

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

HOMECOMING

BOOK III

HERO

R.A. SALVATORE





Prelude

MOSTLY HUMAN BANDITS, TO BE HONEST,” REGIS TOLD WULFGAR. The two were relaxing in the back of a wagon as it rolled southeast from Daggerford down the Trade Way that late spring day of the Year of the Nether Mountain Scrolls, or 1486 by Dalereckoning. “You would expect more monsters to prowl the area, what with the land being so sparse of true settlements, but the trouble was mostly the making of humans.” The halfling ended with a sigh.

Beside him, Wulfgar nodded and glanced out over his arm, which was thrown up and around the wooden rail of the wagon, at the rolling hills to the north of the road. Somewhere up there, his friends were on the march at the head of a vast dwarven army, likely heading east to the Sword Coast before they began their southern turn to the ancient dwarven homeland of Gauntlgrym.

Wulfgar knew Bruenor would get the place back. With Drizzt and Catti-brie at his side, the determined dwarf would not be denied. Surely they would encounter great dangers, and just as surely they would find their way through, even without him.

That thought hung with him, for what surprised Wulfgar most in thinking about the coming trials his friends would face was his own lack of guilt in not being there beside them.

There was so much more of the world that he wanted to see!

He hadn’t returned to life again simply to replay the events of his first existence. And in that spirit, he had come south from Mithral Hall to Silverymoon, and then to Waterdeep where they had spent the cold winter, with Regis and the strange monk Afafrenfer. They rode along the Trade Way bound for the port city of Suzail on the westernmost expanse of the Sea of Fallen Stars, where they would sign on with a ship to Aglarond, to the city of Delthuntle, where Regis’s beloved Donnola Topolino headed the formidable rogue’s house of the same name.

R. A. SALVATORE

“Plenty o’ monsters about, don’t ye doubt,” the grizzled old driver called back. “Were it just human folk, I’d’ve not paid ye so well for yer guarding!”

“Paid?” Wulfgar quietly echoed with a laugh, for their pay was a ride, nothing more.

“Yes, but I find human bandits the most troubling along the road, don’t you?” Regis answered the man. “At least between Daggerford and the Boareskyr Bridge.”

The driver looked back, his face twisted in cynical skepticism. He was sorely in need of a shave, Wulfgar noted, with gray stubble sticking straight out of the many warts on his face. Wulfgar got the impression that the man hadn’t cut the scraggly beard that length, or that he hadn’t cut any of his hair in a long, long while. But still, the longest hairs on his wide, round face were those sticking down from his huge nostrils.

“Bah! Are ye the herald o’ the Trade Way now?” the driver said to the well-coifed and rather foppish-looking halfling. For indeed, Regis was the height of fashion, with his grand blue beret; black, stiff-collared traveling cloak; fine clothes; and the brilliant cage of the fine rapier showing in front of his left hip.

“I rode with the Ponies,” Regis responded, no small amount of pride in his voice.

Wulfgar almost expected his diminutive friend to twirl his mustache.

“The Ponies?” the driver replied, and there was no missing the change in the timbre of the man’s voice, which dropped low as he turned a bit farther around to study Regis. Had he scrutinized Regis more carefully back in Daggerford, the man would probably have guessed that truth about the cultured halfling before it was announced. With his neatly-trimmed goatee, his long and curly brown locks, and splendid garments, it was obvious that Regis was an adventurer of some importance and accomplishment. And the three-bladed dagger on his right hip, the fabulous rapier on his left, and the hand crossbow slung across his chest just under the folds of his fancy cloak were worn in a way that bespoke experience and not mere ornamentation.

Wulfgar carefully watched the driver, then back to Regis as the two locked their measuring stares.

“Yes, the Grinning Ponies,” Regis said. “Perhaps you have heard of them.”

The driver swung back around—quite rudely, Wulfgar thought. “Aye, they’re about,” he said without looking back again. “A lot more in their

tales than in truth, but them little ones're about." And under his breath so that Wulfgar could barely hear, the driver added, "Causing more trouble than they be fixing, to be sure."

Wulfgar arched an eyebrow as he glanced at Regis, who motioned for him to hold silent.

"Aye," Regis replied to the driver. "They called themselves grinning, but I always secretly put the word 'giggling' first in the title. The Giggling Ponies! Fancy enough riders, but not much for the fight. 'Twas why I left them. They so dearly wanted to be counted as heroes, but never earning the title, and oh, how gleefully did they cut down men whenever they found the easy kill!"

The driver grumbled something inaudible.

