



R. A. SALVATORE

RISE OF THE KING



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PROLOGUE



YE E’ER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE THAT?” KING CONNERAD BRAWNANVIL asked the emissary from Citadel Felbarr. They stood on a small guard tower along the rim of the valley called Keeper’s Dale, staring up at the dark sky. The sun barely penetrated the strange overcast. So little light came through the roiling and angry blackness above, in fact, that no one in the North had seen more than a wisp of a shadow in several days.

“None’ve seen anything like that, good king,” the surly old veteran warrior named Ragged Dain answered. “But we ain’t thinkin’ it’s a good thing.”

“It’s them orcs,” King Connerad remarked. “Obould’s ugly boys. It’s them orcs, or the world’s gone crazy and gnomes’re wearing beards long enough to tickle a tall man’s toes.”

Ragged Dain nodded his agreement. That’s why he’d been dispatched by King Emerus Warcrown, after all, because certainly the Kingdom of Many-Arrows had to be the source of this unseemly event—or at least, the dwarves of the Silver Marches were all betting that the minions of King Obould knew the source, at least.

“Ye heared from Citadel Adbar?” King Connerad asked, referring to the third of the dwarf communities in the Silver Marches. “Are they seein’ this?”

“Aye, the Twin Kings are seein’ it and looking to the Underdark for answers.”

“Ye think them boys’re ready for it, whatever it might be?” Connerad asked, for Citadel Adbar had only recently crowned a pair of kings, Bromm and Harnoth, the twin sons of old King Harbromm, who had ruled there for nearly two centuries until his recent—by dwarf accounting—death.

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The twins had been raised well, but they hadn't seen much in the way of action or political intrigue in the quiet of the last decades.

"Who's for sayin'?" Ragged Dain replied, shaking his head solemnly. King Harbromm had been a dear friend to him and the others of Citadel Felbarr, almost as a brother to King Emerus Warcrown. The loss of that great leader, barely cold in the ground, could prove quite troublesome if this event, this darkening, turned as foul as it looked.

Ragged Dain dropped a hand affectionately to the shoulder of Connerad Brawnnavil. "Was yerself ready?" he asked. "When King Banak passed on and ye took the bridle o' Mithral Hall, did ye know what ye needed?"

Connerad snorted. "Still don't," he admitted. "Kinging looks easy from afar."

"Not so much from the throne, then," Ragged Dain agreed, and Connerad nodded. "Well, then, young King o' Mithral Hall, what're ye knowin' now after all?"

"I'm knowin' that I ain't knowin'," King Connerad said resolutely. "And not knowin' likely to get me boys in trouble."

"Scouts, then."

"Aye, a bunch, and yerself's to go with 'em, that ye'll be going back to Felbarr with what ye seen with yer own eyes."

Ragged Dain considered the words for a few moments, then offered a salute to the young King of Mithral Hall. "Ye're ready now," he said, and clapped Connerad hard on the shoulder once more. "Here's to hoping that the twins o' Harbromm catch on as quick."

"Bah, but there's two o' them," said Connerad. "Sure to be."

He looked back up at the sky, at the roiling clouds of smoke or some other foul substance that turned daylight into something less than moonlight and hid the stars entirely.

"Sure to be," he said again, more to himself than to his guest.



"I am a priest of Gruumsh One-Eye," the tall orc protested.

"Yes, and I was hoping that your standing would indicate some intelligence, at least," Tiago Baenre replied with a derisive chortle, and he walked off to the side.

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“We have come to offer a great opportunity,” Tos’un Armgo retorted. “Would not your Gruumsh be pleased?”

“Gruumsh . . .” the orc started, but Tos’un cut him short.

“Would not the god of orcs swim in the blood of humans, elves, and dwarves?”

The tall orc gave a crooked smile as he looked over Tos’un, head to toe. “Uryuga knows you,” the shaman said, and Tiago snorted again at the typically orc habit of referring to himself by his own name.

“You speak of elves,” Uryuga went on. “You know elves. You live with elves!”

“Lived,” Tos’un corrected. “I was chased out, and by the same female who killed many of your kin by the holy cave.”

“That is not the tale my people tell.”

Tos’un started to respond, but just blew a sigh. His actions in that instance, with his wife Sinnafein by his side, certainly would work against him. He had abandoned her to the pursuing orcs in his quest to catch up to Doum’wielle and led her into the Underdark, but any of the orc survivors from that skirmish surely knew that he had not been fleeing from Sinnafein but traveling with her.

Uryuga chuckled and started to continue, but now it was Tiago who cut him short. “Enough,” the son of House Baenre demanded. “Look above you, fool. Do you see that? We have blocked out the sun itself. Do you understand the power that has come upon these lands? If you or your stubborn King Obould will not heed our call, then we will simply replace you both and find another king—and another priest—who will.”

The orc priest straightened his shoulders and stood up tall, towering over Tiago, but if the drow was intimidated, he certainly didn’t show any signs of it.

“Ravel!” Tiago called, and turned to the side, guiding Uryuga’s gaze that way, to see Uryuga—another Uryuga—approaching.

“What is this?” the orc demanded.

“Do you really believe we need you?” Tiago scoffed. “Do you hold yourself tall enough to believe that a plan to conquer the Silver Marches rests on the choices of a simple orc priest?”

“High shaman,” Uryuga corrected.

“Dead shaman,” Tiago corrected, his fine sword, a sliver of the starlit sky it seemed, flashing from its scabbard and rushing tip-in to rest against Uryuga’s throat.

