

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

SOJOURN
THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT BOOK III
RA
SALVATORE





POIGNANT LESSONS

Drizzt crept past the shielding shrubs and over the flat and bare stone ~~X~~ that led to the cave now serving as his home. He knew that something had crossed this way recently—very recently. There were no tracks to be seen, but the scent was strong.

Guenhwyvar circled on the rocks up above the hillside cave. Sight of the panther gave the drow a measure of comfort. Drizzt had come to trust Guenhwyvar implicitly and knew that the cat would flush out any enemies hiding in ambush. Drizzt disappeared into the dark opening and smiled as he heard the panther come down behind, watching over him.

Drizzt paused behind a stone just inside the entrance, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom. The sun was still bright, though it was fast dipping into the western sky, but the cave was much darker—dark enough for Drizzt to let his vision slip into the infrared spectrum. As soon as the adjustment was completed, Drizzt located the intruder. The clear glow of a heat source, a living creature, emanated from behind another rock deeper in the one-chambered cave. Drizzt relaxed considerably. Guenhwyvar was only a few steps away now, and considering the size of the rock, the intruder could not be a large beast.

Still, Drizzt had been raised in the Underdark, where every living creature,

regardless of its size, was respected and considered dangerous. He signaled for Guenhwyvar to remain in position near the exit and crept around to get a better angle on the intruder.

Drizzt had never seen such an animal before. It appeared almost cat-like, but its head was much smaller and more sharply pointed. The whole of it could not have weighed more than a few pounds. This fact, and the creature's bushy tail and thick fur, indicated that it was more a forager than a predator. It rummaged now through a pack of food, apparently oblivious to the drow's presence.

"Take ease, Guenhwyvar," Drizzt called softly, slipping his scimitars into their sheaths. He took a step toward the intruder for a better look, though he kept a cautious distance so as not to startle it, thinking that he might have found another companion. If he could only gain the animal's trust . . .

The small animal turned abruptly at Drizzt's call, its short front legs quickly backing it against the wall.

"Take ease," Drizzt said quietly, this time to the intruder. "I'll not harm you." Drizzt took another step in and the creature hissed and spun about, its small hind feet stamping down on the stone floor.

Drizzt nearly laughed aloud, thinking that the creature meant to push itself straight through the cave's back wall. Guenhwyvar bounded over then, and the panther's immediate distress stole the mirth from the drow's face.

The animal's tail came up high; Drizzt noticed in the faint light that the beast had distinctive stripes running down its back. Guenhwyvar whimpered and turned to flee, but it was too late. . . .

About an hour later Drizzt and Guenhwyvar walked along the lower trails of the mountain in search of a new home. They had salvaged what they could, though that wasn't very much. Guenhwyvar kept a good distance to the side of Drizzt. Proximity made the stink only worse.

Drizzt took it all in stride, though the stench of his own body made the lesson a bit more poignant than he would have liked. He didn't know the little animal's name, of course, but he had marked its appearance keenly. He would know better the next time he encountered a skunk.

“What of my other companions in this strange world?” Drizzt whispered to himself. It was not the first time the drow had voiced such concerns. He knew very little of the surface and even less of the creatures that lived here. His months had been spent in and about the cave, with only occasional forays down to the lower, more populated regions. There, in his foraging, he had seen some animals, usually at a distance, and had even observed some humans. He had not yet found the courage to come out of hiding, though, to greet his neighbors, fearing potential rejection and knowing that he had nowhere left to run.

The sound of rushing water led the reeking drow and panther to a fast-running brook. Drizzt immediately found some protective shade and began stripping away his armor and clothing, while Guenhwyvar moved downstream to do some fishing. The sound of the panther fumbling around in the water brought a smile to the drow’s severe features. They would eat well this night.

Drizzt gingerly flipped the clasp of his belt and laid his crafted weapons beside his mesh chain mail. Truly, he felt vulnerable without the armor and weapons—he never would have put them so far from his reach in the Underdark—but many months had passed since Drizzt had found any need for them. He looked to his scimitars and was flooded by the bittersweet memories of the last time he had put them to use.

He had battled Zaknafein then, his father and mentor and dearest friend. Only Drizzt had survived the encounter. The legendary weapon master was gone now, but the triumph in that fight belonged as much to Zak as it did to Drizzt, for it was not really Zaknafein who had come after Drizzt on the bridges of an acid-filled cavern. Rather, it was Zaknafein’s wraith, under the control of Drizzt’s evil mother, Matron Malice. She had sought revenge upon her son for his denouncement of Lolth and of the chaotic drow society in general. Drizzt had spent more than thirty years in Menzoberranzan but had never accepted the malicious and cruel ways that were the norm in the drow city. He had been a constant embarrassment to House Do’Urden despite his considerable skill with weapons. When he ran from the city to live a life of

exile in the wilds of the Underdark, he had placed his high priestess mother out of Lolth's favor.

