



The Haunted Lands | Book I

unclean

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prologue

5 Mirtul, the Year of Risen Elfkin (1375 DR)

Like any wizard worthy of the title, Druxus Rhym could distinguish reality from dream and knew he was experiencing the latter. Thus, when people started screaming, the clamor in no way alarmed him.

It did, however, intrigue him. Perhaps an amusing spectacle lay in store. Maybe the dream even had something to teach him, some portent to reveal. Oneiromancy was a specialty of the Red Wizards of Divination, while he'd devoted the bulk of his studies to the art of Transmutation. But he was a zulkir, the head of his order and so one of the eight rulers of the land of Thay, and no one rose to such eminence without achieving mastery of many forms of magic.

He extricated himself from his tangled silk sheets and fur blanket and rose from his enormous octagonal bed with its velvet canopy and curtains. Magic had kept the air in his apartments warm just as it did in the real world, and when he murmured

the proper command, it likewise lit the globular crystal lamps in their golden sconces.

The pulse of light splashed his reflection in the mirror, complete with weak chin and bulge of flab at the waistline of what was otherwise a skinny, stork-legged frame. Reflecting that it seemed unfair a fellow had to be homely even in his dreams, he ambled toward the door and the shrieking beyond. Some of the cries were taking on a choked or rasping quality.

He opened the door to behold eight sentries, four men-at-arms and four wizards, none of whom was any longer capable of guarding anything. Most had collapsed to their knees or onto their bellies, though a couple were still lurching around on their feet. All were melting, flesh, hair, clothing, and armor liquefying, blending, streaming, and dripping down to make multicolored puddles and splatters on the floor. Their screams grew increasingly tortured then fell silent, as mouths, throats, and lungs lost definition.

Her eyes and even their sockets gone, her nose sliding down her chin like molten candle wax, one young wizard extended a buckling arm in mute appeal for succor. Despite his comprehension that none of this was real, Druxus stepped back in reflexive distaste.

Once entirely melted, the puddles that had been the guards began to steam, dispersing their substance into the empty air. At the same time, the walls and ceiling started to dribble and flow. Druxus's forehead tingled and stung, and a viscous wetness slid down over his left eye.

Dream or no, the sensation was repugnant, and he decided to end it. Exerting the trained will of a mage, he told himself to wake, and at once he was back in his bed in his still-dark chamber where, heart thumping, he lay trying to slow his panting.

Strange, he thought, that he should have such a nightmare, and stranger still that it had been so vivid as to actually unsettle

him in the end. It almost inclined him to think he ought to take it seriously as a portent or even a warning, but he didn't see how it could be, because he understood the subtext: He'd been dreaming about the book.

The book was nonsense. Or to give it its due, it was a bold and brilliant exercise in arcane theory but of no practical significance whatsoever. Why, then, should it trouble his unconscious mind?

He was still pondering the matter when invisible but powerful hands clamped around his throat.

The crushing grip instantly cut off his air. At the same time, a ghastly chill burned through his body, making his muscles clench and threatening to paralyze him.

He thrust shock aside to focus his will. Reckless foes had tried to assassinate him before, and even when surprised in his bed, he was never unarmed or helpless. The rings on his fingers, the silver-and-obsidian amulet around his neck, and the glyphs tattooed on his body were repositories of magic. He had only to concentrate and one or another of them would infuse his spindly frame with a giant's might, turn his attacker to stone, or whisk him across the realm to a place of safety. He decided on the latter course of action, and then the phantom heaved him up off the feather mattress and bashed his head against a bedpost.

The impact didn't kill him or even knock him unconscious, but it smashed his thoughts into a sort of numb, echoing confusion. The phantom ripped the talisman from around his neck then slammed his head against the obstruction once more.

Something banged. Druxus realized the door had flown open to hit the wall. Voices babbled and footsteps pounded. His guards had heard the sounds of the struggle and were rushing to save him.

Unfortunately, the phantom heard them coming as well. He threw Druxus onto the floor then rattled off an incantation.

Power crackled through the air, and a mote of light flew at the onrushing sentries. When it reached them, it boomed into a sphere of bright yellow fire, exploding with such violence as to tear some of its targets limb from burning limb.

The diversion gave Druxus a final opportunity to use his magic. He strained to focus, to command the proper tattoo to translate him through space, felt the power stir, then his assailant hit or booted him in the jaw. It jolted the stored spell out of his mental grasp.

