

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE RITE

THE YEAR OF ROGUE DRAGONS

11
book

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PROLOGUE

2 & 3 Mirtul, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR)

To Fodel's chagrin, Natali saw them first. He was the one who knew they were coming, but still, it was his fellow sentry with her keen eyes who spotted an outstretched wing momentarily blocking the light of a star, or perhaps the leading edge of the dark mass creeping over the ground—Fodel could tell by the way she gasped and snatched for the bugle hanging at her hip.

Fodel whipped out his dagger and thrust at the slender redhead's sunburned neck, at the bare flesh between mail and helmet. Thanks be to the Sacred Ones, the point drove home before she could blow a note. Warm blood sprayed out and splattered his hand. The brass horn fell clanking onto the wall-walk.

Fodel winced at the clatter, but maybe no one had heard. He grabbed the corpse before it could

collapse and make even more racket, wrestled it to the edge of the battlement, and shoved it over the merlons. It landed with a thud on the ground outside the castle.

He scurried for the stairs leading down into the bailey. Avarin met him in the courtyard and with a nod, conveyed the message that he, too, had killed his companion up on the battlements. For the moment, no one remained to raise an alarm.

That couldn't last. They had to finish their work quickly. Still, as they approached the ponderous mechanisms of windlasses, chains, and counterweights that controlled the portcullis and iron valves, they forced themselves to slow to a saunter. It wouldn't do for the warriors stationed inside the gate to discern their urgency.

The North had reached that time of year when spring ruled the day but winter had yet to relinquish its grip on the night. Accordingly, the two common soldiers and the officer of the watch, a Paladin of the Golden Cup clad in gilt-trimmed knightly trappings, stood huddled around a crackling fire. At first they oriented on Fodel and Avarin, but in a casual sort of way. When the duo stepped into the circle of wavering firelight, though, the paladin peered at them intently.

"Is that blood?" he asked.

Fodel glanced down at himself and saw that it was. He had splotches of Natali's gore all over his chest, where his war cloak didn't cover. Somehow, in his excitement, he hadn't realized.

"Yes," he said, "you see . . ."

He couldn't think of a plausible explanation, but hoped it didn't matter. Maybe he just needed to keep babbling until he and Avarin closed to striking distance.

The knight's eyes narrowed, and Fodel knew the game was up. Ilmater's holy warriors could look into a man's soul when they deemed it necessary, and the officer was surely gazing into his. Fodel flailed his knife arm out from under his mantle and rushed in stabbing.

The paladin caught the first thrusts on his small round

wood-and-leather shield. At the same time, he called, "Treachery! Treachery at the gate!"

Magically amplified, the words boomed loud as thunder. Fodel had no doubt they'd rouse the entire garrison. That meant he and Avarin had, at most, a minute or so left to accomplish their purpose. Fodel feinted with the knife, then kicked the paladin's knee. The knight reeled off balance with his broadsword still halfway in its scabbard. Fodel kicked again, dropped his foe onto his back, flung himself on top of him, and stabbed until the paladin stopped moving.

Hands gripped Fodel's forearm. He jerked around and nearly slashed with the knife before realizing that it was Avarin who'd taken hold of him. His comrade had killed the two men-at-arms and was attempting to haul him to his feet.

"Come on!" Avarin said.

They scrambled on to the windlass that would lift the portcullis. Thanks to the cunning of the dwarves who'd built the contraption, two men could operate it without strain. Still, such was Fodel's desperation that it seemed to take forever to hoist the massive steel grille.

Next, they shifted the bar sealing the gates, which squealed in its brackets despite the grease. That alone didn't make the thick iron leaves movable. Their sheer weight and the enchantments the king's wizards had cast on them could hold them shut. Accordingly, Fodel and Avarin rushed to another windlass, grasped the handles, and heaved.

"Stop!" a soprano voice shouted.

The gate was in effect a sort of tunnel passing through the thick granite wall. Fodel looked around and saw the archers, crossbowmen, and spellcasters assembled in the courtyard just outside, each ready to shoot the traitors down with shaft or spell.

"Come away from the mechanism," the magician, a thin, aging woman with braided hair, continued. She was still in her nightgown, with only a knit shawl wrapped around her shoulders to ward off the chill.

Come away? Fodel thought. Why? They'd only kill him anyway. Better, then, to go down fighting, striving to do what he'd come so close to accomplishing. He threw his weight against the windlass, and Avarin did the same. A first cross-bow bolt, precursor to the volley to follow, streaked past Fodel's head.

Fire, dazzling bright, roared down from the sky to engulf men-at-arms and paladins, wizards and clerics, who screamed, floundered, burned, and died. Those defenders who happened to be standing outside the perimeter of the blast, and who thus survived it, goggled upward to see what had so unexpectedly attacked them. What they saw there drove some mad with fear and made them bolt. The rest, the bravest, prepared to strike back.

With a jolt that shook the earth and knocked men staggering, a gigantic dragon slammed down amid the litter of burning corpses. Its scales were a dull, deep red, and its blank eyes glowed like orbs of molten lava. With a claw it pulled a knight's guts out of his belly. Its serpentine tail lashed, shattering an archer's legs. Biting, its fangs sheared off the top half of a wizard's torso.