Thus, Matron Malice Do'Urden had raised the spirit of Zaknafein, the weapon master she had sacrificed to Lolth, and sent the undead thing after her son. Malice had miscalculated, though, for there remained enough of Zak's soul within the body to deny the attack on Drizzt. In the instant that Zak managed to wrest control from Malice, he had cried out in triumph and leaped into the lake of acid.

"My father," Drizzt whispered, drawing strength from the simple words. He had succeeded where Zaknafein had failed; he had forsaken the evil ways of the drow where Zak had been trapped for centuries, acting as a pawn in Matron Malice's power games. From Zaknafein's failure and ultimate demise, young Drizzt had found strength; from Zak's victory in the acid cavern, Drizzt had found determination. Drizzt had ignored the web of lies his former teachers at the Academy in Menzoberranzan had tried to spin, and he had come to the surface to begin a new life.

Drizzt shuddered as he stepped into the icy stream. In the Underdark he had known fairly constant temperatures and unvarying darkness. Here, though, the world surprised him at every turn. Already he had noticed that the periods of daylight and darkness were not constant; the sun set earlier every day and the temperature—changing from hour to hour, it seemed—had steadily dipped during the last few tendays. Even within those periods of light and dark loomed inconsistencies. Some nights were visited by a silver-glowing orb and some days held a pall of gray instead of a dome of shining blue.

In spite of it all, Drizzt most often felt comfortable with his decision to come to this unknown world. Looking at his weapons and armor now, lying in the shadows a dozen feet from where he bathed, Drizzt had to admit that the surface, for all of its strangeness, offered more peace than anywhere in the Underdark ever could.

Drizzt was in the wilds now, despite his calm. He had spent four months on the surface and was still alone, except when he was able to summon his

magical feline companion. Now, stripped bare except for his ragged pants, with his eyes stinging from the skunk spray, his sense of smell lost within the cloud of his own pungent aroma, and his keen sense of hearing dulled by the din of rushing water, the drow was indeed vulnerable.

“What a mess I must appear,” Drizzt mused, roughly running his slender fingers through the mat of his thick, white hair. When he glanced back to his equipment, though, the thought was washed quickly from Drizzt’s mind. Five hulking forms straddled his belongings and undoubtedly cared little for the dark elf’s ragged appearance.

Drizzt considered the grayish skin and dark muzzles of the dog-faced, seven-foot-tall humanoids, but more particularly, he watched the spears and swords that they now leveled his way. He knew this type of monster, for he had seen similar creatures serving as slaves back in Menzoberranzan. In this situation, however, the gnolls appeared much different, more ominous, than Drizzt remembered them.

He briefly considered a rush to his scimitars but dismissed the notion, knowing that a spear would skewer him before he ever got close. The largest of the gnoll band an eight-foot giant with striking red hair, looked at Drizzt for a long moment, eyed the drow’s equipment, then looked back to him.

“What are you thinking?” Drizzt muttered under his breath. Drizzt really knew very little about gnolls. At Menzoberranzan’s Academy he had been taught that gnolls were of a goblinoid race, evil, unpredictable, and quite dangerous. He had been told that of the surface elves and humans as well, though—and he now realized, of nearly every race that was not drow. Drizzt almost laughed aloud despite his predicament. Ironically, the race that most deserved that mantle of evil unpredictability was the drow themselves!

The gnolls made no other moves and uttered no commands. Drizzt understood their hesitancy at the sight of a dark elf, and he knew that he must seize that natural fear if he was to have any chance at all. Calling upon the innate abilities of his magical heritage, Drizzt waved his dark hand and outlined all five gnolls in harmless purple-glowing flames.

One of the beasts dropped immediately to the ground, as Drizzt had

hoped, but the others halted at a signal from their more experienced leader's outstretched hand. They looked around nervously, apparently wondering about the wisdom of continuing this meeting. The gnoll chieftain, though, had seen harmless faerie fire before, in a fight with an unfortunate—now deceased—ranger, and knew it for what it was.

Drizzt tensed in anticipation and tried to determine his next move.

The gnoll chieftain glanced around at its companions, as if studying how fully they were limned by the dancing flames. Judging by the completeness of the spell, this was no ordinary drow peasant standing in the stream—or so Drizzt hoped the chieftain was thinking.