The phantom continued to pound him until he was thoroughly dazed with agony, until he had no hope of using wizardry or doing anything else. He expected the beating to continue until he died.

After a while it stopped, and he felt a desperate pang of hope. Was it possible his assailant wasn't going to kill him after all?

"I'm sorry for this," the phantom said, his deep, cultured voice now sounding from several paces away, "but it's necessary."

He spoke the same words of power he'd employed before. Another spark flared into being then sprang at Druxus's face.

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Armored from head to toe in blue-enameled plate, mounted on a hairless, misshapen, slate gray war-horse infused with the blood and ferocity of some demon-beast from the Abyss, Azhir Kren, tharchion of Gauros, watched with mingled impatience and satisfaction as the combined armies of her province and Surthay waded the river. Impatience because fording a watercourse was always tedious and in theory dangerous: a force was divided and so vulnerable. Satisfaction because the army—a force made up of humans; towering, hyena-faced gnolls; blood orcs with their tusks and piggish features; scaly lizardfolk; and animated skeletons and zombies—made such a brave sight, and

because she was confident they'd cross successfully.

Some might have considered her overconfident, for over the years, Thayan armies had often traversed this deep gorge with its maze of secondary canyons in order to invade Rashemen, their neighbor to the north. Thus, the Iron Lord, the witches, and their barbarous ilk surely expected another such incursion to come someday, but not this early in the year when, by rights, the spring thaws should have made the River Gauros too deep and swift to ford.

It wasn't, though. Azhir's wizards had tamed the torrent, though she didn't understand why, if they could do that much, they couldn't dry it up altogether. Still, the important thing was that the legions could cross and do so unmolested. Nobody was on the north side of the river to oppose them.

Laden like pack mules, gray-faced, empty-eyed zombies waded ashore. On the south side of the river, Homen Odesseiron, tharchion of Surthay and Azhir's co-commander, waved a company of blood orcs forward, and the officers relayed the order to their underlings. The bellowing carried easily above the murmur of the river and the babble of soldiers closer at hand and hinted at the terrifying war cries the creatures screamed in battle.

In truth, Azhir didn't particularly enjoy contemplating Homen with his wizard's robes, warrior's sword, lance, destrier, and perpetually dour, expression. She didn't dislike him personally—since they were both governors of relatively poor and sparsely settled tharchs, denied a fair portion of the immense wealth and resources of southern Thay, she actually felt a certain kinship—but it vexed her to share command with him when this venture was entirely her idea. She'd had to talk him into it, and it had literally taken years, because the zulkirs didn't know about the expedition, would have forbidden it if they had, and Homen very sensibly feared their displeasure. The mage-lords wouldn't content themselves with discharging tharchions who so

exceeded their authority. They'd punish the transgressors as only Red Wizards could.

But only, she was certain, if the invasion failed. If she presented her masters with a victory over the hated barbarians, with wagon-loads of plunder and hundreds of newly captured slaves, perhaps even with Rashemen itself conquered at last, they would surely reward her initiative.

She needed Homen's warriors to ensure such a triumph, so she had to treat him as an equal for the time being. She promised herself she'd find a way to claim the bulk of the credit and the highest honors when the time came.

He looked in her direction, and she dipped the tip of her lance to signal that all was well on her side of the river. Then voices started singing, the music intricate and contrapuntal, the sound high, sweet, and eerie as it resounded from the brown stone canyon walls. Azhir cast about, seeking the source, and arrows began falling from on high, thrumming through the air and thudding into the bodies of her troops.

At last she could see some of the archers, perched on ledges high above her. Perhaps it was no great marvel that they'd managed to conceal themselves until that moment. Rashemi were little better than beasts and possessed an animal's facility for hiding in the wild, but how could they possibly have known Azhir's army would come so early in the year, let alone seek to ford the Gauros at this particular spot?

An arrow slammed into the crest of her helm, jerking her head, and she realized her questions would have to wait. For now, she had a disaster to avert. She bellowed for her troops to shoot back, though her bowmen, loosing their shafts at targets much higher up, half hidden behind makeshift ramparts of piled stone, were going to have a difficult time of it. Meanwhile, Homen sent all the Thayans still on the south shore rushing forward to ford as rapidly as they could and join the fight.