Regis tossed a wink at Wulfgar. "Men not deserving the blade," the halfling went on, dramatically. "Men just wanting to make a bit o' bread for their families, was all."

Wulfgar scrunched up his face at the curious words, for never before had Regis spoken of the Grinning Ponies with anything less than grand praise. But the big man stared even more curiously at the accent his halfling friend had suddenly affected, one more common to the peasants of the region and one he had never heard from Regis before.

"Bandit," Regis silently mouthed to Wulfgar, subtly pointing to the driver, their current employer.

"Aye, them lords and ladies steal, but it's all legal, and just the sword for a man takin' what he's needing just to fill his own belly and them o' his family," said the driver.

"Taking by the sword, and so the sword returns," Wulfgar said.

"Bah!" the driver snorted. "Well, by the sword and by the hammer if them bandits come for me then, what? Ye just remember who's payin' ye!"

Neither of the companions thought that the driver had said any of that with conviction, or with any fear at all that they might soon be accosted.

The halfling and the barbarian exchanged knowing nods. They had been hired by a bandit who was taking them, no doubt, into a hornet's nest of thieves. And likely soon, they each realized. They were moving out well beyond of the patrolled lands around Daggerford.

Wulfgar pointed to the trail in their wake, and Regis nodded.

"How long are we for the road this day?" the halfling asked.

R . A . S A L V A T O R E

“To the sunset. I’m lookin’ for the Boareskyr Bridge in a tenday, no more, and that’s twenty-and-five or more miles a day.”

Regis looked at Wulfgar and shook his head, confident that they weren’t getting anywhere near the Boareskyr Bridge with this particular driver leading them.

“Then we’ll be long into the night with our watches, and so I’ll find me some sleep now,” Regis announced. He began shuffling boxes about and from his magical pouch produced a heavy blanket.

“Aye, road’s clear enough,” said the driver, without even glancing back. “Ye both might be taking a good afternoon nap.”

“Afafrenfere?” Regis mouthed.

Wulfgar shrugged. The monk had remained behind in Daggerford, following a lead regarding a missing companion named Effron, but had promised to catch up with them on the road. They could use him now. That one could fight well, and a battle was likely very near.

At the same time Wulfgar slid a bag of apples under the blanket, which was suspended between two crates, Regis slipped off the back of the wagon, disappearing into the tall grass so quickly that Wulfgar couldn’t even follow the halfling’s movements beyond the first few hunched steps.

A few moments later, Wulfgar gave a great, feigned yawn, and rested back, conveniently obscuring most of the halfling’s bedroll from the driver.

“Aye, but you scream loudly at any sign of trouble,” he said to the driver. “My little friend here is known for his great snoring.”

“The littlest ones always are!” the man said with a laugh, and soon after, tellingly, he began to whistle.

And Wulfgar began to snore.

The barbarian knew that Regis’s guess was correct very soon after, when the wagon slowed and lurched a bit as it went off the side of the trail. Wulfgar opened his eyes just enough to see that they were moving into a copse of trees.

He heard the footsteps of approaching men, heard the driver suddenly scrambling down from his bench.

Up popped Wulfgar to find himself surrounded by a trio of bandits centered by a man with a fine-looking sword. A woman stood to his right, holding a sturdy spear, and to his left was a second man with an axe so heavy Wulfgar was amazed the flabby-armed, round-bellied fellow could hold it up and remain standing. The driver was just off to the side

of the cart, huddled on the ground. An archer stared down at Wulfgar from above, and he noted a second, bow drawn, behind a wall of planks covered in leaves and set between two oaks.

“Here now, big fellow,” said the swordsman, a tall, slender man with long, curly blond locks. “No need to be getting excited here. You’re caught, as you know, and so there’s no need for us to spill your blood all over the ground.”

“Might be fun, though,” said the woman standing beside him, and she leveled her spear Wulfgar’s way.

“Caught?” Wulfgar asked, as if he had no idea what any of this could mean. He turned his head to the right, glancing over the side of the wagon. “Driver?”

The man whimpered.

“You just keep yourself curled and face down, or you’ll feel the bite of my blade!” the swordsman, apparently the leader, ordered.

Wulfgar knew better.

“Your pouch,” the swordsman demanded, holding out his free hand.

“You would take my last copper?” Wulfgar asked.

“Aye, and that pretty hammer, too,” said the axe-wielder, as dirty a human as Wulfgar had ever seen. He wasn’t as tall as the swordsman, though quite a bit heavier, and as he motioned for Aegis-fang with his bulky axe, Wulfgar was struck by the clumsiness of the movement. Of the three in front of him, only the swordsman seemed to handle his weapon with any aplomb.