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"I serve Gruumsh!"

"Want to meet him? Now?" Tiago flicked his wrist a tiny bit and a spot of blood appeared on Uryuga's throat.

"Answer me," the vicious drow prompted. "But before you do, think of the glorious sights you will miss when a sea of orcs swarm the mounds and dales and roll over the great cities of Luruar. Think of the slaughter of thousands of dwarves, and all without a swing of Uryuga's heavy mace. Because that is what we will do, with you alive or with you dead. It matters not."

"If it matters not, then why am I alive?"

"Because we prefer the priests of Gruumsh to partake of the war. The Spider Queen is no enemy to the great and glorious One-Eye and would welcome him in this great victory. But now I grow weary of this. Will you join or will you die?"

Put that way, and with a sword against his throat, Uryuga gave a slight but definitive nod.

"I'm not certain," Tiago said anyway, glancing back over his shoulder at the illusion of Uryuga worn by Ravel. "I think you look ugly enough to handle this task." As he spoke, he drove his sword forward, just a tiny bit, the fine blade easily cutting the orc's skin.

"Grab for it," Tiago said, turning back to face the shaman. "I would so enjoy watching your fingers fall to the ground."

Ravel began to laugh, but Tos'un shifted uncomfortably.

Tiago snapped his sword away in the blink of an eye, but came forward and grabbed the orc by the collar, yanking him low. "We offer you all you ever wanted," he growled in Uryuga's ugly face. "The blood of your enemies will stain the mountainsides, the dwarven halls will be filled with your people. The great cities of Luruar will grovel and tremble before the stamp of orc boots. And you dare to hesitate? You should be on your knees, bowing to us in gratitude."

"You speak as if this war you hunger for is already won."

"Do you doubt us?"

"It was drow elves who prompted the first King Obould to march upon Mithral Hall," Uryuga replied. "A small band with big promises."

Tos'un shifted uncomfortably. He had been among that quartet of troublemakers, though, of course, Uryuga, who was no older than thirty winters, could hardly know that distant truth.

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“Gruumsh was displeased with that war?” Tiago asked skeptically. “Truly? Your god was displeased with the outcome, which offered you people a kingdom among the Silver Marches?”

“A kingdom we hold strong, but one that will be destroyed if we fail in our march.”

“So you are a coward.”

“Uryuga is no coward,” the orc said with a snarl.

“Then let us proceed.”

“They are seven kingdoms, we are one,” Uryuga reminded him.

“You will not be alone,” Tiago promised. He pointed back over Uryuga’s shoulder, and the orc turned slowly, casting another suspicious glance the Baenre’s way before daring to take his eyes off the dangerous drow. As he turned, though, his legs obviously went weak beneath him, for there in the distance beyond this high, windswept bluff circled a pair of beasts to take his breath away.

A pair of white dragons, ridden by frost giants.

They only remained in sight for a few heartbeats, then swooped away along a mountain valley between a pair of distant peaks.

Uryuga swung around, jaw hanging open.

“You will not be alone,” Tiago promised. “This is no small band of dark elves stirring trouble. I am Tiago Baenre, noble son of the First House of Menzoberranzan and weapons master of House Do’Urden. The daylight is stolen by our power, to facilitate our march, and we have already spread our tendrils far and wide, a net to catch and enlist the battle-hungry. Dragons are always hungry, and the frost giants of Shining White are eager to finish what their Dame Gerti began a hundred years ago.”

Uryuga shook his head, not catching the specifics of that century-old reference, apparently. But it didn’t matter. He wasn’t so stupid as to miss the implications of the reference: The giants would help in the war, and with a pair of dragons, it seemed.

Dragons!

“Go to King Obould,” Tiago ordered. “Tell him that the time has come to find glory for Gruumsh One-Eye.”

Uryuga paused for a few heartbeats, but then nodded and started away.

“A convincing illusion,” Tiago congratulated Ravel when the trio of drow were alone.

Ravel reverted to his proper drow form and nodded.

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"I meant the dragons," Tiago explained. "And with frost giants riding them. Well done."

"It will need to be more than an illusion if we intend to conquer Luruar," Tos'un put in. "This is no minor enemy, with three dwarf citadels, a forest full of elves, and three mighty cities."

"My sister will not fail in this, nor will Archmage Gromph," Ravel assured him, the wizard's tone showing great disdain.

"You have been here too long, son of Armgo," Tiago said dismissively to Tos'un. "You forget the power and reach of Menzoberranzan."

Tos'un nodded and let it go at that. But Tiago was wrong in one thing, he knew. Tos'un hadn't forgotten anything, not from the war between Many-Arrows and Mithral Hall and not from the war before that, when the legendary and godlike Matron Mother Yvonnell Baenre, the great-grandmother of this impudent peacock, had gotten her head cleaved in half by the dwarf king of Mithral Hall.



Saribel glanced nervously at Gromph Baenre. The priestess felt small indeed, surrounded as she was by a trio of blue-skinned behemoths.

Certainly the archmage didn't seem intimidated, and Saribel drew some confidence from that—until she reminded herself that Gromph wasn't her friend. Her ally, perhaps, but she'd never trust this old one enough to think of him as anyone she could rely upon.

The priestess pulled her furred cloak tighter as the mountain winds howled, chilling her even through the magical wards against cold she had placed upon herself.

She glanced at Gromph once more.

He didn't even seem to notice the wind or the cold. He walked at ease—he always walked at ease, she thought, supremely confident, never the slightest hesitation or self-doubt.