Azhir realized her wizards had yet to join the fray. A few thunderbolts, conjured devils, and blasts of blighting shadow could do wonders to scour the foe from the escarpment overhead. She cast about and saw the warlocks scurrying to form the circles they used to perform rituals in concert.

Idiocy! They didn't need to waste precious moments coordinating to evoke hailstorms and the like. They could do that working individually. She spurred her steed in front of a scrambling wizard, cutting him off from the half-formed circle he was trying to reach. He was one of the scarlet-robed elite, and ordinarily even a tharchion would be well advised to show him a certain deference, but this wasn't an ordinary situation.

"Just hit them!" she shouted, brandishing her lance at the Rashemi.

"Listen!" he replied, his eyes wide. "Don't you hear it?"

Hear what? How was she supposed to hear anything in particular above the cacophony of the battle, the drone of arrows, wounded men screaming, the Rashemi women caterwauling, the blood orcs roaring, but then she did—a rumbling, roaring, crashing noise, growing louder by the moment and sounding from the east.

She realized it wasn't just Rashemi women singing. It was Rashemi *witches*, and chanting together, they'd broken the enchantment that had held the Gauros in check. Now the flood was reasserting itself, and the Thayan mages believed they had to combine forces to subdue the river once again.

Azhir permitted the Red Wizard to rush onward toward his fellows. She then faced the river and screamed, "Get out of the water *now!* Run for whatever shore is closer! Just get out!"

As far as she could tell, no one heeded her. In all likelihood, no one could hear.

That left the wizards as the army's only hope, which, she insisted to herself, should suffice. Thayan magic was the most

potent and sophisticated in all Faerûn. Rashemi witches were merely savages with a certain knack for trafficking with petty spirits of forest and field.

But however insignificant their powers, they'd already accomplished their liberation of the flood. That allowed them to harry the Thayan wizards as the latter sought to chain it anew. Emerging from their hiding places on the heights, their faces and bare limbs painted, their hair barbarously long and unbound, the witches conjured enormous hawks and clouds of stinging flies to attack the spellcasters below or made brambles burst forth from the ground to twine around them like serpents. Meanwhile, the Rashemi archers sent many of their shafts streaking at the Thayan warlocks.

It all served to hinder the Red Wizards and their ilk. Some perished or suffered incapacitating wounds. Others felt obliged to forsake their nascent ritual at least long enough to wrap themselves in protective auras of light or scorch masses of swarming insects from existence. Meanwhile, the hiss and roar of the flood grew louder.

Crowned with driftwood and chunks of ice, the white towering wall that was the wave front seemed to burst into view all at once, as if it had leaped up from a hiding place of its own, not hurtled downstream. It was hurtling, though, so swiftly that many of the warriors likely didn't even perceive it until it swept over them, to drown and smash them and carry the corpses away.

It obliterated a significant portion of the Thayan host, split the remainder in two, and left Azhir's part trapped on the wrong side of the river, where the Rashemi were going to massacre them while their comrades watched helplessly.

A number of her wizards had manifestly made the same bleak assessment she had. Some vanished, translating themselves instantaneously through space. Others invested themselves with

the power of flight then soared into the air.

Azhir realized she had to reach one of them before they all bolted, so she could compel him to take her with him as he fled. She spurred her hell-steed toward a figure in a red robe, and an arrow punched into the beast's neck, burying itself up to the fletchings. The charger stumbled then toppled sideways.

She kicked her feet out of the stirrups and flung herself clear. She landed hard, her armor clashing, but at least her leg wasn't caught or broken beneath her mount's carcass. She dragged herself to her feet and cast about, trying to locate the Red Wizard once more.

She couldn't find him or anyone else attired in telltale crimson. In fact, now that she was no longer astride a mount, she couldn't discern much of anything. Everything was too chaotic. Panicked Thayyan warriors scrambled every which way, without order or rational purpose.

She could hear, though. Somewhere close at hand, Rashemi berserkers howled like wolves, working themselves into frenzy. In a heartbeat or two, they'd burst from hiding and throw themselves at the Thayyans, completing the ruin the witches and archers had begun.

I truly am going to die here, Azhir thought. The realization frightened her, but she'd spent a lifetime denying fear and wouldn't go out a craven at the last. Promising herself she'd send at least a few Rashemi vermin to the Hells ahead of her, she pulled her sword from its scabbard.

Then the wind shrieked. Azhir could scarcely feel a breeze, but she perceived that the air must be profoundly agitated overhead, because the Rashemi arrows were veering and tumbling off course.