And the archer above him, he noted, was leaning so heavily and so forward against a branch that he’d never be able to properly adjust his shot quickly to either side.

Wulfgar reached to his belt, broke the tie on his small pouch, and tossed it to the swordsman.

“And the warhammer,” the swordsman demanded.

Wulfgar looked at Aegis-fang. “My father made this for me,” he answered.

The man with the axe giggled and spat.

“Then perhaps he will make you another,” said the swordsman. “We are not murderers, after all.”

“Unless we have to be,” said the woman, and she rolled her spear over in her fingers.

R . A . SALVATORE

Wulfgar put on an expression of regret and looked down at Aegis-fang yet again.

“Now!” the swordsman yelled, trying to startle him, trying to get him to hand it over before he could even consider anything else. And so Wulfgar complied, tossing Aegis-fang to the ground at the man’s feet.

The ruffian with the axe was fast to it, and he dropped his own weapon happily as he picked up the magnificently-balanced Aegis-fang.

“Good choice,” said the swordsman.

Wulfgar shrugged.

“Aye, but we have to kill him anyway, eh?” said the woman.

“Nay, just tie him and leave him,” the swordsman replied.

The ruffian with Aegis-fang had moved off a step to the side, near to the driver, to put his new weapon through some practice swings. Wulfgar noted that the driver kept peeking up at the bandit, apparently trying to get his attention. He whispered something along the lines of “. . . his little friend.”

“And your fine hat, please,” the swordsman asked politely.

Wulfgar turned to his left, where Regis’s splendid blue beret lay at the top of the blanket suspended between the crates.

“It’s not my hat.”

“Then whose . . . ?” the swordsman started to ask, but the man with Aegis-fang cried out, “Eh, take care! He’s got a little rat friend hidin’ under there!”

The spear-wielder’s eyes widened with alarm and she reflexively thrust forward the spear.

“No!” the swordsman cried, but too late.

An arrow dropped harmlessly to the ground beside her, and as Wulfgar dodged the thrust and grasped the spear just blow the tip, he managed to glance up into the tree to see the archer fully slumped over the branch, one arm and one leg on either side.

Silently thanking Regis, Wulfgar grabbed the spear shaft with his second hand and shoved it back at the woman, driving it past her right side. Then, with frightening strength, he casually flicked it—and her—into the air. She tumbled into the swordsman and knocked him aside.

Wulfgar rolled into a back somersault, his hands planting and pushing off to throw him up to his feet, and over the right side of the wagon he went, landing next to the huddled driver, who looked up.

Wulfgar kicked him in the face, sending him sprawling in the dirt.
But on came the bandit wielding Aegis-fang.

“What have you done?” the swordsman cried as he extracted himself from his female companion. Both turned to help their friend, but a voice from behind stopped them before they took their first steps.

“Nothing wise.”

The two leaped about, trying to bring their weapons to a defensive posture. Regis sent in his rapier, prodding the woman in her leading hand, going right through her palm as she tried to swing her spear across her chest. She yelped, lost her grip with that hand, and fell back defensively, her spear angled to the ground.

At the same time, the swordsman took the opening to leap forward with a strike. But the dagger neatly picked it off and turned the blade out wide. The bandit disengaged skillfully and spun to square up against his diminutive foe. He found the halfling holding the dagger in front of him, but with only one of its serpent-like side blades now apparent.

“Good sir, I fear you have broken my fine knife,” the halfling said.

The swordsman smiled—but only until the halfling threw the “broken” tine at him. It struck him on his blocking forearm, doing no immediate harm, but the piece transformed from a metal side blade into a tiny living serpent. Before the surprised bandit could react, the snake rushed along with incredible speed, up his arm, over his shoulder, and around his neck, and there it circled and tightened. The swordsman clawed at it with his free hand, working to keep his sword up in an attempt to ward off the halfling.

But this was more than a small magical serpent. It was a garrote, and one that summoned a most awful specter right behind the victim, an undead entity that tugged with such tremendous force that the swordsman was yanked off his feet and sent flying backward and to the ground.

And there he lay, writhing, choking. He dropped his sword and grabbed at the serpent with both hands, but to no avail.

And then how the bulky man roared, lifting his beautiful new weapon up over his head with both hands, charging for the unarmed barbarian, determined to crush the fool’s skull with a single, mighty downward chop.

