin' yer way out and across the Surbrin, know that Felbarr'll be itchin' to get out and join ye in the slaughter."

"Ye're talkin' months," Oretheo Spikes reminded them all, "for winter's soon to be deep about us."

"Then yerself's to keep the way from Adbar to Felbarr open," King Emerus told him. "And Felbarr'll keep the way clear to Mithral Hall while Connerad and his boys get ready to break them orcs."

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“So there ye have our answer, King Bruenor, me old friend,” Emerus went on. “I got no love for the folk o’ Silverymoon or Everlund, nor am I losin’ much sleep for the folk o’ Sundabar. Aye, but they’ve treated yer memory with disrespect, and called me own boys cowards for the slaughter at the Redrun, and now I wouldn’t lose a boy to save a one o’ them towns! But aye, ye’re right in that we’re better with them orcs chased off and killed to death. Ye get yerselves out and we’ll watch for ye.”

He shifted his gaze to take in Connerad as well. “But if ye canno’ get out, ye won’t be findin’ Felbarr leading the way up.”

“Nor Adbar,” Oretheo Spikes warned.

Bruenor and Connerad exchanged concerned glances, then Bruenor looked over to Drizzt, who nodded.

They really couldn’t have asked for more than that.



None were happy after leaving that meeting that day in Citadel Felbarr, but the whispering echoed in every hall in Felbarr soon after, as word that their own Little Arr Arr had returned with his spectacular announcement.

King Bruenor? Could it be?

Uween Roundshield was hard at work at her blacksmithing when she heard the whispers. She wasted no time in closing down her forge and heading back to her home. Overwhelmed and confused, she didn’t want to discuss the startling news. She really had no idea how she actually felt about it. If the whispers were true, she was the Queen Mother of Mithral Hall, a place she had never even visited and of which she knew almost nothing.

Whatever excitement that strange and unexpected title might inspire was surely tempered, though: If this was King Bruenor, then what of her Little Arr Arr? What of the child she had nurtured? For eighteen years, he had been her boy—not without trials, certainly, but not without love, either.

But how much of it was a lie?

She thought of the last month he had been in her home, itching to be on the road to Mithral Hall. So he knew then, she realized. Possibly, he had known for all his life.

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And he hadn't told her.

She dropped her thick apron on the counter in her entry hall and plopped down heavily on a chair at her dining table, feeling much older than her hundred and ten years. How she missed her husband in this difficult moment. She needed someone to lean on, someone to help her sort through this . . . insanity.

"I come home, Ma," came a familiar voice from the hallway behind her.

Uween froze in place, her thoughts whirling.

"I hope ye're to forgive me for going to King Emerus first, but I seen the war, and it's no pretty thing," Bruenor said, moving slowly toward the woman.

Uween didn't—couldn't—look over at him. She kept her head bowed into her hands, trying to clear her mind, trying to throw aside her fears and grief and simply let her heart guide her. She heard her boy approaching, and couldn't deny the flutter in her heart.

"Ma?" Bruenor said, dropping a hand on her shoulder.

Uween spun on him and leaped up from her seat, and even in the motion, she wasn't sure whether she'd punch him or hug him. She went with the hug, crushing her boy tight against her.

He reciprocated, and Uween felt the warmth, the sincere love coming back at her.

"King Bruenor, they're sayin'," she whispered.

"Aye, 'tis true, but that's a part o' me," he whispered back. "Uween's boy, Reginald's boy, I be, and proud of it, don't ye doubt."

"But ye're this other one, too," Uween said when she composed herself. She pulled back a bit to look her son in the eye.

"Aye, Bruenor Battlehammer, son o' Bangor and Caydia, and don't ye know but that I'm shakin' me head every time I'm thinking about it!" Bruenor replied with a self-deprecating laugh. "Two Mas, two Das, two lines o' blood."

"And one's royal."

Bruenor nodded. "Still got me royal blood. Been to Gauntlgrym, to the Throne o' the Dwarf Gods, and ye canno' sit on it if . . ." His voice trailed away, and Uween blushed, recognizing that she hadn't hid her disinterest well enough. She didn't care about his other Ma and Da, or this whole King Bruenor business. Nay, this was her Little Arr Arr and not some Battlehammer!

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"I'm not meanin' to hurt ye," Bruenor said. "It's the last thing I'd be wanting to do."

"Then what's this craziness that's come over ye?"

"It's not. Me name's Bruenor—always been. By the grace of a goddess was I brought back from the grave."

"So someone telled ye!"

"No," Bruenor said somberly, shaking his head. "No. It is not a tale needin' telling, for it's one I've walked awake."

"And what's that meanin'?" Uween started to ask, but Bruenor's expression, deadly serious and certain, clued her to another direction. "How long ye knowin' this?"

"Whole time."

"And what's that to mean?"

"Whole time," Bruenor repeated. "From me old life to me death, to the forest o' Catti-brie's goddess, to the womb o' Uween. I knowed who I was."

"From the moment ye was born again?"

"Before," Bruenor said.

Uween fell back, overwhelmed, confused, and horrified to think that she held some sentient, knowing adult creature in her womb! What was he claiming? What madness was this?

"Ye spent the better part of a year in me belly, ye're sayin'?" she gasped.

"No," Bruenor replied. "I come in as I was comin' out. At the time o' birth . . ."

"Oh, but ye're a fat liar!"

"No."

"No babe's to be knowin' that! No memories go that far back, for any of us!"

Bruenor shrugged. "I can tell ye every bit o' the day yer husband, me Da, did no' come back. When Parson Glaive and King Emerus come to yer door."

Before she could even think of the motion, Uween slugged him in the face. She gasped and brought her hands to her mouth, tears flowing freely. "Ye knew in the crib?" she asked breathlessly. "Ye knew and ye did no' tell me? What . . . what madness?"

"I could no', and ye'd not have believed me," Bruenor said. He gave a little snort. "Are ye even believin' me now, I'm wonderin'? It was me own secret and me own burden, and why I had to go."

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“To Mithral Hall?” She tried to sound understanding, now that her anger had manifested itself with the strike. She had let her horror overtake her, but only briefly, she decided. Only briefly.

“Through Mithral Hall,” Bruenor answered. “And all the way to the Sword Coast.”

“Did ye tell ’em? Them boys from Mithral Hall?”

“Nah,” Bruenor said, shaking his head. “Not till I come back now with me friends aside me—and some o’ them went through death, too. That was the deal with the goddess, and I was oath-bound. And oh, don’t ye doubt that the throne of our gods let me know their anger when I was thinkin’ o’ breakin’ that oath!”