She caught a glimpse of the half-naked berserkers driving in on the Thayyan flank. All at once, ice gathered on the ground beneath their feet and rose here and there in glittering spikes.

The Rashemi warriors slipped and fell, gashing themselves against the protrusions, which were evidently sharp as razors. More ice geysered upward from the central mass, forming itself into a crude, thick-bodied, faceless shape like a statue on which the sculptor had barely begun to work. The giant swung its hand, and the shattered bodies of two barbarians flew through the air.

Rain poured from the empty air to batter the canyon wall, and wherever it pounded one of the Rashemi, flesh blistered and smoked. The enemy made haste to shield themselves or scuttle for cover, which interrupted the witches' barrage of spells.

Then *he* appeared before Azhir, so suddenly she assumed he must have shifted himself through space, but without the ostentatious burst of light, crackle of power, or puff of displaced air that often accompanied such feats. Rather it was as if she'd simply blinked, and at that precise moment, he'd stepped in front of her. Though he could no doubt appear however he liked—and gossip whispered that his true form was ghastly indeed—Szass Tam, zulkir of Necromancy, looked as he always had whenever she'd met him. He was tall and dark of eye, with a wispy black beard and a vermilion robe trimmed with gems and gold. He was gaunt and pale even for a Thayan aristocrat, but even so, he seemed more alive than otherwise. Only his withered hands and the hint of dry rot that occasionally wafted from his person truly attested that he was a lich, a wizard who'd achieved immortality by transforming himself into one of the undead.

She started to kneel, and he caught hold of her arm and held her up. "No time for courtesies," he said. "My magic interrupted the attack, but it will resume in a moment. Get your people moving toward the river."

She stared at him in confusion. "We don't have a way to cross."

"I'm about to remedy that."

He produced a scroll, perhaps plucking it from the empty air, though it was also conceivable that, his shriveled fingers deft as a juggler's, he'd simply drawn it from his voluminous sleeve. He unrolled the vellum, turned to face the Gauros, and spoke the trigger phrase, releasing the magic stored in the parchment.

Three arches of crimson light shimmered into being above the river, spanning it from shore to shore. Bridges, Azhir realized, he built us bridges.

She grabbed the nearest warrior, held him and shouted at him until she made him understand that a means of escape was available. Then she released him to spread the word, even as she continued to do the same.

Perhaps her efforts did a little good, but it was primarily Szass Tam who goaded the Thayan warriors toward salvation. He multiplied himself to appear in a dozen places at once, each version bellowing to all in an amplified voice discernible even over the ambient din.

In less time than Azhir would have imagined possible, they were all scrambling for safety. The smooth, transparent curve of the bridge she chose looked as if it ought to be slippery as glass, but in fact, the surface was sufficiently rough that she had no difficulty negotiating it.

It was only when she was on the south shore, and Szass Tam was dissolving the bridges to forestall pursuit, that she remembered that a death beneath the blades of the Rashemi would have been a merciful fate compared to what the lich was likely to do to her.

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Homen Odesseiron had long ago learned that a battle doesn't end when the fighting stops. He and Azhir had to restore order to their battered and demoralized legions, make sure the healers

tended the wounded, withdraw their force to a place of greater safety, and establish a defensible encampment.

It was hectic work, but even so, Homen stole the odd moment to savor the beauty of wisps of white cloud in the bright blue sky and the towering mountainsides with their subtle striations of dun and tan and their trim of fresh spring greenery. He made time because it might well be his final opportunity to enjoy anything.

Soon enough, Szass Tam led the two insubordinate tharchions into a tent—Homen’s own green- and white-striped pavilion, as it happened, with his axe-and-boar standard planted before the entrance—to talk in private. Once inside, he kept the governors kneeling for a considerable time. The servants had spread carpets on the ground, but the exercise in humiliation made Homen’s knees ache even so. Since Azhir was as old as he and wearing plate to boot, it was probably even more uncomfortable for her. He hoped so anyway.

“I confess,” said Szass Tam at last, “I don’t recall the council of zulkirs ordering a raid on Rashemen. Perhaps I missed a meeting.”

There was a part of Homen that wanted to shout, It was all her idea, reckless, ambitious, hatchet-faced bitch that she is. She pressured me into it. But his pride wouldn’t permit him to whine like a frightened child, and it wouldn’t have done any good anyway. As governor of Surthay, he had to take responsibility for his own decisions.