It took him a couple of long strides to realize that he wasn’t holding the warhammer any longer, and a couple more halting steps to come to the realization that the barbarian now had the weapon securely back in hand.

R. A. SALVATORE

And by that time, of course, the portly bandit found himself standing right in front of the huge, muscular—and *armed*—barbarian.

“Huh?” the ruffian asked, clearly at a loss.

Wulfgar stabbed the head of Aegis-fang forward into the man’s fat face, cracking teeth and splattering his nose, stopping the attacker in his tracks. The portly bandit stumbled back a step, staring at Wulfgar in disbelief, unable to sort out how that warhammer could have possibly been taken from him so cleanly, and from several strides away.

He didn’t understand Aegis-fang, and its connection to Wulfgar, son of Beornegar and son of Bruenor, and how the simple whisper of “Tempus” would magically teleport the hammer to Wulfgar’s waiting hand.

The bandit staggered. He shook his head. He fell over onto the ground.

Wulfgar couldn’t watch that descent. A thrumming sound from the bluff alerted him to danger. He threw himself back, turning his head and sweeping his arms up in front of his chest and face—and a good thing he did. When he hit the ground in a roll, he had an arrow sticking out of his muscled forearm!

He paid it little heed, coming around and to his feet then in a fast half-turn from which he sent Aegis-fang flying for the hidden archer.

The warhammer hit the wooden blind and blew apart the planks, driving through in an explosion of splinters. Wulfgar heard a cry, a woman’s voice, and the female archer went flying out the back of her ambush spot.

“Tempus!” Wulfgar roared, though he really wasn’t even certain if that name meant anything to him anymore.

Still, the hammer appeared in his hand, and so his battle cry was one well-chosen.

The woman grabbed up her spear again, wincing with pain, but with no choice but to battle through it. She thrust ahead, more to keep the halfling at bay than in any hopes of scoring a hit, but Regis was far too quick for that.

In perfect fencing balance, left foot trailing and perpendicular to the fight, he quick-stepped a retreat, then came rushing ahead. Seeing her error, the woman tried to send her spear forward again, but Regis was inside the head and the strength of the thrust then, and a fast down-and-out sweep of the rapier turned the spear out wide.

The dashing halfling stepped in behind, and, one-two, stabbed the woman in her shoulders.

He swept out to the side, toward the man being choked to death on the ground by the spectral apparition.

A quick stab of Regis's splendid rapier ended that drama, the simple hit on the apparition making it disappear to nothingness. The swordsman fell flat, gasping.

"Do stay down," Regis warned him, rushing back the other way, sweeping his rapier in circles around the stabbing tip of the woman's spear. And when her eyes, too, began to spin as she tried to keep up with the movement, the halfling reversed the flow, driving his rapier down and across his body, taking the spear inside while he stepped outside and forward.

Now his dagger came in, catching the spear fully, and he lifted it high, waded in underneath the lifted tip, and brought his rapier's point in under the woman's chin.

"Oh, dear lady, I do not wish to end your life," he said graciously. "So please do drop your nasty spear."

Head tilted way back, nowhere to flee, she looked down at him and swallowed hard—and did indeed let go of the spear.

Regis flicked it far aside, then called over his shoulder to the swordsman, who was stubbornly trying to rise.

"I am sure I told you to stay on the ground," he said.

The man paused, but then started up once more.

"I have another . . ." Regis started to explain, but he just sighed and sent his dagger's second magical snake flying at the man.

Regis didn't even watch the result. He didn't have to.

He turned his attention back to the woman at the end of his rapier, and her eyes told the tale, as did the swordsman's desperate gasp, when a second apparition appeared at the back of the new garrote and began choking the life out of him once more.

This time, Regis let the undead fiend choke the man unconscious before he calmly walked over and poked the specter, dispelling the deadly magic.

Regis heaved a great sigh. "Sometimes, they are so stubborn," he said to Wulfgar, his complaint interrupted by the crack of a tree branch up above. The archer, sound asleep from Regis's poisoned hand crossbow dart, fell heavily to the dirt right beside the barbarian and the female prisoner.

Regis looked from the groaning, broken man to Wulfgar, and shrugged.

R . A . S A L V A T O R E

Wulfgar motioned to Regis's magical pouch, where he kept his potions, salves, and bandages. The barbarian hoisted his warhammer up on one shoulder then kicked softly at the man on the ground in front of him. "If you stand up," he warned the portly bandit, and then extended the warning to the wagon driver as well, "I will crush your heads."