“Ye keep claimin’ the gods’re on yer side then.”

“I know what I know, and I know who I be. And I be Bruenor, and remember all o’ that other life I knew. The life afore I died.”

Uween nodded, beginning to digest it all, and telling herself that she had no choice but to accept it.

“And ye’re still me Ma, I’m hopin’, but course the call’s yer own to make.”

Uween started to nod—how could she not love this one, even if he wasn’t . . .

The woman froze, her face locking into an expression of pure shock. “Me own boy,” she finally managed to whisper after a long, long pause. “Me own boy . . .”

“Aye, if ye’ll have me.”

“Not yerself! Me boy what was in there,” she said, and rubbed her belly. “What’d ye do to him then? Where’s me boy o’ Reginald’s seed?”

Bruenor sucked in his breath and held up his hands helplessly, clearly at a loss.

Uween believed him—he had no answer as to how that transformation might have occurred, of how he had gotten into the tiny body in the womb and what had been there before him. Had the child been a blank slate awaiting the consciousness of Bruenor Battlehammer? Or some other, maybe, and so expelled—was that the way it worked?

“Get yerself out o’ me house, ye murderin’ dog!” the woman said, trembling and with tears pouring down her cherubic cheeks. “Oh, ye doppelganger! Abomination! Ye killed me baby!”

As she ranted, she pushed Bruenor toward the door, and he gave ground, shaking his head with every step. But he couldn’t deny her charges, and could only hold his hands up helplessly, clueless.

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Uween shoved him outside and slammed her door in his face, and he could hear her wailing from behind the stone.

He staggered away, but had only gone a few steps before Ragged Dain caught up to him. “Come on, then, ye fool king!” the dwarf said lightheartedly. “Might be the greatest swarm o’ orcs above us the world’s e’er seen, but ho, we’re still to drink to King Bruenor this day! The gods’ve blessed us—they sent ye here for a reason!” he said, dragging Bruenor along. “We’ll be singin’ and dancin’ and drinkin’ all the night, don’t ye doubt!”

Bruenor nodded—he knew the expectation, of course, and would go along. But he kept looking back at the humble home he had known in this childhood, kept thinking of the woman he had left behind the stone door, broken and grieving.



They had an army of orcs camped up above them, flooding the land, sacking the towns, but anyone looking in on the celebration that night in Citadel Felbarr would never know it. For one of the most legendary dwarves of the past two centuries had returned from the grave, and while many in the Silver Marches grumbled about Bruenor’s signature on the Treaty of Garumn’s Gorge, the dwarves of the North were not among those naysayers.

King Bruenor was kin and kind, friend of Felbarr, friend of Adbar, and so the celebration roared.

Bruenor spent the early part of the gathering beside Drizzt and Catti-brie. He nodded and smiled, clapped tankards, and shared hugs and well-wishes with a line of Felbarran dwarves. He did well to mask his inner turmoil over Uween, and truthfully, over the whole process that had brought him back to life and back to Toril. Had his arrival in Uween’s womb thrown aside a babe? Had he taken the infant’s body like some mind flayer?

The horror of that notion had him rubbing his hairy face.

“I fear for them, too, my friend, but take heart,” Drizzt whispered to him on one such beard-stroking. Bruenor looked at him curiously.

“Hold faith in Wulfgar and Regis,” Catti-brie clarified, and she reached over and put her hand on Bruenor’s forearm.

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The reminder jolted Bruenor from his other concerns. He hadn't been thinking of his lost friends at all that day—too many other problems nipped at his every step. He nodded solemnly at his beautiful daughter and put his hand atop hers. "Aye, the little one's grown. With him aside Wulfgar, sure that it's them orcs we should be worrying for!"

He lifted his mug and clapped it against the flagon Catti-brie put up, and a third came in from Drizzt, and then more as another band of well-wishers bobbed over.

And on it went, with cheers and promises that the orcs of Many-Arrows would rue the day they came forth from their smelly keep, and every drink lifted repeatedly for "Delzoun!" and "Bruenor!"

On one side of the room, a chorus began, a troupe of dwarves with tones both wistful and dulcet, singing tales of war, of victory and great sorrow. As one song, a merrier melody, gathered momentum, some dwarves began to dance, and others called for Drizzt and Catti-brie to join in.

And so they did, and soon the dwarven dancers fell back and circled them, cheering them on.

Drizzt and Catti-brie had never actually danced before, and certainly not publicly. But they had trained for war together many times, sparring in mock battle, and no two creatures in Faerûn were more attuned to the movements of each other. They glided around the floor with ease, lost only in each other, moving with sympathy and grace, and not a stumble could be found.

Bruenor couldn't help but smile as he watched the couple, and surely it did his heart good to see the love that remained between the two. It brought him back to the days before the Spellplague, when at last, Catti-brie and Drizzt had admitted to, and surrendered to, their love for one another. And here it was again.

No, not again, Bruenor thought, but still.

Eternal.

He nodded and felt warm.

Then he went back to clapping tankards and sharing hugs and handshakes.

At one pause in the procession of well-wishers, Bruenor looked past Drizzt and Catti-brie, who were returning to their seats, and noted King Emerus, Ragged Dain, and Parson Glaive sitting around a small table in an animated conversation with Athrogate.

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Drizzt followed his gaze, then looked back to Bruenor with concern. Bruenor nodded and held up his hands to ward off a group coming to greet him, thinking to make his way to that table and see what Athrogate might be telling Emerus.

“Ah, but there’s a slap in me face,” a woman’s voice followed him as he took a step in that direction.

“Aye, but ain’t he the king now?” another woman asked with biting sarcasm. “Too good for the likes of us.”

Bruenor stopped and dropped his head to hide the smile growing within the red-orange flames of his beard, his hands going to his hips.

Oh, but he knew these two!

“Might that we should kick him in the hairy butt,” said the first, and all around, other dwarves were laughing.

“Aye, and stick the one horn o’ his helm up it,” said the other.

Bruenor leaped around as the two dwarves charged at him, and he caught them both, or they caught him, or they all caught each other.

And he got kissed—oh, did he get kissed!—on both his cheeks and flush on the lips.

When he came up for air, Bruenor saw Drizzt and Catti-brie standing beside him, staring at him with amused expressions. He pulled the two young ladies out to either side, keeping them firmly wrapped with his arms around their shoulders.

“Drizzt and me girl, Catti-brie, I give ye Tannabritches and Mallabritches Fellhammer, two o’ the toughest fighters what ever whacked an orc!” Bruenor said. He looked to Tannabritches, then to her twin sister, noting their nicknames, “Fist’n’Fury!”