“Your Omnipotence,” he said, “I exceeded my authority and led my troops into a trap. I’m to blame and will accept whatever punishment you deem appropriate.”

Szass Tam smiled. “Are you sure? You’ve seen the kind of punishments I’m wont to concoct. Get up, both of you. Do you have anything to drink stowed in these trunks? If so, perhaps you could pour us each a cup.”

Feeling confused, Homen did as the necromancer had bade him. Szass Tam inhaled the bouquet of the Chessentan red, swished it around, then sipped from his golden goblet with every sign of a connoisseur's appreciation, though Homen wondered if the undead were truly capable of enjoying such pleasures. Perhaps the lich simply drank—and even, on occasion, ate—to appear more normal and so put folk at ease.

“Well,” said Szass Tam, “it’s clear what the two of you did, but kindly explain why.”

“Master,” Azhir said, “with respect, surely it’s plain enough. I sought to perform great deeds for Thay, to fill her coffers with plunder and extend her borders.”

“And to enrich and elevate yourself in the process.” Szass Tam raised a shriveled finger. “Please, don’t embarrass yourself by denying it. Kept within limits, self-interest is a virtue in a tharchion.” His dark eyes shifted to Homen. “I take it you share your co-commander’s sentiments?”

“Yes,” Homen said. “Your Omnipotence knows that in my youth, I was a Red Wizard of Evocation. I could have remained with my order and enjoyed a privileged, luxurious existence, but the warrior’s life called me. I aspired to win great victories on the battlefield.”

Szass Tam nodded. “Yet for all your personal prowess and all the might of Thay’s legions, you rarely prevailed in a campaign of any consequence.”

Homen’s face grew warm with emotion. Shame, perhaps. “That’s true. Somehow, through the decades, Rashemen and Aglarond withstood us again and again, and now I’m an old man. I didn’t want to go to the grave as the failed captain of a humbled realm.”

“I understand.” Szass Tam took another sip of wine. “But why not ask the zulkirs to authorize your expedition? We could have given you additional troops—”

“By the Black Hand!” Azhir exploded. She must have been utterly unable to contain herself to interrupt a zulkir. He arched an eyebrow, and realizing what she’d done, she blanched.

“It’s all right,” Szass Tam said. “Complete your thought.”

“It’s just—” Azhir took a breath. “Master, have I not asked for permission repeatedly over the course of the last several years, and have you not denied me every time? These days, the policy is *trade*”—her tone made the word an obscenity—“not war. All we want is our neighbors’ gold, even though we already have plenty, even though the mountains of High Thay are full of it. I remember when we dreamed of ruling Faerûn!”

“As do I,” Szass Tam replied.

Homen hesitated then decided that if the lich hadn’t struck Azhir dead for her outburst, he might likewise tolerate a somewhat impertinent question. “Master, pardon me if I presume, but you almost sound as if . . . you agree with us? I thought you supported peace and the trade enclaves.”

Szass Tam smiled. “There are only eight zulkirs, but our politics, our gambits and maneuverings, are more intricate than any sane outsider could imagine. You should be wary of assuming that all is as it appears, but we can talk more about that later.” He shifted his narrow shoulders like a laborer about to set to work. “For now, we must determine how to turn today’s debacle into a splendid achievement, a deed meriting a triumphal procession as opposed to pincers and thumbscrews.”

Homen reflected that it was strange. By rights, conversation ought to produce enlightenment, but the longer the three of them talked, the more perplexed he felt. “You . . . mean to help us escape the consequences of our folly?”

“It should be easy enough,” said the lich. “It’s all in how one tells the story, isn’t it? How about this: Because the two of you are astute commanders, with scouts and spies cunningly deployed, you discovered that a band of Rashemi intended to

invade Thay via the Gorge of Gauros. You marched out to stop them and stop them you did, albeit at a heavy cost. Let all Thay applaud your heroism.”

Homen studied Szass Tam’s fine-boned, intellectual features, looking for some sign that the necromancer was toying with them, proffering hope only for the amusement of snatching it away once more. As far as he could tell, the undead warlock was in earnest.

“Your Omnipotence,” Homen said, “if you show us such mercy, then for the rest of our days, we will serve you above all others.”

“That seems fair.” Szass Tam saluted them with his cup. “To better times.”