To emphasize his point, he sent his hammer swinging down, the head driving deeply into the ground right in front of the prone bandit's face.

"Stay down and right there," Wulfgar reiterated. Then he stalked off, breaking through the remaining splinters of the blind between the oaks and moving into the brush to find the second archer, the woman. He carried her out over his shoulder, with her groaning in agony with every step. One of her arms hung limp and twisted, terribly shattered, and her breathing came in gasps. The hammer had driven through her arm and collapsed half her chest.

Without magic, she would surely die in short order. Fortunately for her, and for the other archer, Wulfgar and Regis were not without magic. Even as Wulfgar moved over to lay the wounded woman on the back of the wagon, Regis had his portable alchemy lab set up, and the spear-wielding woman he had captured was moving from one fallen bandit to another with potions of healing.

"These unguents and potions are not cheaply made," Regis grumbled to Wulfgar. He reached for a potion bottle, but noting the extent of the woman's wounds, went instead to a small jar of salve.

"What gold value is too much?" Wulfgar asked.

Regis smiled and began applying the healing salve.

A rustle caught their attention and they turned to see the other woman, the one Regis had captured, rushing away through the underbrush.

Regis looked up at Wulfgar. "Do you think she has more friends?"

Wulfgar looked around at the motley crew scattered all about. These were farmers, or perhaps tradesmen, dirt poor and desperate.

"Should I catch her, that we can hang the lot of them together?" he asked.

Regis's horrified expression lasted only the moment it took for him to realize his large friend was teasing. But even in that jest, Wulfgar had set out a perplexing question. Whatever were they to do with this group? They had no intention of executing them, for clearly these were not hardened murderers and thieves.

But still, could they leave them alive and free here on the road, where they might bring more mischief and even harm to the next unwary travelers who got into the back of the treacherous driver's wagon?

"Justice can be harsh on the Trade Way," Regis remarked.

"Would the Ponies execute this bunch?"

"Only if they were found to have killed someone."

"Then what else?" Wulfgar asked. The man choked unconscious by Regis's garrote awakened then, coughing and sputtering and struggling to sit up. Wulfgar stepped over and helped him, grabbing him by the front of the tunic and hoisting him to his feet with just the one arm.

"Thieves are put to work for merchants or craftsmen," Regis explained. "Hard labor until their debt is repaid for the trouble they have caused."

"I . . . We . . . we . . . we could have killed you," the swordsman sputtered.

"No, you could not have," Wulfgar replied, walking the fellow over to the wagon. "Nor did you want to when you thought you had me helpless, and that is the only reason any of you are still alive."

"So then what do you mean to do with us?" asked the leader of the group.

"We hired a wagon to take us to the Boareskyr Bridge," Wulfgar explained. "And so you shall do exactly that. All of you."

He shoved the man away. "Go and find your woman who tried to stab me," Wulfgar instructed, nodding to the brush where the woman had run. "Bring her back. If you return, you will ride with us to the bridge. If you do not return, you will find your four friends dead right here, and we will be gone with the wagon. And know that if you do not return to us quickly, if I ever see you again, I will kill you."

"Do you think he'll come back?" Regis asked when the man disappeared into the underbrush.

"Are you asking for a wager?"

The halfling grinned.



SOON AFTER, THE SUN beginning its western descent, the wagon once again rolled down the Trade Way toward the Boareskyr Bridge, with Wulfgar sitting on the bench beside the bruised and terrified driver, and Regis right behind him, keeping an eye on the two archers, the most badly wounded of the bandit group.

R. A. SALVATORE

The portly man who had foolishly thought to wield Wulfgar's hammer sat on the back of the wagon, his legs dangling.

They had barely begun to roll out when the other two bandits appeared on the road behind them, running to catch up—and with a familiar robed figure right behind them, prodding them along.

“Bah, a gold piece for Wulfgar, then,” Regis grumbled.

But he was glad that his big friend had guessed right, and glad, too, to see that Brother Afafrenfere had come at last.



“BUT I WOULD be foolish to try, yes?” the swordsman, Adelard Arras of Waterdeep, said to Wulfgar soon after they broke camp the next morning.

“Yes,” Wulfgar replied.

“And since I know this, I would not try!”

Wulfgar looked at him skeptically.

“I am no fool!” Adelard protested.

“But you are a highwayman. And not a very good one.”

Adelard sighed and shook his head. “The road is dangerous, my friend.”

“Never confuse me as your friend,” Wulfgar warned.