“Well met!” said Tannabritches.

“And better met!” added Mallabritches.

“Glad that ye bringed us back our Little Arr Arr,” said the first.

“Ah, Sister, don’t ye know he’s the king?” Mallabritches scolded.

“Aye,” Tannabritches lamented. “King Bruenor, we’re telled.”

“Aye, and he ain’t young. No, he’s four hunnerd if he’s a day, and woe to his poor old legs.”

“Woe and more when we’re done dancin’!” Tannabritches insisted, and she and her sister pulled Bruenor out to the floor, to the rousing cheers of all.

Delighted, Drizzt and Catti-brie took their seats and watched the show as the trio bumbled, bounced, and banged their way through it all. There

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wasn't much graceful about their dance—at times, they more resembled three famished dwarves fighting over the last beer—but truly, Drizzt and Catti-brie had never seen a purer expression of joy from their grumbling friend Bruenor.

And so it went, and for that night at least, the companions could forget the orcs above and their friends lost in the tunnels.

Just for that one night.

PART ONE



THE WINTER OF THE IRON DWARF

LOST AGAIN.

It has become a recurring nightmare among my companions, both these old friends returned and the newer companions I traveled beside in recent times. So many times have I, have we, been thrown to a place of hopelessness. Turned to stone, captured by a powerful necromancer, captured by the drow, even dead for a hundred years!

And yet, here we are, returned. At times it seems to me as if the gods are watching us and intervening.

Or perhaps they are watching us and toying with us.

And now we have come to that point again, with Regis and Wulfgar lost to us in the tunnels of the Upperdark. There was an aura of finality to their disappearance, when the devilishly-trapped wallstone snapped back into place. We heard Regis fall away, far away. It didn't seem like a free fall, and orcs are known to prefer traps that capture victims rather than kill them outright.

That is not a reason to hope, however, given the way orcs typically deal with their captives.

In the first days of our return, I convinced King Connerad to double the guard along the lower tunnels, even to allow me to slip out from the guarded areas still secured as Mithral Hall, out into the regions

we know to be under the control of the orcs. Bruenor begged to come with me, but better off am I navigating alone in the Underdark. Cattibrie begged me to remain in the hall, and claimed that she would go out with her magic to scout for our friends.

But I could not sit tight in the comfort of Mithral Hall when I feared they were out there, when I heard, and still hear, their cries for help in my every thought. A recurring nightmare invades my reverie: my dear friends frantic and fighting to get to the lower tunnels still held by the dwarves, but by way of an environment unsuited to a halfling and a human. One dead end after another, one ambush after another. In my thoughts, I see them battling fiercely, then fleeing back the way they had come, orc spears and orc taunts chasing them back into the darkness.

If I believe they are out there, how can I remain behind the iron walls?

I cannot deny that we in the hall have much to do. We have to find a way to break the siege and begin to turn the battles above, else the Silver Marches are lost. The misery being inflicted across the lands . . .

We have much to do.

Nesmé has fallen.

We have much to do.

The other dwarf citadels are fully besieged.

We have much to do.

The lone lifelines, the tunnels connecting Adbar, Felbarr, and Mithral Hall, are under constant pressure now.

We have much to do.

And so much time has passed in dark silence. We traveled to Citadel Felbarr and back, and many tendays have passed without a hint from Wulfgar and Regis.

Are they out there, hiding in dark tunnels or chained in an orc prison? Do they cry out in agony and hopelessness, begging for their friends to come and rescue them? Or begging for death, perhaps?

Or are they now silenced forevermore?

All reason points to them being dead, but I have seen too much now to simply accept that. I hold out hope and know from experience that it cannot be a false hope wrought of emotional folly.

But neither is it more than that: a hope.

They fell, likely to their deaths, either immediately or in orc imprisonment. Even if that is not the case, and their drop through the wall took them to a separate tunnel free from the orcs and drow that haunt the region, so many tendays have passed without word. They are not suited to the Underdark. For all their wonderful skills, in that dark place, in this dark time, it is highly unlikely that Wulfgar and Regis could survive.

And so I hold out that finger of hope, but in my heart, I prepare for the worst.

I am strangely at peace with that. And it is not a phony acceptance where I hide the truth of my pain under the hope that it is mere speculation. If they are gone, if they have fallen, I know that they died well.

It is all we can ask now, any of us. There is an old drow saying—I heard it used often to describe Matron Mother Baenre in the days of my youth: “*qu’ella bondel*,” which translates to “gifted time,” or “borrowed time.” The matron mother was old, older than any other, older than any drow in memory. By all reason, she should have been dead long before, centuries before Bruenor put his axe through her head, and so she had been living on *qu’ella bondel*.

My companions, returned from the magical forest of Iruladoon, through their covenant with Mielikki, are living on *qu’ella bondel*. They all know it, they have all said it.

And so we accept it.

If Wulfgar and Regis do not return to us, if they are truly gone—and Catti-brie has assured me that the goddess will not interfere in such matters again—then so be it. My heart will be heavy, but it will not break. We have been given a great gift, all of us. In saying hello once more, we all knew that we were making it all right to say farewell.

But still . . .

Would I feel this way if Catti-brie were down there?

—Drizzt Do’Urden

CHAPTER 1



DUKE TIAGO

HARTUSK GRUMBLED AT EVERY STEP AS HE KICKED THROUGH THE deepening mounds with heavy, wet snow falling all around him. Behind him, Aurbangras, his dragon mount, reveled in the fluffy stuff, rolling around like a playful kitten. To the mighty wyrm, the snow signaled the onset of winter, the season of the white dragons with their frosty breath.

The storm was general across the Silver Marches, piling deep around Hartusk Keep, formerly known as Sundabar, settling in Keeper's Dale and Cold Vale, burying the surface doors of the underground dwarven citadels, locking the humans in their cities.

But stopping, too, the press of battle against Silvermoon's intact, well-defended walls. And halting any march to Everlund. Hartusk wanted to go anyway, despite the storms; and the frost giants, unbothered by the winter, were ready to march. But the drow had firmly warned him against the move, indeed, had forbidden it.

The ferocious Hartusk had planned to march anyway, but then, unexpectedly, the leader of the giants reinforcing his line, a twenty-foot behemoth named Rolloki, reputedly the eldest brother of Thrym, who was god to the frost giants, had pulled back his support for continuing the campaign through the deepening snows.

Rolloki, with Beorjan and Rugmark, the other huge giants who claimed to be of the god's family, sided with the dark elves on every issue. Given their near-deity status as brothers of Thrym, Fimmel Orelson,

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Jarl of Shining White and leader of the frost giant legions, would not go against them.

