

FORGOTTEN REALMS®



THE
PRIESTS

QUEEN OF DEPTHS

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THE **H**RIESTS

PROLOGUE

Hetham studied the murky gap between the dark mounds that were the hills. Nothing there yet, or at least, nothing he could see.

The problem was that despite the enchantment a sea-elf Dukar had cast on him to augment his vision, he couldn't see much. Like all mermen, he was a creature of the upper waters. He wasn't used to these cold, desolate depths. Light as he knew it scarcely existed here, and clouds of particulate matter, a by-product of the teeming life hundreds of feet higher up, drifted down to obscure any feeble gleam that did arise.

With a flick of his piscine tail, he swam a little closer, squinted, and still saw nothing. He cursed.

Ingvatorc chuckled. "Relax, my friend. They'll be here soon enough."

Hetham's mouth tightened in irritation.

Thus far, the mad dragons had mainly attacked As'arem, the confederated shalarin kingdoms. But the spindly, crested shalarins were part of the Nantarn Alliance, and so troops from all six allied races, and others that merely maintained friendly relations with them, had united to battle the wyrms. Companies of mermen stood with slender sea-elf crossbowmen and goggle-eyed locathah spearmen with jutting fins ringing their faces and lining their limbs. Tritons, beings somewhat resembling mermen, but with scaly legs ending in flippers in place of tails, tended gigantic crabs that served as both mounts and weapons. Morkoths, their forms an ugly blend of fishy heads and octopod bodies, inspected the ranks of their sahuagin and scrag slave soldiers. Dolphins and whales swam about the periphery of the formation.

The battle order put Hetham and his company next to a band of storm giants, towering manlike beings possessed of prodigious strength and potent magic. The merman knew he was lucky to fight in proximity to such formidable comrades. Still, no doubt because he was nervous, he found Ingvatorc's calm and cheerful manner grating.

"What if the wyrms don't come through the gap?" the merman asked. "What if they circle to take us from behind, or from above?"

"They won't," said Ingvatorc, strands of his long, dark hair and beard shifting in the current. "The scouts and diviners agree. You have to remember, the wyrms have gone crazy. They no longer have sense enough to keep an eye out for trouble or use clever tactics. They just swim until they find something to kill, tear into it, then rush onward—" The giant stopped and stared. "They're here. Get ready." He waved his hand, signaling to others that the time for battle was at hand.

Across the formation, other officers did the same, and everyone made his final preparations as silently as possible. The wyrms surely sensed that someone awaited them beyond the gap, but if the warriors of the alliance were quiet—and lucky—the cover afforded by the twin hills might keep the drakes from realizing just how strong a force had ventured forth to engage them.

Hetham heard a rasping screech, a snarl, but still couldn't see anything. Then, at last, the notch between the slopes seemed to churn. Vague, serpentine shapes erupted from the gloom.

For a final moment that seemed to stretch on and on until Hetham wanted to scream, nobody attacked. Then captains and sergeants bellowed their orders. Volleys of crossbow bolts streaked through the water, though Hetham and his company didn't shoot. As yet, they were too far away. Spellcasters pointed wands and staves, or chanted incantations and lashed their hands through mystic passes. Darts of crimson light; glowing, slashing, disembodied blades; and pouncing, seething masses of shadow assailed the wyrms. Glaring at a huge black drake with a withered, leprous mask, Ingvatorc sang more than declaimed his words of power. He ended on a deep, sustained note, and rounds of milky phosphorescence materialized above and below the reptile. They snapped shut on it and engulfed it completely, like an oyster clasping a pearl.

For an instant, it almost seemed as if the allies could batter and harass the wyrms with impunity. One of the mermen cheered. Then, in a surging blur of motion, the reptiles struck back.

A dragon eel, as long as Ingvatorc was tall, with a few crossbow quarrels sticking in its dull scales, lashed its tail and hurtled into the midst of a band of elves. Each snap of its beak obliterated a warrior,

nipping him to fragments, or snatching every trace of him from view as the creature swallowed him whole. A haze of blood suffused the space around it.

Wings beating, shimmering water drakes shot through a band of shalarins, wheeled, and streaked at them again. On each pass, they ripped at their prey with fang and claw.

A colossal sea drake, a wyrm somewhat like the dragon eels but even bigger, whipped around a whale, confining and crushing the cetacean in its coils, tearing great chunks of flesh away with its jaws. Dolphins swirled about the duel, hammering the drake with their snouts, but to little effect.

A long-necked dragon turtle, like a living fortress in its massive, bladed shell, opened its beak and spewed its breath weapon. The water in front of it bubbled furiously, suddenly boiling hot. The locathahs caught in the effect floundered in agony.