She hated him.

"Do you remember their names?" Gromph said then, unexpectedly, shattering Saribel's contemplations.

He had done that on purpose, she knew, as if he was reading her every thought.

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“Well?” Gromph added impatiently as the flustered priestess tried to collect herself.

The archmage snickered derisively and shook his head.

“They are the brothers of Thrym, so we are to tell Jarl Fimmel Orelson,” Saribel blurted.

“Three of the ten brothers of the frost giant god,” Gromph said.

“Yes.”

“Do you remember their names?”

“Does it matter?”

Gromph stopped short and turned to stare hard at Saribel. “For tendays now, I have been trying to figure out why Matron Mother Baenre decided to bless Tiago’s choice of wife and thus bring you into the House proper. I have tried to justify it as an act to strengthen our ties to the new city of Q’Xorlarrin, to serve as yet another reminder to Matron Mother Zeerith that her world survives at the suffrage of House Baenre.” He paused and gave a look and a nod as if that should suffice, but then added, “Truly, young priestess, even that pleasing reality does not seem worth the price of having to suffer your dim-wittedness.”

Saribel swallowed hard and worked to keep her lip from quivering, all too keenly aware that Gromph could destroy her with just a thought, at any time.

“Beorjan, Rugmark, and Rolloki,” she recited.

“Which is Beorjan?” Gromph asked and Saribel felt her fear rising once more. The giants were all the same size, fully twenty feet tall and with equally impressive girth and musculature. They all wore their hair the same, long and blond, all dressed in similar furs of the same cut, and all carried a gigantic double-bladed axe.

“Well?” Gromph prodded impatiently.

“I cannot tell them apart,” a flustered Saribel blurted, and she thought she was uttering her last words with that admission.

And indeed, Gromph stared at her threateningly for a long heartbeat, until one of the giants began to laugh.

“Neither can I,” Gromph admitted. “And I grew them.” He, too, began to laugh—something Saribel had never thought possible. He clapped her on the shoulder and started them on their way once more.

“I am Rugmark, Fourth Brother of Thrym,” the first in line recited.

“I am Beorjan, Seventh Brother of Thrym,” said the one on the left behind the two dark elves.

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"I am Rolloki, Eldest Brother of Thrym," said the one beside Beorjan.

And they believed their own words. The claims weren't true, of course. These were three giants Gromph had coerced to their cause at Matron Mother Baenre's request. A few spells of growth and permanency, a few sessions with Methil, the illithid imparting new identities to the trio that the slow-minded creatures couldn't help but believe, and the result: three living and walking doppelgangers of the fabled ten brothers of the frost giant deity, Thrym.

And three supremely powerful tools for Matron Mother Baenre to utilize.

"There is the doorway to the frost giant stronghold of Shining White," the archmage said, pointing up the path. "Just ahead and around the bend. Make a worthy entrance and play your role well."

"You are far better at this game than I," Saribel replied. "Are you sure that you will not join—"

"My dear wife of Tiago, consider this your worthiness test for House Baenre," Gromph said. He moved very near her. "You see, I can repair any damage your idiocy causes in the coming negotiation, or I can simply destroy Jarl Fimmel and replace him with a lackey more suitable to my needs if you fail to convince him. So I fear not for my own outcome.

"But you should fear for yours," Gromph added just as Saribel started to visibly relax. "If you fail me in this, well, there are many priestesses who would love to take Tiago Baenre as a husband, I expect, and many Houses more important to me than Xorlarrin, despite your ridiculous delusions of holding an independent city."

The giants around them began to chuckle, and one clapped his massive axe across his open palm.

"It would be unfortunate for you to fail me here, dear Saribel," was all that Gromph added, and he snapped his fingers and was gone, simply vanishing into nothingness, so it seemed.

Saribel Xorlarrin took a deep breath and reminded herself that she was a High Priestess of Lolth and the noble daughter of a powerful drow House—indeed, the princess of a city. These were just frost giants, bulky and powerful, but dim-witted and without magic.

She had set up a spell to teleport her almost instantly back to the cave where the drow had formed their base camp, but that notion now, given Gromph's last warning, didn't seem like such a clever escape should she fail here.

"Enough," she whispered under her breath, and to her three gigantic companions, she motioned forward and said determinedly, "We go."

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“It is uncomfortable,” Matron Mother Quenthel Baenre said, walking beside Gromph along a mountain pass high up in the Spine of the World.

“You are cold?”

“The light,” she corrected. “The vastness of this unceilinged world.”

“We are on the edges of Tsabrak’s spell,” Gromph explained. “It is darker in the midst of the Silver Marches.”

“It is a foul place,” said Matron Mother Baenre. “I long for home.”

Gromph nodded, and couldn’t really disagree. He led on with all speed, the appointed meeting place just ahead, around the next bend on a high and snowy plateau. The pair turned that corner and were assailed by high winds and stinging, blowing snow. So furious was the clime, whipping and blowing to near whiteout conditions, that it still took the pair a few more steps to see their counterparts, though those counterparts were huge indeed.

Huge and white.

And dragons.

Lesser beings than the Matron Mother and Archmage of Menzoberranzan would have fallen to their knees at that moment, or run in terror back around the bend.

“Is it not a beautiful day, wizard?” asked the larger of the pair, Arauthator, the Old White Death, one of the greatest of the white dragons of Faerûn.

“They won’t think so, Father,” said the other, a young male barely half the size of the other. “They are puny and the wind is too cold . . .”

“Silence!” demanded the Old White Death in a voice that shook the mountains around them.