It all came back to the drow and their cautious designs.

Hartusk's grumbles became growls as he neared Nesmé's blasted gate, giants standing to either side of the broken doors, orcs lining the wall and looking down at him and looking past him to the magnificent aerial mount that had brought him here from Hartusk Keep in the east.

The giants snapped to attention as he neared, and that measure of respect from the behemoths did improve the ferocious orc warlord's mood a little bit at least.

Between them went Hartusk, ignoring the cheers that began in the guard towers and along the wall, watching the warriors who gathered in the city courtyard to formally greet him.

An orc leaped out in front of him as he crossed the threshold into the city.

"May I announce your glorious presence, Warlord, to Duke Tiago?" the guard inquired.

Hartusk stopped abruptly and stared at the orc, a formidable sort and one apparently of high rank in the Nesmé garrison if the armor he wore was any indication of station.

"To who?" Hartusk asked.

"To Duke Ti—" the orc started to answer, his words choked off as Hartusk grabbed him by the throat and easily lifted him up to his tiptoes.

"Duke?" Hartusk scoffed, mocking the notion.

The trapped orc moved his mouth as if to respond, but little sound came forth past the crushing grip of mighty Hartusk.

The war chief looked around at the many onlookers. "Duke?" he asked, making it clear that the whole notion of Tiago's self-assumed title was perfectly ridiculous, and with such amazing ease, such power, he tossed the choking orc back and to the ground.

"Do you think I need an introduction?" Hartusk asked his seated victim.

The orc shook his head so fiercely that his lips flapped noisily.

Hartusk growled again and pressed on, the crowd parting in front of him like water before a great ship's prow. Without a word of acknowledgment to the guards at the large building Tiago and the other drow had taken as their castle, Hartusk pushed through the door.

Those gathered in the foyer and small room beyond, orc and drow alike, gasped in unison when they noted the identity of the brusque newcomer,

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and they prudently fell aside, many of the orcs falling to their knees as their glorious leader swept through.

The two drow guarding the next set of ornate doors wisely also moved aside. One reached back to grab the door handle, to swing the door open for the great orc, but she pulled her hand back quickly as Hartusk simply bashed through, both doors flying wide.

Those in the room, the appointed audience chamber of Duke Tiago Do'Urden of Nesmé, started and turned, except for the five drow at the other end of the long, narrow room. There sat Tiago, casually draping a leg over the arm of his wooden chair, the priestess Saribel, his wife, sitting beside him. That half-drow, half-moon elf creature attended to the priestess, along with her limping and broken-down father.

Ravel was there, too, Hartusk noted—and he trusted that drow wizard least of all.

Hartusk stood in the doorway for a long while, letting the others in the room, more drow than orcs, absorb the sight of his magnificence. And he let his stare linger, long and hard, on the five at the other end: the drow nobles who served as the mouthpieces of Menzoberranzan's efforts in the Silver Marches.

The orc warlord wasn't surprised to see them all here together. He had specifically ordered Tiago that they should not all be together in this time of winter's lull, when desperate and dangerous enemies would seek ways to strike out from their besieged cities and citadels. It seemed natural that the impudent drow would ignore his commands.

He made his way slowly across the room, taking satisfaction as dark elf and orc alike eased back from his imposing march.

"Warlord, it is good to see you," Tiago said. His words rang superficially in Hartusk's sharp mind. "Do gather a flagon—a keg, I say!—and let us drink through winter's long night."

"And find whatever other pleasures as we might," Saribel added—Duchess Saribel, Hartusk presumed, though he had not heard her referred to in that manner.

"Where is your dragon, drow?" he asked.

"Where he should be," Tiago cryptically replied. "Where I asked him to be, and of no concern to you, surely."

The brutish orc narrowed his yellow, bloodshot eyes.

"Warlord, be at ease," Tiago said to him.

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“Do you mock me?” the orc asked, and at that, all in the room and in the anteroom tensed, every drow and every orc taking stock of the other race, in case it should quickly come to blows.

“My, but he seems quite upset,” Ravel Xorlarrin remarked, moving over to stand directly behind Tiago’s chair, and never taking his eyes off the warlord.

“He is bored, nothing more,” Tiago said. “He wants blood!” He braced his hands on the arms of his makeshift throne and jumped up to his feet. “Yes, Hartusk?”

He came forward. He moved close—close enough to bite.

“Does the winter settle uneasily about your strong arms, Warlord?” Tiago asked. He grinned slyly, as did the others around the royal dais—except the surface elf, Hartusk noted, that ever-scowling little creature who never seemed to take her hand from the hilt of her fine sword. She wore an expression that bore no humor, as if she was always expecting a battle to break out.

Hartusk supposed that such a demeanor was the only way she could possibly survive in the midst of this viper’s nest of treachery. Hartusk needed the drow, of course. They had been central to his coup against the children of Obould, and surely pivotal in the death of King Obould.

Obould wouldn’t lead the minions of Many-Arrows to war. The drow, like Hartusk, wanted war, and so their marriage of blood had been consummated.

Their marriage of Obould’s blood.

That didn’t mean the warlord of Many-Arrows didn’t profoundly hate the dark-skinned devils—every one.

He looked hard at the young half-elf, half-drow then, challenging her with his stare as one dog might do to another. He didn’t blink and neither did she, but yes, she clutched that sword ever more tightly.

Hartusk began to smile, lewdly. And it went on, and all around took notice.

“Ah, a budding romance,” the wizard Ravel remarked.

“He is *iblitb*!” Saribel cried, using the drow word for offal—a word Hartusk knew.

“She is *darthiir*!” Ravel countered, the drow word for surface elves and an insult far worse than *iblitb*.

The dark elves all laughed at Doum’wielle’s expense, even her father, though Hartusk noted that the one named Tos’un did cast a clearly uncomfortable sidelong glance her way.

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“Arauthator should fly beside his son, dropping boulders on Silverymoon,” Hartusk said finally, breaking the gaze. “The minions of Alustriel are miserable in their hole, and we should make them more miserable!”

“A useless exercise that alleviates the boredom for Silverymoon’s vast array of wizards,” Tiago immediately countered.

“Press them!”

“Bore them!” Tiago shot back, and Hartusk narrowed his eyes again and gave a growl. “Silverymoon is not like Nesmé, nor even Sundabar, Warlord. She is a city thick with magic-users. We threw stones at her—have you forgotten?”

The orc didn’t blink.

“Her wizards caught them with their spells and guided them down harmlessly,” Tiago reminded. “You were there, upon Aurbangras, beside me and my dragon mount. You know the truth of it.”