Drizzt relaxed a bit as the leader dipped its spear and signaled for the others to do likewise. The gnoll then barked a jumble of words that sounded like gibberish to the drow. Seeing Drizzt's obvious confusion, the gnoll called something in the guttural tongue of goblins.

Drizzt understood the goblin language, but the gnoll's dialect was so very strange that he managed to decipher only a few words, "friend" and "leader" being among them.

Cautiously, Drizzt took a step toward the bank. The gnolls gave ground, opening a path to his belongings. Drizzt took another tentative step, then grew more at ease when he noticed a black feline form crouched in the bushes a short distance away. At his command Guenhwyvar, in one great spring, would come crashing into the gnoll band.

"You and I to walk together?" Drizzt asked the gnoll leader, using the goblin tongue and trying to simulate the creature's dialect.

The gnoll replied in a hurried shout, and the only thing that Drizzt thought he understood was the last word of the question: ". . . ally?"

Drizzt nodded slowly, hoping he understood the creature's full meaning.

"Ally!" the gnoll croaked, and all of its companions smiled and laughed in relief and patted each other on the back. Drizzt reached his equipment then, and immediately strapped on his scimitars. Seeing the gnolls distracted, the drow glanced at Guenhwyvar and nodded to the thick growth along the trail ahead. Swiftly and silently, Guenhwyvar took up a new position. No need

to give all of his secrets away, Drizzt figured, not until he truly understood his new companions' intentions.

Drizzt walked along with the gnolls down the mountain's lower, winding passes. The gnolls kept far to the drow's sides, whether out of respect for Drizzt and the reputation of his race or for some other reason, he could not know. More likely, Drizzt suspected, they kept their distance simply because of his odor, which the bath had done little to diminish.

The gnoll leader addressed Drizzt every so often, accentuating its excited words with a sly wink or a sudden rub of its thick, padded hands. Drizzt had no idea of what the gnoll was talking about, but he assumed from the creature's eager lip-smacking that it was leading him to some sort of feast.

Drizzt soon guessed the band's destination, for he had often watched from jutting peaks high in the mountains, the lights of a small human farming community in the valley. Drizzt could only guess at the relationship between the gnolls and the human farmers, but he sensed that it was not a friendly one. When they neared the village, the gnolls dropped into defensive positions, followed lines of shrubs, and kept to the shadows as much as possible. Twilight was fast approaching as the troupe made its way around the village's central area to look down upon a secluded farmhouse off to the west.

The gnoll chieftain whispered to Drizzt, slowly rolling out each word so that the drow might understand. "One family," it croaked. "Three men, two women . . ."

"One young woman," another added eagerly.

The gnoll chieftain gave a snarl. "And three young males," it concluded.

Drizzt thought he now understood the journey's purpose, and the surprised and questioning look on his face prompted the gnoll to confirm it beyond doubt.

"Enemies," the leader declared.

Drizzt, knowing next to nothing of the two races, was in a dilemma. The gnolls were raiders—that much was clear—and they meant to swoop down upon the farmhouse as soon as the last daylight faded away. Drizzt had no

intention of joining them in their fight until he had a lot more information concerning the nature of the conflict.

“Enemies?” he asked.

The gnoll leader crinkled its brow in apparent consternation. It spouted a line of gibberish in which Drizzt thought he heard “human . . . weakling . . . slave.” All the gnolls sensed the drow’s sudden uneasiness, and they began fingering their weapons and glancing to each other nervously.

“Three men,” Drizzt said.

The gnoll jabbed its spear savagely toward the ground. “Kill oldest! Catch two!”

“Women?”

The evil smile that spread over the gnoll’s face answered the question beyond doubt, and Drizzt was beginning to understand where he stood in the conflict.

“What of the children?” He eyed the gnoll leader squarely and spoke each word distinctly. There could be no misunderstanding. His final question confirmed it all, for while Drizzt could accept the typical savagery concerning mortal enemies, he could never forget the one time he had participated in such a raid. He had saved an elven child on that day, had hidden the girl under her mother’s body to keep her from the wrath of his drow companions. Of all the many evils Drizzt had ever witnessed, the murder of children had been the worst.

The gnoll thrust its spear toward the ground, its dog-face contorted in wicked glee.

“I think not,” Drizzt said simply, fires springing up in his lavender eyes. Somehow, the gnolls noticed, his scimitars had appeared in his hands.

Again the gnoll’s snout crinkled, this time in confusion. It tried to get its spear up in defense, not knowing what this strange drow would do next, but was too late.

Drizzt’s rush was too quick. Before the gnoll’s spear tip even moved, the drow waded in, scimitars leading. The other four gnolls watched in amazement as Drizzt’s blades snapped twice, tearing the throat from their

powerful leader. The giant gnoll fell backward silently, grasping futilely at its throat.