It was hard to note a white dragon blanching, of course, but surely it seemed to Gromph and the matron mother that the young dragon, Aurbangras by name, shrank beneath the weight of that imperial tone.

“It is a beautiful day, to herald a glorious dawn,” said Quenthel. “You understand the purpose of our journey here?”

“You will start a war,” Arauthator said plainly. “You wish for me to join in.”

“I offer you the opportunity, for the glory of your queen,” said Quenthel.

The dragon tilted his huge, horned head, regarding her curiously.

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“There will be much plunder, Old White Death,” the matron mother went on, undeterred. “You will find all that you can carry and more. That is your charge, is it not?”

“What do you know, clever priestess?” the old dragon asked.

“I am the voice of Lolth in Faerûn,” she answered with equal weight. “What should I know?”

The dragon growled, mist and icicles blowing from between his jagged teeth.

“We know that the word has gone out to the chromatic wyrms,” Gromph interjected, “to gather their hoards of gold and jewels and gems.” He paused and eyed the dragon slyly, and cryptically added, “A pile to reach the Nine Hells.”

Arauthator rolled back on his haunches at that, his stare seeming as cold as any breath weapon he might produce.

“Yours is not the only queen who seeks to gain,” said the matron mother. “The Spider Queen, in her wisdom, has shown me that your goals and mine intersect here in this land of the Silver Marches. There is opportunity here for us both, and in good faith do I come to you. Lend us your power, and share with us our plunder. For your queen and my own.”

The dragon made a curious sound, as if a mountain had been inflicted with hiccups, and it took the two drow a short while to realize that Arauthator was laughing.

“I will make many trips south and back to my lair,” the dragon informed them. “And each return will be laden with treasure.”

“Your value will earn that,” the matron mother agreed with a bow.

Gromph, too, wisely bowed, but he never stopped looking at Quenthel as he did. She had told him that this would be an easy acquisition, because of some stirring in the lower planes that held great interest and importance to the chromatic dragons of Toril.

Apparently, she had been correct, and on such a momentous matter as this, that served to remind Gromph yet again that he had helped to create a powerful creature in Quenthel. Not so long ago he had been plotting her demise, but now he would not even dare to think of such a thing.

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“That one,” Ravel said to Tiago, indicating a burly orc warrior strolling confidently across the encampment, as revealed in the scrying mirror.

“Impressive,” Tiago murmured. “He would survive my first attack, perhaps, though I’d have him dead by the second thrust.”

Ravel gave the pompous drow warrior a curious look out of the side of his eye, and even shook his head a bit. “If it plays out as we expect, that one—Hartusk—will be our best friend.”

“In his small mind.”

“That is all that matters,” said Ravel. “Hartusk is a traditionalist, a war chief full of bloodlust, and he simmers for battle. Uryuga has whispered to me that Hartusk led several of the raiding bands that have attacked the humans, dwarves, and elves across the region. All secretly, of course, for this King Obould”—he motioned to another figure in the scene, sitting at the middle of a long feast table, bedecked in jewels, a fur-trimmed purple robe and a gaudy crown of beaten gold set with a multitude of semiprecious gemstones “—would tolerate no such activities.”

“Uryuga said this pretend king would be trouble,” Tiago said. “We offer him powerful alliances and grand conquests, and he shakes his ugly head.”

“‘Pretend’ king?”

“A king of orcs afraid of battle?” Tiago said with a dismissive snort.

“He is more concerned with the legacy of his namesake and the vision of the first Obould Many-Arrows,” Ravel explained. “More than the glory of battle, Obould seeks the power of peace.”

“What are these orcs coming to?” Tiago lamented.

“A change of mind,” Ravel answered the quip with one of his own. The drow wizard smiled wickedly as another figure moved up near to Obould, and when they were close, the resemblance was unmistakable. “Lorgru, eldest son and named heir of Obould,” he said.

“Between, second bastard son of Berellip,” Tiago corrected, for he knew the ruse, and knew too that the real Lorgru lay peacefully asleep in a mossy bed down by the orc docks on the River Surbrin, after hearing the soft and undeniable whispers of drow poison.

Ravel laughed.

In the orc encampment, the fake son of Obould moved up to his presumed father with the king’s plate and drink, all properly tested by the court tasters—a precaution that had become critical in the last tenday or so, since the skies had darkened and rumors of—and calls for—war had

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begun cropping up all around.

The fake Lorgru saluted properly and moved off, and King Obould began to eat, washing down each bite with a great swallow of lousy wine.

"King Obould will be dead before the morning," Ravel said with confidence. "And so will commence the fighting among his many sons, since the heir will be blamed for this murder."

"And none of them will win," said Tiago.

"None will survive, likely," Ravel agreed, his smile showing that he would do his best to make sure of that very outcome. "Hartusk will claim the throne, and who among the orcs would dare oppose the powerful war chief when he is backed by the drow of Menzoberranzan and a legion of frost giants from Shining White?"

Tiago nodded. It had all been so easy. Saribel had not disappointed, and Jarl Fimmel Orelson had called out to other giant clans along the Spine of the World, coaxing them into the cause. They were eager for battle. The mere existence of the vast Kingdom of Many-Arrows had essentially cut the frost giant clans off from their traditional raids on the goodly folk of the Silver Marches, and the orcs certainly didn't have enough plunder or even livestock to make marauding worth the giants' time!

"It is better for us that King Obould did not agree with Uryuga's call," Ravel said, drawing Tiago from his private musing. The weapons master looked at his wizard friend and bade him continue.