“We will drop the stones in the night, in the dark,” Hartusk argued. “The wizards will not see—”

“We cannot even ride the wyrms at night,” Tiago interrupted with a laugh—and how Hartusk’s eyes flared at that. “It is too cold for drow skin, and orc skin, up high in the winter night sky.”

“Then send the dragons alone!” Hartusk roared.

Tiago sat back in his chair and tapped his fingers together in front of his face, staring past the wagging digits at the obstinate orc. “Leave us,” he said quietly to Saribel and the others. “Clear the room.”

“It is not your place to dismiss my guards . . . Duke of Nesmé,” Hartusk warned, verily spitting Tiago’s assumed title.

“Keep them in place as you will, then,” Tiago replied with a dismissive laugh.

The drow and Doum’wielle filtered away from the royal dais, collecting all of the other drow, a pair of giants, and several orcs and goblins in their wake as they exited the room. Hartusk continued to stare at Tiago for a while, but then nodded to the remaining orcs, his personal entourage, bidding them to leave. As the last exited, Tos’un, at the entrance, closed the door.

“We would do well to ease our demands upon the dragons,” Tiago said when they were alone—seemingly alone. They both knew that Tiago’s wizard companion had probably already enacted spells to spy on their private discussion.

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“We would do well to sack Silverymoon and take our fight to Everlund.”

Tiago gave another of his annoying chuckles. “Indeed, and none would desire that more than I. But I warn you, the dragons are not to be exploited. Arauthator is older than any other in this campaign, and the Old White Death earns his name honestly.”

“He was brought in to serve,” the orc insisted.

“And there you err,” said Tiago. “Arauthator does not serve—not the orcs of Many-Arrows, not the giants of Shining White, and not the drow of Menzoberranzan. He is a dragon, ancient and huge and ultimately deadly.”

“Your wizard brought him to us,” Hartusk insisted.

“My wizard?” Tiago asked dramatically, and Hartusk nearly choked on that thought.

“The old one of your city.”

“Gromph, yes, who is older than Arauthator, and perhaps the only power of Menzoberranzan who could defeat the dragon in combat. But Gromph is not here, Warlord. He is home in the City of Spiders, and home he will stay.”

“Recall him,” Hartusk insisted.

“Better that he stay,” said Tiago. “Were we to ask Gromph to command the dragon, to threaten the dragon, he would take the far easier course and destroy us both, I assure you.”

Hartusk growled yet again.

“Let the dragons have their winter play,” Tiago advised. “Good Warlord, patience!”

“Damn your waiting!”

“Patience,” Tiago insisted. “Our enemies are going nowhere—unless they try to break free of the prisons their cities and citadels have become. We have the granaries of Sundabar, a supply line stretching back to the drow city of Q’Xorlarrin, and freedom to roam the land and hunt as we please. The winter is but an inconvenience to us, but to our enemies . . . ah, Warlord, to our enemies, it is a time of thin rations and misery, and that is the beauty, is it not?”

“Silverymoon is full of priests and wizards,” Hartusk reminded him.

“Yes, Silverymoon will survive the winter well. Everlund, too, no doubt. But the dwarves, Warlord, buried in their holes . . .”

“They spend all of every winter in their holes. What foolishness is this?”

“Yes, but they trade throughout the winter with Silverymoon and

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Sundabar,” Tiago explained. “Alas, but they’ll find no easy routes for that now! The tunnels below run thick with my people, to say nothing of goblins and orcs. The dwarves have grown fat on trade, and now they have no trade. The dwarves know how to forage the Underdark for food, but now their range is limited. They will not enjoy this winter, I assure you. As the year turns to 1485, and the winter deepens through Hammer and Alturiak, the ringing of their hammers will be replaced by the growling of their bellies, do not doubt.”

“Your people have planned well.”

“We always do.”

“They are a tougher lot than you believe.”

“I do not doubt their resourcefulness or their resolve,” Tiago said with a wry grin. “But not even a dwarf can eat stone, my orc friend. Let them wither and die in their holes—perhaps they will begin to eat their dead as the old and the young succumb.”

“A pleasing thought,” Hartusk admitted.

“Or perhaps they will try to break free of their prisons. Any of them. Understand, my friend, that if but one of those three fortresses falls, the other two will be in a sore predicament. Adbar makes the weapons, Felbarr is the link between the three, and Mithral Hall . . .” He paused there, and now it was his turn to growl a little bit, though it sounded more like the purr of a cat about to leap upon a field mouse.

“What of Mithral Hall?”

“That is the prize,” Tiago said, but he didn’t elaborate.



Tiago cared nothing for Hartusk’s war—Matron Mother Quenthel had already recalled some of the principles of her little excursion up here on the surface. Gromph was back home, and Tsabarak, too, had returned to the side of Matron Mother Zeerith Xorlarrin in her fledgling city to the west. Tiago didn’t expect that he and the other “Do’Urdens” would remain much longer.

But long enough, he was determined, to see the end of the heretic named Drizzt, the rogue who had fled into Mithral Hall with his pathetic friends of this wretched World Above. Tiago would flush him out, or

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use everything at his disposal—the fodder goblin and giantkind, the dragons, and the drow—to knock down the doors of Mithral Hall.

“Patience,” he said again to the orc warlord, but in fact, it was his own patience that was wearing thin.



“I do so wish that Tiago would lop the ugly fool’s head off and be done with it,” Ravel Xorlarrin said to Saribel, Tos’un, and Doum’wille when they were out of Tiago’s audience chamber and alone in a side room.

“Tiago will do as Menzoberranzan decides,” Saribel answered her brother sternly. “And I do not believe that would include decapitating the army Matron Mother Quenthel has put at our disposal.”

Both Tos’un and Ravel looked at the high priestess curiously at that remark.

“My dear sister, you do seem to be embracing this Baenre stature you have found,” the wizard sarcastically remarked.

“This Baenre stature?” she dryly replied.

“You were always the obedient one,” said Ravel. “And not even to Matron Mother Zeerith alone. When Berellip spoke, Saribel listened!”

The drow priestess narrowed her gaze, but Ravel nearly laughed aloud at that.

“Quiet and demure Saribel,” he teased. When her hand went to the snake-headed whip she carried on her belt, he added, “Slow with the whip, but true to her calling.”

“Berellip is dead,” she replied. “Perhaps she would not be were it not for Tiago’s obsession with the rogue named Drizzt.”

“You openly blame your husband?”

Now it was Saribel’s turn to laugh. “Perhaps I credit him. It does not matter. House Xorlarrin has determined a different course now.”

“Different from yours, you mean,” said Ravel.