“But you did not kill me, nor any of my companions,” Adelard protested. “Yet you are a fierce warrior, of course, and would not shy from such extreme retribution. Indeed, by your own admission, you spent a great deal of wealth in the form of potions and salves to save us.”

“She shot me with an arrow,” Wulfgar reminded him, nodding back at the woman who rode, much more comfortably now, in the back of the wagon.

“And yet we live! All of us! Because you see in us—”

“You are not getting your weapons back,” Wulfgar declared with finality. “In the time between here and the bridge, prove to me that you’ll not waylay others and perhaps I will show mercy, perhaps even let you go free—under watchful eyes.”

Adelard started to protest, but Wulfgar cut him short.

“Trying to trick me into returning your sword does not help you,” he said.

“Trick?” Adelard acted as if he were truly wounded, but Wulfgar merely snorted, or started to, until Regis said sharply, “Silence!”

All eyes turned to the halfling.

“What?” Wulfgar whispered, seeing his diminutive friend’s faraway look.

Regis motioned to Afafrenfere, who was on the road behind the wagon, kneeling with his ear to the ground.

Wulfgar stopped the wagon, all eyes on the monk.

“Horses,” Afafrenfere explained. “Coming fast from behind.”

All eight others of the party held silent then, straining to hear. Sure enough, a slight shift of the breeze brought the sounds of several horses galloping down the road from behind them.

Wulfgar looked around. They had just come through a copse of trees, but there was no time to get back around the bend and into cover.

“Arm us,” Adelard whispered.

Wulfgar eyed him dangerously, warning him to silence. The barbarian tied off the reins and hopped down from the bench, motioning Regis to his side at the back corner of the wagon, where Afafrenfere stood waiting.

“Bandits?” the monk asked.

“Likely,” Regis replied.

“If there are many, do we arm our companions?” Wulfgar asked, looking around at the ragtag band of six they had taken prisoner.

“Only the swordsman is a worthy fighter,” Regis reminded him. “And we gamble that he will know the group approaching and join in with them.”

“Then I kill him first.”

Regis shrugged.

The sound of the approaching riders was clear then, nearing the copse of trees that was still in sight down at the bend in the road.

“Go and hide, all of you,” Wulfgar told the bandits. “To the tall grass.”

The six began to scurry, but not quickly enough. The posse—a dozen riders kicking up dust and thundering along the Trade Way—came around the bend. They drew their fine swords as soon as they pulled in sight of the wagon. Steel gleamed in the morning sunlight almost as brilliantly as Regis’s wide smile.

“Is it . . . ?” Wulfgar started to ask.

The dozen approaching riders seemed quite easy in the saddle, as if they had ridden many, many miles over many, many months—and they were all quite short.

The barbarian put a hand on Brother Afafrenfere’s shoulder, coaxing him out of his battle stance.

R . A . S A L V A T O R E

Wulfgar heard more than one bandit groan.

The Grinning Ponies had come.

“Hold, wagon, hold!” cried the rider in the center of the leading line, a finely-dressed fellow with a wide-brimmed leather hat, one side pinned up and plumed.

“If we held any more, Master Doregardo, we would be rolling back at you!” Regis yelled in answer. He moved forward out of Wulfgar’s shadow, drew his fine rapier, and dipped a low bow.

“Spider!” shouted the halfling at Doregardo’s side.

Up the troupe thundered, kicking dirt and rearing their ponies. Even as his mount’s forelegs touched back down, Doregardo lifted a leg over his saddle and dropped skillfully to the ground.

“Why, Master Topolino, it has been far too long!” Doregardo exclaimed, and he rushed up and exchanged a grand hug with Regis.

“But, good sir,” he added, pushing Regis back to arms’ length, “you seem to have lost your mount!”

“It has been a long and eventful few years, my old friend,” Regis replied. “Years of war and adventure.”

“And you will tell us all about it, then, aye,” said Showithal Terdidy, the halfling who had first shouted Regis’s name. He, too, slipped from his saddle and rushed over to embrace Regis.

“We were pursuing a band of highwaymen known to be in the area,” Doregardo explained.

“Highwaymen and women,” Wulfgar replied, gesturing at the six bandits, none of whom had managed to get off the road and out of sight.

“By the gods,” they heard Adelard grumble, and he added quietly to the disheveled driver, “You gave a ride to a Grinning Pony?”

“They found us,” Regis explained.

Doregardo glanced around curiously, waving his hand as he did so. The mounted halflings flanked left and right and began encircling the troupe.

“They are quite caught,” Regis assured Doregardo. “We were allowing them the time to the Boareskyr Bridge to convince us they would mend their ways.”