"Obould would have ever been a reluctant leader," Ravel explained. "At any opportunity, where a city or citadel offered peace, he would likely have come to accept it as an appropriate feather in his cap and taken their offered treaty. He remains, and ever will, more concerned with his ancestor and the vision of a peaceful Many-Arrows than anything else. But Hartusk? Nay. He wants to taste blood, nothing less."

"But now the kingdom may be split," Tiago warned.

Ravel shook his head. "More orcs agree with Hartusk," he said. "The beasts are tired of the imaginary lines defining their borders. Particularly outside of Dark Arrows Keep, where King Obould keeps those most loyal to him and his cause, the orcs of the kingdom have been whispering about the Obould family living in luxury because of the deal they signed with the dwarves and the other kingdoms. There is deep resentment among the rabble, and there is . . . the hunger for battle, for victory, for blood. Hartusk's message will sound like the clarion horn of Gruumsh himself to many."

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“Obould will be quickly forgotten, then,” Tiago agreed. “Cast into the soot pile of history to be swept under the uplifted corner of a dirty skin rug, and spoken of with naught but derision.”

“A hundred thousand orcs will march, with legions of giants behind them,” Ravel said, his red eyes gleaming in the torchlight.

“We’ll pull goblins and bugbears and ogres from every hole in the Underdark to bolster their lines,” said Tiago, getting caught up in the excitement.

“And darker things,” said Ravel, and Tiago laughed.

They had been sent here to start a war.

The drow were very good at that particular task.

PART ONE



UNDER SKIES OF GLOOM

HOW MUCH EASIER IS MY JOURNEY WHEN I KNOW I AM WALKING A ROAD OF righteousness, when I know that my course is true. Without doubt, without hesitation, I stride, longing to get to the intended goal, knowing that when I have arrived there I will have left in my wake a better path than that which I walked.

Such was the case in my road back to Gauntlgrym, to rescue a lost friend. And such was the case leaving that dark place, to Port Llast to return the rescued captives to their homes and proper place.

And so now the road to Longsaddle, where Thibbledorf Pwent will be freed of his curse. Without hesitation, I stride.

What of our intended journey after that, to Mithral Hall, to Many-Arrows . . . to start a war?

Will my steps slow as the excitement of adventuring with my old friends ebbs under the weight of the darkness before us? And if I cannot come to terms with Catti-brie's assertions of orc-kind as irredeemable, or cannot agree with Bruenor's insistence that the war has already begun in the form of orc raids, then what does this discordance portend for the friendship and unity of the Companions of the Hall?

I will not kill on the command of another, not even a friend. Nay,

to free my blades, I must be convinced heart and soul that I strike for justice or defense, for a cause worth fighting for, worth dying for, and most importantly, worth killing for.

That is paramount to who I am and to how I have determined to live my life. It is not enough for Bruenor to declare war on the orcs of Many-Arrows and begin its prosecution. I am not a mercenary, for gold coins or for friendship. There must be more.

There must be my agreement with the decision to go to war.

I will enjoy the journey to Mithral Hall, I expect. Surrounding me will be those friends I hold most dear, as we walk the new ways together again. But likely my stride will be a bit tighter, perhaps a bit heavier, the hesitance of conscience pressing down.

Or not conscience, perhaps, but confusion, for surely I am not convinced, yet neither am I unconvinced.

Simply put, I am not sure. Because even though Catti-brie's words, so she says and so I believe, come from Mielikki, they are not yet that which I feel in my own heart—and that must be paramount. Yes, even above the whispers of a goddess.

Some would call that insistence the height of hubris, and pure arrogance, and perhaps they would be right in some regard to place that claim upon me. To me, though, it is not arrogance, but a sense of deep personal responsibility. When first I found the goddess, I did so because the description of Mielikki seemed an apt name for what I carried in my thoughts and heart. Her tenets aligned with my own, so it seemed. Else, she would mean no more to me than any other in the named pantheon of Toril's races.

For I do not want a god to tell me how to behave. I do not want a god to guide my movements and actions—nay. Nor do I want a god's rules to determine that which I know to be right or to outlaw that which I know to be wrong.

For I surely do not need to fear the retribution of a god to keep my path aligned with what is in my heart. Indeed, I see such justifications for behavior as superficial and ultimately dangerous. I am a reasoning being, born with conscience and an understanding of what is right and what is wrong. When I stray from that path, the one most offended is not some unseen and extrawordly deity whose rules and mores are inevitably relayed—and often subjectively interpreted—by mortal

priests and priestesses with humanoid failings. Nay, the one most wounded by the digressions of Drizzt Do'Urden is Drizzt Do'Urden.

It can be no other way. I did not hear the call of Mielikki when I fell into the gray-toned company of Artemis Entreri, Dahlia, and the others. It was not the instructions of Mielikki that made me, at long last, turn away from Dahlia on the slopes of Kelvin's Cairn, not unless those instructions are the same ones etched upon my heart and my conscience.

Which, if true, brings me back full circle to the time when I found Mielikki.

At that moment, I did not find a supernatural mother to hold the crossbar to the strings supporting a puppet named Drizzt.

At that moment, I found a name for that which I hold as true. And so, I insist, the goddess is in my heart, and I need look no farther than there to determine my course.

Or perhaps I am just arrogant.

So be it.

—Drizzt Do'Urden

CHAPTER 1



SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

WHAT'RE THEM DOGS UP TO NOW?" KING BROMM OF CITADEL ADBAR asked when the scouts returned with their reports.