“And yours. Or have you already forgotten? You thought you would be the archmage of this new great city of the Xorlarrins. You were the one who led us to the ruins of Gauntlgrym, of course. But the designs did not play that way, did they? Nay, it was Tsabrak who was deemed more worthy than you, Tsabrak who was blessed with the power of Lolth to

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enact the Darkening, Tsabrak, not Ravel. Matron Mother Zeerith fought for Tsabrak in her dealings with Matron Mother Quenthel, and the matron mother conceded him the position of Archmage of Q'Xorlarrin. Him. Tsabrak, not you."

Ravel conceded that point with a bow.

"Does it disappoint you, dear brother?"

"I prefer Menzoberranzan," Ravel admitted, and he smiled cleverly as he added, "I prefer the halls of House Do'Urden."

That elicited a surprised stare from Saribel.

"Are you not pleased with your new station, Sister?" Ravel asked.

"I am a priestess in House Baenre, the High Priestess of House Do'Urden, and have a promising young noble, a weapons master, grandson of the great Dantrag Baenre, as my husband. Just a few short months ago, I was the younger sister of Berellip Xorlarrin, and little more."

"Even with the advent of Q'Xorlarrin?" Ravel pressed.

"Oh, indeed did I hope that I would find a place—perhaps I would rule Matron Mother Zeerith's academy, if she bothers to build one."

"If Matron Mother Quenthel allows her to build one, you mean," Tos'un unexpectedly intervened, and both Xorlarrins turned to him with a look bordering on shock. There it was, spoken openly, the truth about the supposedly independent city of Q'Xorlarrin, forever destined to be a satellite of Menzoberranzan, existing forever under the suffrage of whomever sat at the head of the spider-shaped table of Menzoberranzan's Ruling Council—which meant, almost certainly, forever under the gaze of a Baenre.

"And now you are a Baenre," Ravel remarked.

"No, I am a Do'Urden," Saribel corrected. "The High Priestess of the Eighth House of Menzoberranzan. And my husband is the weapons master, and you, dear brother, are the House Wizard."

"But our loyalty is truly to House Baenre, then, is it not?" Ravel asked. "House Do'Urden surely survives because of the demands and protection of the matron mother."

Saribel nodded, and both of them glanced at Tos'un as they agreed on Ravel's point.

Tos'un was not Xorlarrin, nor Baenre. Tos'un was of House Barrison Del'Armgo, the Second House of Menzoberranzan, the principle rival of House Baenre.

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Doum'wielle caught those looks and turned her own concerned gaze upon her father.

But Tos'un seemed truly unbothered. "I am Do'Urden," he said.

"A set of eyes for Matron Mother Mez'Barris, no doubt?"

Tos'un laughed at the absurdity of the remark. "You are not very old, wizard. Nor you, priestess. You do not remember the first assault upon the dwarven citadel of Mithral Hall, when Matron Mother Yvonne Baenre was destroyed by the dwarf king Bruenor. When Uthegental, the greatest weapons master of Menzoberranzan . . ." He paused and grinned, and even bowed a bit at the obvious slip up. "Unless that title was given to Dantrag Baenre, of course," he offered, speaking of Tiago's grandfather, who was Uthegental's most hated rival.

"I remember it all so well," Tos'un continued. "The utter folly. The slaughter. We came and we were beaten back, but no, we did not leave—or did not have to leave! That was the decision of those left in dead Matron Mother Yvonne's bloody wake. We did not avenge her, or Uthegental. No, we fled.

"Drizzt Do'Urden was there, you know," he went on, and the Xorlarrins leaned in eagerly. "In Mithral Hall in the time of that battle, fighting beside King Bruenor, against his own people. So the drow fled, and Mez'Barris was no small part of that decision—indeed, she never approved of the march in the first place."

"*Matron Mother Mez'Barris*," Saribel corrected, but there was more curiosity than outrage in her voice.

"But I did not leave," Tos'un said, the boast clear in his voice. "Nay, I would not leave. And so, with my conspirators, I waited, and cultivated our opportunity. When we found that opportunity, in the form of the original king Obould, we did then exactly as this wiser Matron Mother Baenre does now. And look what we created, friends!" He waved his arms around. "The Kingdom of Many-Arrows, where the orcs bred thick, with numbers uncounted."

"You acted in preparation for this war?" Ravel asked, clearly unconvinced. "You foresaw this day? Is that your claim?"

"I cultivated the battlefield," Tos'un replied. "Do you doubt me? With a hundred thousand orc warriors at your disposal, do you doubt me?"

"You think yourself a hero of Menzoberranzan," Saribel said, and it sounded more like an accusation than anything else.

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But Tos'un clearly wasn't rattled in the least, and a smile widened across his face. "I think myself a Do'Urden," he said slyly. "The patron of House Do'Urden, if I correctly recall the matron mother's demands. And I think that a good thing. It is a fledgling House, yet already seated at the Ruling Council."

"As an echo for Baenre," Saribel dared to say.

"For now, with Matron Mother Darthiir," said Tos'un. "But consider the talent assembled in that fledgling House. Consider the alliances, particularly with Baenre. Consider the glory we bring with every victory scored here in this land—a land I know better than any drow alive. Consider our ties to Q'Xorlarrin, with two of Zeerith's children serving in positions of high regard.

"And with that one," he added, and turned and pointed back to the hall where they had left Tiago. "Full of ambition, full of fire, and full of talent. A Baenre noble, a favored great-nephew of the matron mother. It is good to be a Do'Urden."

He stopped, and there ensued a long silence as the others digested his startling words.

"Perhaps it will be, one day soon," Ravel said, finally. "For now, being a Do'Urden means being trapped in this place of roofless nightmares and wind and snow. And now, worse, it means all of that without the warmth of an enemy's blood to defeat the cold, and without the dying cries of an enemy's last hopeless moments to steal the boredom."

Saribel offered a nod at that, as did Tos'un, after a moment.

"How many years did you remain here?" Ravel asked Tos'un, shaking his head to show that the question was simply a statement of disbelief.

Tos'un did not answer, and Ravel glanced around, suddenly seeming not unlike a caged animal. He turned around, nearly a complete circuit, before settling his gaze upon Doum'wielle.

"I am bored," he said, particularly to her. "Come." He extended his hand to her, and she cast a confused glance at her father.

"Pleasure me," Ravel said bluntly.

Doum'wielle felt her cheeks flush at the crude remark. Her thoughts careened from disgust to, surprisingly, a sudden notion of a path of amazing possibilities rolling out in front of her. Ravel was the House wizard of Do'Urden, a noble son of House Xorlarrin, friend to Tiago, brother and confidant to Saribel.