“Or kill you in your sleep,” muttered Showithal.

“I do not sleep,” said Afafrenfere, drawing a hard stare from Showithal.

“I give you Brother Afafrenfere of the Monastery of the Yellow Rose,” Regis quickly explained. “Brother Afafrenfere, dragonslayer.”

“And this is my long-time friend, Wulfgar of Icewind Dale,” Regis pressed on, thinking it prudent to clarify the situation a bit, given the still-threatening look on Showithal’s face. That one had always been eager for a fight, eager to elevate the stature of the Grinning Ponies above that of his old vigilante band from Damara, the Kneebreakers. Regis could well imagine Showithal drawing his sword on Wulfgar, and then the rest of them trying to figure out how to get poor Showithal down from the top branches of the tallest nearby tree after Wulfgar threw him up there.

Doregardo gave a little laugh, and graciously bowed to Wulfgar. “We are honored, good sir,” he said politely, then turned to Regis. “And pray tell what you planned to do in the case that these ruffians could not convince you of their mended ways?”

“Then they would no longer be our problem,” Wulfgar grimly replied, his meaning all too clear.

Doregardo looked up at him for a long moment. “Consider them your problem no longer, then.” He motioned to his riders, who began rounding up the group.

“Well, that depends on your intentions,” Wulfgar replied.

“You think them redeemable?”

“If we didn’t, they would all be dead back on the road.”

“Then our intentions are to escort you to the Boareskyr Bridge,” Doregardo assured him, “and offer our help in managing your prisoners. And there at the bridge, we will hear your verdict.”

“And honor it?” Wulfgar pressed.

Doregardo gave a noncommittal shrug. “I’ve associates who are gathering more information regarding this band. If there is blood on their hands . . .”

Wulfgar held up his hand to show that he understood and agreed. He nodded, satisfied.

The Trade Way was very much a wild land, with precious cargo constantly flowing and highwaymen constantly lurking. There were few jails available, and fewer guardians, like the Grinning Ponies, to patrol the long road. For all who traversed this region, safety often balanced on the edge of a fine sword. The same had been true in Icewind Dale, of course, where justice, out of necessity, was usually swift and almost always brutal.

Doregardo motioned to a nearby halfling rider, a wide-eyed young lass Regis did not know. She expertly swung her pony around and galloped

back up the road, returning some time later after the wagon was rolling once more, with a pair of riderless ponies in tow.

“Will you ride with us again, my old friend?” Doregardo asked Regis when the spare ponies neared.

Regis grinned, as much at the curious reference—for how “old” a friend was Doregardo, after all, in comparison to the hulking barbarian who sat on the bench beside Regis?—as at the appealing prospect. He accepted the offer, and rode easily in a line between Doregardo and Showithal, and teased them with the tales he would tell them that night around the campfire.

And what grand tales those were!

Regis recounted the War of the Silver Marches all the way to the momentous battle at Dark Arrow Keep, and the great victory of King Bruenor and his allies. Many cheers went up from the Grinning Ponies—and even a few from the captured bandits.

Regis told them of the of dragons above the mountain, and coaxed Afafrenfere into detailing his battle with the white wyrm on the side of the mountain, and even though the monk downplayed the event with proper humility, a multitude of gasps accompanied his every sentence.

It was long into the night when Regis finished, but none were asleep, not even Adelard and his band, all whispering and laughing at the grand story, all cheering for King Bruenor and King Harnoth and King Emerus Warcrown.

“And now you are bound for Boareskyr Bridge,” Doregardo said when the whispers died away, halflings and bandits and barbarian alike moving to their bedrolls.

“Suzail, actually,” Regis replied.

Doregardo and Showithal exchanged curious looks.

“Morada Topolino?” Showithal asked, and Regis’s smile confirmed the guess.

“I promised Lady Donnola that I would return. It is not a promise I intend to break!”

Showithal Terdidy, who remembered well the lovely Donnola, nodded and returned the grin.

“And you?” Doregardo asked Wulfgar.

“My eager little friend is often in need of protection,” Wulfgar replied.

“As is Wulfgar, who smashed his face into rocks in the dark tunnels,” Regis quipped back.

“Another tale?” asked Doregardo, and Regis laughed, more than willing to comply.

But Showithal moved off to the side of the other three then, to a lone figure crouched on a flat stone, peering off into the darkness. Regis paused, all three straining to hear the exchange.

“The Monastery of the Yellow Rose, so said Spider. Damara?” Showithal asked, obviously intrigued. Showithal was from that faraway land and had begun his career there with a halfling vigilante band known as the Kneebreakers.