"No good, that's for sure as a baby goblin's shiny butt," replied his twin brother and fellow King of Adbar, Harnoth.

The twins looked at each other and nodded grimly—they both understood that this was their first real test as shared kings. They'd had their diplomatic and military squabbles, certainly—a trade negotiation with Citadel Felbarr that had almost come to blows between Bromm and King Emerus's principle negotiator, Parson Glaive; a land dispute with the elves of the Moonwood that had become so hostile the leaders of Silverymoon and Sundabar had ridden north to intervene; even a few skirmishes with the troublesome rogues of Many-Arrows, raiding bands that had included giants and other beasties—but if the scouts were correct in their assessment, then surely the twin Kings of Citadel Adbar had yet presided over nothing of this magnitude.

"Hunnerds, ye say?" Bromm asked Ragnerick Gutpuncher, a young dwarf, but one of considerable scouting experience.

"Many hunnerds," Ragnerick replied. "They're floodin' Upper Surbrin Vale with the stench o' orc, me kings. Pressin' the Moonwood already—been arrows flying out from the boughs and smoke's rising into the dark sky."

Those last three words rang ominously in the hall, for the implications of the eternal night sky locked over the Silver Marches were hard to ignore.

"They'll be pressin' Mithral Hall, to be sure," said Bromm.

"We got to get word fast to Emerus and Connerad," his brother agreed.

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“Long way to Mithral Hall,” Bromm lamented, and Harnoth couldn’t disagree. The three dwarf citadels of Luruar were located roughly in a line, Adbar southwest to Felbarr, then an equal distance southwest from there to Mithral Hall, with most of the journey just south of the forested crescent known as the Glimmerwood. From one citadel to the next was a march of more than a hundred miles, at least a tenday’s hike—likely twice that given the broken terrain. The three citadels were also connected underground, through tunnels of the upper Underdark, but even along those routes, any march would be long and difficult.

“We got to go,” Harnoth reasoned. “We can’t be sittin’ here with our kin facing a fight—and might be that we’re th’only ones knowing.”

“Nah, Connerad’s already knowing, I’m thinkin’,” said Bromm. “He’s an army o’ orcs sitting on his north porch. He’s knowin’.”

“But we got to know what he’s needin’,” Harnoth said and Bromm nodded. “I’ll take a legion through the tunnels to Felbarr, and if we’re needed, we’ll go on to Mithral Hall, then.”

“Underdark,” Bromm noted grimly. “We ain’t been down there in years, excepting the underground way to Sundabar. Best make it a big legion.”

“And yerself’ll lock down Adbar,” Harnoth agreed, nodding.

“Aye, she’s already done, and might that I’ll go out and have a better look, and might just chase them orcs from the Glimmerwood’s edge. Next time we’re arguin’ with them elves over some land, we’ll not be letting them forget our help.”

“Hunnerds,” Harnoth said grimly.

“Bah, just orcs,” Bromm retorted and waved his hand dismissively. “Might that we’ll skin ’em and use ’em to build soft roads from Adbar to Felbarr and all the way to Mithral Hall.”

King Harnoth gave a hearty laugh at that, but he gradually dismissed the absurdity of the claim and allowed himself to picture just such a road.



“Ready to rumble!” General Dagnabbet, daughter and namesake of Dagnabbit, granddaughter of the great General Dagna, announced to King Connerad. They stood on a high peak north of Mithral Hall, looking down on the Upper Surbrin Vale, the mighty river dull and flat under the

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dark sky and the tall evergreens of the Moonwood portion of the long Glimmerwood dark in the northeast.

“Gutbusters’re itchin’ to hit something, me king!” cried Bungalow Thump, who led the famed Gutbuster Brigade as Connerad’s personal bodyguard. All around the group came a chorus of cheers.

But King Connerad was shaking his head with every call for action. He looked at the swarm of orcs on the field far below. Something felt wrong.

The orc forces, opposing each other, rolled like swarms of bees, mingling in a great black cloud that turned the vale as dark as the sky above.

“Now, me king,” Bungalow Thump pleaded. “The fools’re fighting each other. We’ll roll ’em into the dirt by the hunnerd.”

He moved up beside Connerad to continue, but Dagnabbet intercepted him and eased him back.

“What’re ye thinkin’?” the dwarf lass asked.

“What’s yerself thinking?” Connerad asked of his general, who was soon to take command of Mithral Hall’s garrison, by all accounts.

“I’m thinkin’ that’s been too long since me axe’s chopped an orc,” Dagnabbet replied with a sly grin.

Connerad managed a nod, but he was far from full agreement with the implications of the general’s desire. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something here was not as it seemed.

“We got to go soon,” Bungalow Thump said. “Long run to the vale.”

King Connerad looked to Dagnabbet and then to Bungalow Thump, and the eager expressions coming back at him made him worry that he was being too cautious here. Was he failing as a leader out of his own timidity? Was he seeing what he wanted to see so that he could avoid a risk?

Growling at his own weakness, the order to charge down to the vale almost left his mouth—almost, but Connerad bit it back and forced himself to focus more clearly on the chaos before him, and in that moment of clarity came his answer.

For the battle in the Upper Surbrin Vale, orc against orc, didn’t seem to him to be a battle at all.

“Back to the hall,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper, lost as it was in the midst of his gasp.

“Eh?” asked Bungalow Thump.

“Me king?” General Dagnabbet added.

“What’re ye thinkin’?” Bungalow Thump demanded.