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Perform well! Doum'wielle thought, or heard in her head, and the possibilities of acceptance and ascension in the drow ranks fluttered around her subconscious, just out of reach but tempting nonetheless.

She looked directly at Ravel and noted a sly undercurrent behind his lewd smile. That turned her to her father, who seemed quite shaken.

Still, Tos'un looked at her and nodded, even slightly motioning with his chin that she should take the offered hand and go with Ravel.

Fingers visibly trembling, Doum'wielle reached for the drow hand, and Ravel pulled her away.



"My son tells me that the war chief is not pleased," the great Arauthator said to Tiago when the drow found him in a cave not far from Nesmé.

"Hartusk is angry at . . . everything," Tiago replied dismissively. "It is that very nature of the ugly beast that made him valuable to us in the first place. I would be more worried if he was contented, particularly now with the fighting in pause."

"A pause he does not want."

"What Hartusk wants matters not. He will do as we tell him or he will be replaced." The drow gave a little laugh. "Even if he does as we instruct, he is a temporary thing. We will outlast him."

"I will," the dragon replied. "I will outlast you all. When you are dust, I will call this land my domain."

"I was speaking of the years coming, not the centuries," Tiago dryly replied.

"Years?" the dragon said doubtfully. "Your people think in tendays, not years. You will outlast Hartusk if you murder him, perhaps, but else he will call Many-Arrows his kingdom when the drow have returned to their lightless tunnels."

"Not so."

"They are already going!" the dragon said, and his insistence was forceful enough to blow Tiago's hair back and chill the dark elf to the bone. "Do you deny it? Many of your people have left!"

Tiago paused and carefully considered his next words, as he could see that Arauthator was growing more and more agitated. He couldn't

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deny the dragon's observations, particularly in that the highest-ranking drow—Matron Mother Quenthel, Gromph, and Tsabrak, in particular—had not been seen around the region in a long while, and were not expected back, ever. It occurred to him that an angry Arauthator could eat him then and there to send a statement to the matron mother and the archmage. They had enlisted the great wyrms to their cause, after all, and if Arauthator ever began to feel that he was being exploited, the result would surely be . . . unfortunate.

"My people are not accustomed to this biting cold, great dragon," he said calmly. "Or this snow!"

"My breath is colder still," the dragon warned.

"So I have witnessed from my perch upon your back," Tiago said lightheartedly.

"You admit that the winter has driven the drow from this land and from this campaign?"

"Nay!" Tiago insisted. He turned and pointed back toward Nesmé, the smoke from the hearth fires in the town visible above the rolling hills. "You have four drow nobles just beyond the rise, wintering in Nesmé, where I am duke."

"Four," the dragon muttered, unimpressed.

"Ravel of Q'Xorlarrin, sister city of Menzoberranzan," Tiago replied. "Noble son of Matron Mother Zeerith, who rules Q'Xorlarrin. And Tos'un of House Barrison Del'Armgo, Second House of Menzoberranzan. And Priestess Saribel, who is Baenre and Xorlarrin."

"And Tiago, who is Baenre no more," the perceptive dragon remarked. "You are all of this other, lesser House, are you not? Your boasts are of Do'Urden, not Baenre, not Barrison Del'Armgo, and not Xorlarrin!"

Tiago looked carefully at the wyrm. Clearly Arauthator had been doing some investigating and more than a little spying.

"Lesser?" he asked, with a dismissive shake of his head.

"Where does Do'Urden rank among the Houses of Menzoberranzan?" the dragon asked. "Where are the drow leaders?"

"I am the drow leader in this campaign, and doubt not the importance of this fledgling House—a House purposely named to dishonor the rogue who has come again to this land."

"Him again?" Arauthator did not seem impressed.

"You should take heed of Drizzt Do'Urden, my great friend," Tiago warned. "He is one of those pesky heroes whose names are sung by the

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bards in taverns across Faerûn. Surely you who are of dragonkind knows of this sort. The heroes who topple tyrant kings.”

Arauthator began to growl, knowing where this was going, obviously, but that didn't stop Tiago.

“The heroes who slay dragons,” he finished, ignoring Arauthator's growl.

The two stared at each other for a long while.

“There are more of my people about than you see,” Tiago said. “In the tunnels all about the Upperdark of the Silver Marches, pressing the dwarves in their holes. It is good that Nesmé has fallen, and better that Sundabar is no more, and better still will it be when Silvermoon is crushed beneath us!”

“I will eat every captive from that wretched city,” the dragon promised, for Arauthator had taken more than a few stinging magical assaults when flying around that powerful magical fortress.

“These prizes offer much,” said Tiago. “Slaves and treasure, yes, but the better slaves and the greater treasures will not be so easily pried.”

“The dwarves,” the dragon reasoned.

“Of course the dwarves,” Tiago agreed. “The humans and elves of the Silver Marches are no threat to the drow—if ever they deigned to march upon Menzoberranzan, most would perish long before they neared the city! But the dwarves . . . My people will not suffer them to thrive as they are now in the Silver Marches. When dwarves thrive, they dig deeper, and when they dig deeper, they accost my people.

“The drow are in the tunnels all about Mithral Hall and Felbarr and Adbar,” he assured the wyrm. “Every day, perhaps even at this very moment, my people battle the bearded folk, and press them tighter into their holes, and stop them from gathering food beyond their dark halls. They will come out, there will be no choice for them, and then we will all know a greater victory, and Arauthator will know piles of treasure for his hoard.”

The dragon growled, but it was not threatening—it sounded more like a purr. The great wyrm nodded slowly in approval. But, as was often the case with such creatures, that mood did not last.

“You will not stay,” the dragon said accusingly. “The great mage and the matron mother have gone, and so will the rest. If these dwarves were as important as you claim, Gromph would remain. His power mocks all that Tiago holds at his fingers.”

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The drow shook his head.

“You will not stay!” the dragon insisted.

“Perhaps not,” Tiago admitted, “but we will leave our mark forever upon this land.”

“Your scar, you mean.”

“As you wish,” Tiago agreed. “And it is a scar to benefit us both. Gromph has made clear our bargain, and it is one we are all more than happy to uphold. Consider this, Old White Death, as you mull the winter quiet. My people seek longer gain while the orcs are but impulsive dullards. Hartusk and all the others, perhaps, would see to your due, but some would hide those treasures away, hoping to fool you. You have known orcs through the centuries, and so you know this to be true.”

“But the drow would be more clever in their cheating.”