Meanwhile, the dragons capable of casting spells, or possessed of innate magical powers, blasted arcane attacks at the wizards and priests among their foes. The reptiles might be insane, but they still had sufficient wit to use the full range of their abilities and to strive to eliminate their most dangerous adversaries first.

A topaz dragon, eyes glowing like yellow flame, hide reflecting light as if it were a living jewel in truth, stared at a half dozen morkoths. Unlike many of the supernatural effects being conjured on every side, the wyrm's power didn't manifest with a flash, a whine of sound, or anything else perceptible to Hetham's senses. But the morkoth wizards convulsed, their tentacles whipping about. Instantly, the topaz beat its wings and plunged forward to finish them off while they were helpless. The morkoths' bodyguards, sahuagin with round, black eyes; webbed, clawed hands; and maws full of needle fangs, leaped to interpose them-

selves between their masters and the threat, but the topaz smashed through them in an instant.

A black dragon snarled at a trio of sea-elf Dukars, the enchanted coral bonded to their skeletons now visible to all, jutting from their hands and twining about their limbs to serve as weapons and armor. The water around the mages darkened, curdled. They flailed, evidently unable to breathe, and struggled to flounder clear of the cloud. One of them succeeded, but only to blunder into the dragon's jaws.

The glowing, clamlike prison Ingvatorc had conjured winked out of existence, liberating the black inside. The dragon snarled words of power. To Hetham's horror, Ingvatorc changed, shrinking, his limbs becoming soft, clear, and shapeless as the substance of a jellyfish. Until something, his own magical abilities or sheer strength of spirit perhaps, reversed the transformation. He swelled and solidified back into his true form, then slumped wide-eyed and quaking, striving to collect himself sufficiently to resume the struggle.

Hetham was glad to see his huge companion withstand the curse, but he wondered if it was really going to matter. Nothing else had. The army of the alliance had claimed the ground its commanders had wanted and executed the strategy they'd devised. They'd struck the first blow and struck it hard. Yet as best Hetham could judge, they'd scarcely hurt the wyrms at all. They certainly hadn't slowed them down or dampened their appetite for slaughter. The reptiles were knifing through their ranks as easily as a whale sucked in mouthfuls of plankton.

Heart pounding, Hetham looked over to see if his captain was about to order the company forward into the mayhem. It didn't look like it. Perhaps the officer was afraid, or maybe he simply saw no point in moving. For after all, the dragons were coming to them.

The dragon turtle boiled a squad of tritons with

another puff of its superheated breath. Water drakes and dolphins spun around one another in a combat like intricate dance. The cetaceans fought fearlessly, and their bards sang songs laced with magic, but the reptiles had them overmatched and ripped them to bloody shreds of fin and viscera. A dragon eel caught a giant crab in its beak, bit down, and cracked its adversary's shell. Still alive for the moment, the arthropod groped with its pincers, but the drake kept its scaly coils out of reach.

Two dragons, the colossal black Ingvatorc had tried and failed to imprison and the equally enormous topaz, tore another contingent of morkoths and slave warriors into a gory haze. Hetham saw with a thrill of terror that no one remained between the wyrms and his own company. Sure enough, the reptiles oriented on them and charged, legs stroking and kicking, wings sweeping, and tails lashing.

Some of the mermen turned and bolted. For an instant, Hetham wondered if he was gong to do the same. But evidently he was not, though he wasn't sure why. He was certain he was just as frightened as those who'd fled.

"Aim!" the captain shouted.

The mermen lifted their crossbows. Hetham pointed his weapon of bone and coral and its bolt of blowfish spine at the topaz's radiant yellow eye.

"Shoot!"

The volley flew. Hetham's quarrel missed the eye by a finger's length. For an instant, he thought it might still do some good, but it just glanced off the creature's brow. Many of his comrades' darts did the same. A few lodged in the dragons' scales, but failed to penetrate deeply enough to kill or cripple. It seemed possible that the reptiles didn't even feel the stings.

Some storm giants cast additional spells, but whatever the resulting flashes of green and purple light,

sudden chill, carrion stink, and head-spinning moment of dizziness were supposed to accomplish, the reptiles weathered it all without slowing down or veering off. The rest of the band discharged their own crossbows. The oversized missiles might have done the dragons some actual damage, but they dodged the bolts by lashing their serpentine bodies low or from side to side. The black had but a single hole punched in its leathery wing, and the topaz suffered no harm at all.

“Tridents!” the merman officer shouted, reasonably enough. A warrior didn’t want to be caught with a missile weapon in his grasp when the foe closed to striking distance, even if said foe’s prodigious fangs and talons were such fearsome implements of destruction that Hetham’s three-pronged lance seemed a joke by comparison.