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"I'm thinkin' that me king's smellin' a rat," Dagnabbet answered.

"I asked what yerself was thinkin'," Connerad said to Dagnabbet. "And now I ask ye again." He pointed down to the swirling morass of tiny orcs forms below them.

Dagnabbet stepped out on the ledge before Connerad and stared hard at the mingling armies battling far below.

"They got no discipline," she said almost immediately. "Just a mob."

"Aye, seeing the same," said Connerad.

Dagnabbet spent a long while looking at the young King of Mithral Hall.

"Well?" an impatient Bungalow Thump asked.

A smile, somewhat resigned, perhaps, but also congratulatory, crossed Dagnabbet's face, and she nodded in deference to Connerad, her king, and replied to him and to Bungalow Thump, "Orcs o' Dark Arrow Keep fight better'n that."

"Eh?" the battlerager asked.

"Aye," Connerad agreed.

"They're thinking to lure us out," said Dagnabbet.

"Well, let's oblige 'em then!" Bungalow Thump cried, eliciting wild cheers from his Gutbuster Brigade.

"Nah," Connerad said, shaking his head. "I ain't seeing it." He turned to Dagnabbet. "Post a line o' lookouts, but we're back to the hall, I say."

"Me king!" Bungalow Thump cried in dismay.

Of course the battle-lusting Thump was blustering and sputtering, and Connerad didn't bother answering, knowing full well that the Gutbusters were, above all else, fiercely loyal. Connerad moved straight for the long stair that would bring him to the lower plateau just above Keeper's Dale where his army waited, waving his hand for Dagnabbet and the others to follow. From there, they would take secret doors that led to the descending tunnels that would take them back into the fortress of Mithral Hall.

It took a long while to descend those two thousand stairs, and the warning cries from the northeast beat Connerad's group to the bottom.

"Orcs! Orcs!" they heard with many stairs still before them. "Hunnerds, thousands."

King Connerad found it hard to breathe. He was not battle-hardened in this leadership role, and had seen little action that involved responsibility for anyone other than himself, but he knew then that he had narrowly avoided a huge error—one that would have left Mithral Hall reeling under the weight of staggering losses!

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"Can't be!" General Dagnabbet cried. "Vale's too far!"

"A third orc army," Connerad replied. "The swinging door to close us into their box if we'd've gone out to the fake fight in the vale."

"Well, a dead third army then," declared Bungalow Thump, and he and his boys began bounding down the steps past Connerad, taking them three at a time despite the obvious peril along the steep stairway.

Connerad stopped and grabbed both railings, stretching out his arms and thus bottlenecking those still behind him. His thoughts whirled, imagining the trails back around the mountain to the Upper Surbrin Vale, estimating the time for such a march—a forced and fast march that had already almost assuredly begun, he realized.

"No!" he shouted to all those around him, particularly aiming his cry at Bungalow Thump and the rambling troupe of Gutbusters. "To the hall and shut the durned doors, I say!"

"Me king!" came the predictable cry of disappointment from Thump and his ferocious boys, all in unison.

"Them orcs're coming, all o' them," Connerad said to Dagnabbet behind him on the stairs. "Tens o' thousands."

The dwarf lass nodded grimly. He could see that she wanted to disagree with him, that she wanted nothing more than to go out and kill some orcs. But she couldn't and for a moment, he feared that it was simply because she could not bring herself to disagree with him. Like her father and grandfather before her, Dagnabbet was a loyal soldier first and foremost.

"If we could be done with this bunch and get inside, I'd be tellin' ye to go to the fight," she said as if reading his thoughts and wanting to put his concerns to rest. "But this group'll hold us down. That's their job, I'm guessin'. They'll come on a'roarin', but they'll fade back in the middle o' the line, they will. Again and again, just out o' reach. Aye, and we'll keep chasing and choppin', and oh, but we'll put more'n a few to their deaths, don't ye doubt."

"And then th'other two armies'll fall on us and we won't ne'er make our halls alive," King Connerad added with a nod.

Dagnabbet patted him on the shoulder. "Ye done the right call, me king, and twice," she said.

More cries rang out in the northwest, warning of approaching orcs.

"We ain't there yet," said Connerad, and he started down the stair with all speed. As he and the others neared the bottom, with perhaps a

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hundred stairs to go, they got their first glimpse of that third orc force, a black swarm sweeping around the rocky foothills.

“Worgs,” Dagnabbet breathed, for a cavalry legion led the orc charge, huge orcs on ferocious dire wolves. When they came in sight of the dwarf army settled on the plateau, they blew their off-key horns and chanted for Gruumsh—and didn’t slow in the least, roaring ahead and as eager for a fight as any Gutbuster.

Connerad thought to yell out for Bungalow Thump, but he realized that he needn’t bother. Thump and his boys, too, had seen the orcs approach, and nothing the king might say would have made any difference at that point. The battle was about to be joined, and the Gutbuster Brigade, above all others, knew their place in such a fight. As one, they ran, leaped, and tumbled down the stairs, bouncing onto the plateau and charging ahead. Bungalow Thump cried out to the battle commanders of the garrison, ordering them to fall back, and those commanders readily complied, for they, too, knew the place of the Gutbusters—a place in the forefront, as the leading worg riders quickly and painfully learned. Cavalry, shock troops, depended on their ferocity and straightforward aggression to scatter lines and terrify enemies out of defensive positions. But for the famed Gutbuster Brigade of Mithral Hall, such a tactic inspired nothing but an even more ferocious response.