The monk nodded. “And there, I return.”

“Ah, but we’ve got words to exchange, then, good monk! I’ve friends in that faraway land, too long estranged!”

He scrambled up on the rock beside the monk and took up a conversation.

“It is a good thing your friend insisted that he does not sleep,” Doregardo said to Wulfgar and Regis, “for Showithal Terdidy is not known for his brevity in recounting his adventures.”

Regis nodded, more than aware of that very fact.

“Now,” Doregardo said, clapping his hands. “Tell me this new tale. One of my stature is always thrilled to hear of tall humans running into low-hanging rocks in the dark.”

He stopped and flashed a wide smile, but it dissipated as he considered Regis and Wulfgar, the halfling offering a questioning stare, and Wulfgar eventually nodding his agreement.

“I do have another tale to tell you,” Regis told Doregardo, in a voice much softer and more somber. “But one you will hardly believe, I fear, and one that travels back to a time before you were born.”

Doregardo looked curiously at this halfling who seemed no more than half his age then at Wulfgar.

By the time the wagon began its roll down the Trade Way early the next morning, neither Regis, Doregardo, nor Wulfgar had slept. Doregardo most of all seemed as if his mind still whirled from the most fantastical tale he had ever heard, one of rebirth and a second chance at life, and one, he found to his own surprise, that he believed wholeheartedly.

A tenday later, the troupe settled comfortably at the Boareskyr Bridge. There, another group of Grinning Ponies found them, Doregardo’s scouts seeking information on the highwaymen. That proved to be

good news for five of the six captives, who would be granted leniency. But for the sixth, the bulky axeman, there came information of blood on his hands.

He was hanged that same day from a tree just west of the bridge.

Justice in the wild lands was swift and brutal.

To the surprise of the companions from the Silver Marches, Doregardo informed them that he and some others of his band would escort them all the way to Suzail.

"I know many of the ship captains, of course, and so can help you secure passage to Aglarond," he explained.

"Suzail is a journey of several hundred miles!" Regis reminded him.

"A ride I have not made in far too long," said Doregardo. "Showithal and I were discussing this very journey soon before we found you. Since the events of the Sundering and the great changes that have swept over the Realms, it is far past time for us to show the banner of the Grinning Ponies once more in Cormyr."

"We will be glad for the company," Regis replied.

"And we, too! But first we must secure for your friends two fine horses," said Doregardo.

Wulfgar nodded, but Afafrenfere shook his head. "I require no mount."

"Our pace will be swift," Doregardo warned, but Afafrenfere reiterated his stance. Soon after they departed, no one questioned him again. Afafrenfere ran easily beside the group and had no trouble keeping pace in the tendays following.

They had hoped to make Suzail by the beginning of summer, but the Western Heartlands remained quite unsettled following the many wars and upheavals of the tumultuous events of the previous years, and so that journey found many side streets, and small adventures, and goodly folk in need of assistance. It was well past midsummer when at last the troupe spotted the tall masts gently rocking in the harbor of Suzail.

There they said goodbye to Brother Afafrenfere, who sailed out for Mulmaster on the Moonsea, the swiftest route to his monastery home.

Ships to Aglarond were harder to find at that time, though, and so it wasn't until the very last day of Eleasis that Wulfgar and Regis at last boarded a squat merchant vessel, serving as deck hands and hired swords, bound for Aglarond's port city of Delthuntle.

“Fare you well, my friend Doregardo,” Regis said at the dock. “I tell you now to keep your eyes and ears open to the Craggs, north of Neverwinter. There will King Bruenor Battlehammer claim once more the most ancient homeland of the Delzoun dwarves.”

“Fare you well, my friend Regis . . .” Doregardo replied.

“Spider Topolino,” Showithal said with a wink behind the halfling, and all got a laugh at that.

“Regis,” Doregardo corrected, “hero of the north. And you, as well, Master Wulfgar. I wish that I could cut you into three pieces and make of you three additions to the Grinning Ponies!”

“Until we meet again, then,” said Regis.

“On the doorstep of Gauntlgrym, perhaps,” Doregardo replied. “And from there, you can take us to meet this dwarf king you name as friend.”

Regis bowed, Wulfgar nodded respectfully, and the pair boarded the caravel.

None of them could know it at the time, but on that very day, Bruenor, Drizzt, Catti-brie, and the vast army that had marched from the Silver Marches set its camp before the northern gates of the city of Neverwinter.