The giants dropped their crossbows and unsheathed greatswords of sharp, faceted claw coral. For a sea creature Hetham’s size, such a cutting, chopping weapon was all but useless. The resistance of the water kept a merman from swinging it hard enough to do much damage. But beings as strong as Ingvatorc and his kin could wield them to deadly effect. Hetham tried to draw some encouragement from that fact.

Meanwhile, the dragons raced closer, loomed larger, until even the giants seemed puny by comparison. For Hetham, dazed with dread, the moment had a dream-like quality, and he had the daft thought that if only he’d lived a better life, and so inclined the gods to love him better, it might truly be possible to escape this doom by the simple expedient of waking up.

Just as the drakes were about to close, one of the storm giants bellowed a command or war cry in his own language. He and his fellows lunged to meet the onrushing dragons, essayed a first strike with their long, heavy, gemlike blades, then tried to dodge and spin away from the reptiles’ ripostes. Some were such

able swordsmen, or had so augmented their natural prowess with enchantment, that they jumped away from that first exchange unscathed. Another, less skillful or less fortunate, sank down to the sea floor with three gaping vertical rents in his torso. Blood streamed out to dirty the water, to taint it with its coppery smell and taste.

“Kill them!” the merman officer cried.

The warrior beside Hetham cried out, “I’m sorry!” dropped his trident, and fled. Everyone else rushed forward.

Hetham had once watched a big shark and eel fighting while smaller fish, ignored, perhaps even unnoticed, whirled around the combatants to feast on drifting morsels of flesh from their wounds. The moments that followed reminded him of that, with his fellow mermen and himself playing the roles of the scavengers.

The dragons were too intent on the giants, by far the more serious of the two threats facing them, to pay much heed to mermen. Unfortunately, the wyrms were so huge and powerful that they could annihilate a smaller creature hovering close at hand without even particularly intending to. The black-scaled “skull dragon,” as such reptiles with their shriveled masks were called, raked at a giant, accidentally snagged a merman on the tip of one claw, and crushed him when it set its foot back down. A random swat from a dusky wing shattered the bones in another warrior’s body. The topaz pivoted to strike at the towering swordsman on its flank, and its whipping tail smashed the merman officer’s head, which tumbled clear of his shoulders.

Even the storm giants posed a hazard. One feinted a cut at the jewel wyrm’s leg then whirled his blade high for the true strike at its neck, without seeing the merman obliviously swimming into the arc of the

attack. The coral blade sheared off the flukes of his tail.

All but choking on the blood in the water, his eyes smarting and nearly blinded by it, Hetham strained to block out the horror of what was happening, believing his side might actually have a chance. For after all, the giants were fearsome combatants. Their great-swords hacked long, deep gashes in the dragons' hides. At the very least, they were keeping the wyrms busy, and while they managed that, maybe the mermen's desperate little pokes and jabs would actually do some good.

He *wanted* to think so. But despite their wounds, the dragons never faltered, while, one by one, the giants slowly collapsed to the sea floor with crushed, misshapen heads, shredded torsos, and ragged stumps where massive limbs had been. Finally only Ingvatorc remained. The reptiles maneuvered to flank him, and knowing himself overmatched, he started jabbering a spell. Before he could finish, though, the wyrms pounced. He lashed out with a stop cut, and intent on the kill, the topaz didn't even try to avoid it. The blade sliced its flank, but at the same instant, the creature caught Ingvatorc's shoulder in its jaws.

Meanwhile, the skull wyrm plunged its fangs into the giant's lower back. The drakes twisted, wrenching and pulling in opposite directions, and Ingvatorc's torso ripped into two pieces.

With that accomplished, the reptiles rounded on the surviving mermen. The topaz clawed at Hetham. He jerked out of the way and swam backward.

The retreat carried him into water where the drifting blood wasn't quite so thick, permitting a glimpse of the battle as a whole. What he saw came as no surprise but wrung his heart nonetheless.

The army of the alliance was finished, Dukars, high mages, morkoths, mermen, shalarins, sea-elves,

and tritons all annihilated, or maybe, in the case of a few lucky folk, put to flight.

We tried, he thought, perhaps addressing the multitude of folk who'd depended on them for their deliverance. I swear by the tides, we tried. But we just couldn't stop them. No one could.

Still, he had a duty to fight on, for these last few moments of life. He aimed his trident at the topaz's mask. If it bit at him, he would try again to put out its luminous yellow eye.

But when he met its gaze, pain exploded through his head, paralyzing him. Before he could recover, its fangs pierced him through.