And with the Gutbuster Brigade fronting the line, the dwarf cross-bowmen neither flinched nor retreated, and they got their volley into the air just before the thunderous collision.

The worg riders were stopped cold by that wall of quarrels, and then by leaping dwarves in battle-ridged armor.

For the Battlehammers, the fight had started on a high note indeed. The pounding spiked fists of Gutbusters drew orc grunts and worg yelps. And that cavalry legion had gotten too far out in front of the charging infantry of orcs coming behind.

The army of Mithral Hall fell over them and slaughtered them, and cheers and calls for orc blood chased King Connerad down the stairs.

And might have chased him all the way out to the battle, but General Dagnabbet was right there behind him, whispering in his ear, and now it was she who urged greater caution.

Connerad at last leaped off the stairs to the plateau and ran with all speed to his garrison commanders, calling out orders for tight ranks. He

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ran past the back of the formation and shouted for those in the rear to begin their turn immediately for the hall.

“Go and get in and get clear o’ the doors,” he commanded. “Clear run to the halls for all.”

Many disappointed looks came back at him—he would have been disappointed at any other reaction—but the dwarves did not argue with their king. Still cheering their brethren who had locked up with the leading orcs, the ranks at the back of the formation began their swift and orderly retreat.

King Connerad pulled up and whirled around. “Get to the door,” he ordered Dagnabbet.

The dwarf warrior gasped in disbelief.

“I need ye there,” Connerad told her. “We’ll get all stuck shoulder to shoulder, and them that don’t get in are to be murdered to death. Ye go and keep ’em movin’. Every one ye get in is one ye’re saving.”

Dagnabbet couldn’t hide her disappointment and just shook her head.

Connerad leaped into her and grabbed her roughly by the collar. “Ye think any others’ll hold the respect o’ Dagnabbet?” he yelled in her face. “Ye think I can send an errand-dwarf and them damned doors’ll stay cleared, and them that’s running away—and what dwarf’s wantin’ to run away?—won’t be stopping to look back? I need ye, girl, more’n e’er before.”

Dagnabbet straightened and composed herself fully. “Aye, me king!” she said crisply. “But don’t ye let yerself stay out there too long and get yerself killed to death. Ye’re needin’ me, and I’ll do me part, but don’t ye let yerself forget that Mithral Hall’s needing yerself. More now than e’er if them orcs mean to stay about.”

Connerad nodded and turned to go, but Dagnabbet grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him around.

“Don’t ye get yerself killed,” she implored him, and she gave him a kiss for luck.

For luck and for more than that, they both realized to their mutual surprise.

Then both ran off, in opposite directions, Dagnabbet yelling orders to various dwarves to form guiding lines to the doors and Connerad calling his battle commanders together. It wasn’t until he neared the front of the skirmish, that he was able to gain a wider view of the sloping pass that rounded the mountain, and when he saw that, the dwarf king had to force himself to breathe once more.

The orc armies out in the Upper Surbrin Vale had been large, but this

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force was larger still, and rumbling down among the swarms of orcs were huge blue-skinned behemoths, a full legion of frost giants.

Any fantasies Connerad might have had of standing their ground washed away in the face of that reality. If he could muster every dwarf of Mithral Hall out onto this field, fully armed and armored for battle, with a full complement of heavy war weapons—ballistae and catapults—and preset in proper formations, they simply could not prevail in this fight, not even if the two orc armies out in the Upper Surbrin Vale did not come in to join their kin and kind.

Connerad Brawnnavil had never seen so many orcs.

They blackened the trail and turned the entire side of the mountain into something resembling a writhing, amorphous beast.

Many times throughout that day, King Connerad reminded himself to remain calm, to lead with a steady hand. He didn't flinch when one of his battle commanders standing right beside him was crushed by a giant boulder. He suppressed his wail of anguish when Bungalow Thump and a band of Gutbusters fell amid a sea of orcs.

And he kept them moving, all of them, an orderly procession, one line breaking back and reforming as the next line broke and retreated behind them. With each step of the staggered retreat, fewer dwarves remained alive to take the next step, but for every downed dwarf, several orcs lay writhing and dying.

At one dark moment, it seemed to Connerad as if all was surely lost, for on came the giants, swatting orcs out before them as they bore down on the hated dwarves.

"Brace and go for the knees, boys!" he cried, and the dwarves cheered, and then all the louder as a volley of ballista bolts hummed through the air above their heads. Giants staggered, giants fell, and those behind the first line began a hasty retreat.

A shocked King Connerad spun around and spotted Dagnabbet immediately.

Beautiful and fierce Dagnabbet. Brave and noble and loyal Dagnabbet.

The line of dwarves continued into the hall through the doors in swift and orderly fashion, and somehow, even among that great responsibility, Dagnabbet had managed to get a quartet of spear-throwing ballistae out from the halls, and for just such an occasion as this, when the giants came on.

Mithral Hall lost three score brave dwarves that day, with thrice that

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number crawling back in with grievous wounds, including Bungalow Thump, who had somehow survived that swarm.

But they were secure behind their fortified doors now, and the moment of surprise had passed.

And hundreds of orcs and a trio of giants lay dead outside that northern door.

“Ye done good,” Dagnabbet told him when the leaders of the hall convened in the war room. “Ye done King Bruenor proud.”

Coming from the daughter of Dagnabbit, the granddaughter of the legendary Dagna, King Connerad knew that to be no small compliment.

He took it in stride, though, and knew that his trials were just beginning.

A great army of orcs was even then camping upon his doorstep.