“And the drow would be wiser than to even try,” Tiago replied. “We care little for the treasures you seek. Our goal here is not wealth, but power! Power for Lady Lolth, as you seek . . .”

He paused there and smiled knowingly, reminding the dragon of the source of the original deal it had made with Gromph and Matron Mother Quentel. Arauthator and his son had joined in the war for treasure, and not simply to hoard it, as dragons will. No, the chromatic wyrms had a need for their piles of gold and gems as they prepared the way for their maelstrom goddess.

“I am doing you a favor, am I not?” the dragon said.

Tiago nodded and smiled. “Has there been any movement about Mithral Hall?”

“Just the orcs,” answered the dragon, who had been spending a lot of time circling the area of Mithral Hall, scouting for Tiago. “And a legion of giants camped with war machines on the ridge above the western door and the valley called Keeper’s Dale. The great bridge over the river is thick with orcs all about it. If the dwarves broke out to the east, that bridge would be dropped into the Surbrin.”

“You remained up high? Far above the giants and orcs?”

“As you asked.”

“Lower, then, next time, if you would,” Tiago asked.

The dragon stared at him intently.

“Find their chimneys and spy holes,” Tiago explained. “Find regions on the high mountain where we can put our own spies.”

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“The dwarves are not fools, drow,” the dragon replied. “They hide their chimneys in ravines and chasms, deep in dark caves. I will fly lower, as you ask. And you will ride with me.”

It wasn't a suggestion, Tiago knew, but an order. If he didn't agree, Arauthator would not subject himself to possible ballista fire or magical spells around the mountain that housed Mithral Hall. Not unless Tiago was willing to take the same risk.

Tiago nodded, and thought that perhaps it would be wise to take Ravel along, as well. The wizard could ward him from the cold winds that would buffet him on his dragon perch, and perhaps Ravel's spells would prove useful in determining more secrets about Mithral Hall's clever inhabitants.

The harder part would be convincing Hartusk to withdraw the giants and many of the orcs. Despite his claims to Arauthator, the drow in the Upperdark were not doing much to hamper and sting Mithral Hall. Of the three dwarf citadels, that one was the most self-sufficient, so they had come to recognize.

The dwarves might be able to stay in their hold indefinitely, and that, Tiago could not tolerate.

Not when his own time here might be growing short.

Not when Drizzt Do'Urden was in that hole with them.



Doum'wielle lay in the darkness on the bed in her room, staring up at the ceiling. Tears settled in her eyes, but not from the pain she felt in her jaw. Many drow males were like that. So frustrated by their subservience to the women of their race they routinely abused others, like Doum'wielle, whom they could so casually refer to as offal.

Offal. *Iblith*, they said.

She, too, was of House Do'Urden, so it had been decreed, but she would forever be *iblich*, or, worse, *darthiir*.

She thought of her mother, then, in the Glimmerwood. Sinnafein was a queen of the elves, and Doum'wielle had been a princess.

Now she was offal.

She thought of her brother, and her tears flowed more freely. She pictured the look her father had given her when Ravel had reached out to her.

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She could see him so clearly again in her mind's eye, and so now she tried to decipher that curious expression.

Ravel's call to abuse his Little Doe had likely—hopefully!—hurt Tos'un, but as she recalled that visage now, Doum'wielle couldn't help but note a twinge of eagerness there. She had initially thought it a desire to go and punish Ravel for insulting Little Doe, but now, in retrospect, a different, and most unsettling, notion came to her.

Had her father been eager to give her over to Ravel or to another of the important dark elves of House Do'Urden, as a way to better secure his own standing in the House? He was Barrison Del'Armgo, after all, of the family known to be bitter rivals to both the Baenres and the Xorlarrins. In House Do'Urden, with Tiago and Saribel and Ravel, he was vulnerable.

It all began to sort out to her then. Ravel hadn't taken her to alleviate his boredom or for any carnal needs—not primarily, at least. He had used her as a test of Tos'un's loyalty.

Tos'un had warned her of the trials they would face—nothing as specific as this, of course, but he had explained in great detail to his daughter that the ways of the drow were not much akin to the ways of the wood elves. In the Glimmerwood, sensuality and sexuality were great gifts, often shared, but never taken and never coerced.

For a few moments, Doum'wielle began to truly sink then the weight of all she had done began to descend upon her like Arauthator's leathery wings. She brought her hands up into view, expecting to see Tierflin's blood staining them. She wanted her mother, above all, and almost cried out for Sinnafein.

Almost. The moments were fleeting, and a voice promising greater comfort called out to her.

Doum'wielle rolled out of her bed and padded across the room on bare feet to the chair set by the window, to the sword belt hanging on the chair.

To the comfort of her sentient sword.



“You grow impatient,” Arauthator said to Tiago just a few days later. The pair had found another cave, a deep crevice actually, set far back in the mountain known as Fourthpeak. It seemed unremarkable enough, just

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a crack in the stones, but Arauthor's keen sense of smell had detected a whiff of smoke emanating from within. And so the dragon had pried the stones apart, and Tiago had gone in and located the hidden chimney.

The drow didn't deny the dragon's observation. "No activity?" he asked again.

"The mountain is quiet," the dragon confirmed.

"Seal the chimney," Tiago bade his godlike mount, and the drow quickly backed away.

Arauthor looked around at the stone, gauging the integrity—or in this case, the lack thereof. "On my back, young Baenre," he said, and he lowered and turned so that Tiago could climb onto the saddle.

Once Tiago was seated, Arauthor breathed into the crevice with all his strength and all his deadly cold mist, sealing the chimney top under a layer of ice. That wouldn't hold for long, the wyrm knew, given the warmth climbing up from the fires below, and so the beast attacked the mountain itself, claws rending stone, wings pushing dislodged boulders into position. The wyrm jumped atop the pile of rubble that used to be a crevice between two slabs of stone, tightening the seal.

Let the dwarves choke on their own smoke!

"Well played, my friend," Tiago said in congratulations when the wyrm was done.

"They have a hundred more vents all around the mountain, you know," the dragon replied. "Our efforts will make parts of their complex uncomfortable, perhaps, but you'll not smoke them out."

Tiago nodded. He knew. From his high perch, the drow looked down around the mountain ways, to the black camps of orcs and goblins and the line of giants with their war machines atop Keeper's Dale.

"Let us fly to Sundabar," he bade the wyrm.

"Hartusk Keep, you mean," the dragon replied with a sly look. Both of them knew the name had been offered merely to placate the stupid orc leader.

Despite his very real fears that the dwarves would outlast him, Tiago laughed.

The dragon banked away, catching the updrafts on widespread wings, soaring out to the east. It was time to convince the warlord.