A gnoll to the side reacted first, leveling its spear and charging at Drizzt. The agile drow easily deflected the straightforward attack but was careful not to slow the gnoll's momentum. As the huge creature lumbered past, Drizzt rolled around beside it and kicked at its ankles. Off balance, the gnoll stumbled on, plunging its spear deep into the chest of a startled companion.

The gnoll tugged at the weapon, but it was firmly embedded, its barbed head hooked around the other gnoll's backbone. The gnoll had no concern for its dying companion; all it wanted was its weapon. It tugged and twisted and cursed and spat into the agonized expressions crossing its companion's face—until a scimitar bashed in the beast's skull.

Another gnoll, seeing the drow distracted and thinking it wiser to engage the foe from a distance, raised its spear to throw. Its arm went up high, but before the weapon ever started forward, Guenhwyvar crashed in, and the gnoll and panther tumbled away. The gnoll smashed heavy punches into the panther's muscled side, but Guenhwyvar's raking claws were more effective by far. In the split second it took Drizzt to turn from the three dead gnolls at his feet, the fourth of the band lay dead beneath the great panther. The fifth had taken flight.

Guenhwyvar tore free of the dead gnoll's stubborn grasp. The cat's sleek muscles rippled anxiously as it awaited the expected command. Drizzt considered the carnage around him, the blood on his scimitars, and the horrible expressions on the faces of the dead. He wanted to let it end, for he realized that he had stepped into a situation beyond his experience, had crossed the paths of two races that he knew very little about. After a moment of consideration, though, the single notion that stood out in the drow's mind was the gnoll leader's gleeful promise of death to the human children. Too much was at stake.

Drizzt turned to Guenhwyvar, his voice more determined than resigned. "Go get him."



The gnoll scrambled along the trails, its eyes darting back and forth as it imagined dark forms behind every tree or stone.

“Drow!” it rasped over and over, using the word itself as encouragement during its flight. “Drow! Drow!”

Huffing and panting, the gnoll came into a copse of trees stretching between two steep walls of bare stone. It tumbled over a fallen log, slipped, and bruised its ribs on the angled slope of a moss-covered stone. Minor pains would not slow the frightened creature, though, not in the least. The gnoll knew it was being pursued, sensed a presence slipping in and out of the shadows just beyond the edges of its vision.

As it neared the end of the copse, the evening gloom thick about it, the gnoll spotted a set of yellow-glowing eyes peering back at it. The gnoll had seen its companion taken down by the panther and could make a guess as to what now blocked its path.

Gnolls were cowardly monsters, but they could fight with amazing tenacity when cornered. So it was now. Realizing that it had no escape—it certainly couldn’t turn back in the direction of the dark elf—the gnoll snarled and heaved its heavy spear.

The gnoll heard a shuffle, a thump, and a squeal of pain as the spear connected. The yellow eyes went away for a moment, then a form scurried off toward a tree. It moved low to the ground, almost catlike, but the gnoll realized at once that his mark had been no panther. When the wounded animal got to the tree, it looked back and the gnoll recognized it clearly.

“Raccoon,” the gnoll blurted, and it laughed. “I run from raccoon!” The gnoll shook its head and blew away all of its mirth in a deep breath. The sight of the raccoon had brought a measure of relief, but the gnoll could not forget what had happened back down the path. It had to get back to its lair now, back to report to Ulgulu, its gigantic goblin master, its god-thing, about the drow.

It took a step to retrieve the spear, then stopped suddenly, sensing a movement from behind. Slowly the gnoll turned its head. It could see its own shoulder and the moss-covered rock behind.

The gnoll froze. Nothing moved behind it, not a sound issued from anywhere in the copse, but the beast knew that something was back there. The goblinoid's breath came in short rasps; its fat hands clenched and opened at its sides.

The gnoll spun quickly and roared, but the shout of rage became a cry of terror as six hundred pounds of panther leaped down upon it from a low branch.

The impact laid the gnoll out flat, but it was not a weak creature. Ignoring the burning pains of the panther's cruel claws, the gnoll grasped Guenhwyvar's plunging head, held on desperately to keep the deadly maw from finding a hold on its neck.

For nearly a minute the gnoll struggled, its arms quivering under the pressure of the powerful muscles in the panther's neck. The head came down then and Guenhwyvar found a hold. Great teeth locked onto the gnoll's neck and squeezed away the doomed creature's breath.

The gnoll flailed and thrashed wildly; somehow it managed to roll back over the panther. Guenhwyvar remained viselike, unconcerned. The maw held firm.

In a few minutes, the thrashing stopped.