The defenders managed to do the wyrm some little harm in return. An arrow pierced one of its scalloped neck frills. Bellowing the name of his god, a Paladin of the Golden Cup swung his greatsword and cut a gash in the dragon's flank. The wizard in the shawl thrust out her hands and encrusted the monster's neck and one wing in frost, which seemed to sting it. The dragon hissed in fury. Blood oozed from its scales, not as a result of any injury but as a manifestation of some magic of its own, and slathered it in a dark, shiny wetness. It lunged, snapped, and raked at its adversaries even more savagely than before.

At which point Fodel abruptly realized that the surviving defenders were so busy fighting the wyrm that they'd forgotten all about him and Avarin.

"Let's get it open," he said, and he and his comrade hauled on the windlass anew. One of the iron leaves swung inward,

and cheering and howling, stunted goblins, pig-faced orcs, and a miscellany of bigger, more fearsome creatures surged through. A towering hill giant with thick, long arms, a low forehead, and lumpish features spotted Fodel and Avarin and rushed them. It swung its crude warhammer over its head.

“We’re friends!” Fodel cried. “We opened the gate for you!”

The giant only sneered.

But then, in the blink of an eye, Sammaster appeared between the huge marauder and its intended victims. Many an observer might have regarded him as an even more alarming apparition than the giant, for his spiked gold crown and the rest of his jeweled regalia did nothing to blunt the horror of his withered skull-face and skeletal limbs. But Fodel had never been so glad to see anyone in his life.

“They are friends,” the undead wizard said. “Go make yourself useful. Pulp some paladins or something.”

The giant inclined its head in a servile fashion and shambled away to do its master’s bidding.

“Thank you!” Fodel said. “I thought—”

Sammaster silenced him by raising a bony finger. “Be careful what you say,” the enchanter whispered. “Remember that to you, I’m the First-Speaker of our fellowship, but to our allies here, I’m Zhengyi, their fallen Witch-King risen from the Abyss to lead them to victory. Convenient, isn’t it, that to most eyes, one lich looks like another.”

“Thank you for sending the dragon to help us.” Fodel wondered how Sammaster had known they needed succor, but probably that was no great trick for a master wizard. “I’m sorry we couldn’t open the gate secretly, the way we were supposed to.”

“No matter. I thought to take the fortress with more finesse and less brute force, but the important thing is that we’ve taken it. Look for yourself.”

Fodel gazed out into the courtyard and saw that Sammaster was correct. The king’s men had no hope of contending with the dragon and the invading horde of goblin kin simultaneously. Most of the men-at-arms were dead, the rest,

routing. Perhaps a handful would escape the citadel and lose themselves in the night, but that didn't matter.

Earlier, the castle called the Vaasan Gate, where the Cult of the Dragon had likewise insinuated its agents, had fallen, enabling Sammaster to lead the orcs and giants of the desolate territory to the northwest into Bloodstone Pass. Marching at maximum speed under cover of darkness, the invaders had ignored the various settlements in the valley to reach the Damaran Gate in advance of any warning that aught was amiss, and they'd taken possession of that fortification as well.

Well, actually, only the eastern tip of it. The Damaran Gate was a mammoth construction of wall and watchtowers three miles long, with castles anchoring the ends, and it was the lesser of these that Sammaster had overthrown. But that was enough to open Damara to the hosts of savage creatures who'd lusted to take their vengeance on it ever since the king slew their overlord and drove them out of his dominions fourteen years before.

Fodel was a Damaran himself, and for a moment, felt a vague pang of regret over the slaughter and ruin to come. Then he reminded himself of the glorious future that awaited him and all who believed in Sammaster's teachings, and the emotion faded.



The company had ridden hard for two days, but, Igan reflected, no one would know it from the way Gareth Dragonsbane sat tall and easy in the saddle. Trying to copy the brawny, handsome, blond-bearded warrior as a squire was supposed to emulate the knight he served—especially if said knight also happened to be a Paladin of the Golden Cup, a celebrated hero, and the King of Damara—the gangly youth with the pox-scarred face sat up straighter, too.

"They're coming," said Mor Kulenov, one of the senior wizards, a pudgy little man with a billy-goat beard. Presumably some spell alerted him to the enemy's approach.

“It’s a bad idea,” grumbled Drigor Bersk, “fighting dragons in the dark.” Scar-faced and hulking, stronger than most men-at-arms, the priest of Ilmater was a dauntless terror in battle, but had a habit of predicting doom before the hostilities commenced.

“It’s either stop them here and now,” Dragonsbane said, “or let them rampage through Ostrav. The village is just beyond those hills. Besides, dragons are big, Drigor. You won’t have any trouble picking them out, even at night.” He raised his voice and called, “All right, gentlemen, this is where we make our stand. You know what to do, so take your positions, and may the Crying God bless us all.”

Maneuvering with practiced efficiency, the company of six hundred riders dispersed itself into a number of smaller units arrayed across the heath. It was a looser formation than the king might have chosen to meet another foe, but it was bad tactics to bunch up when fighting dragons.

Though he’d skirmished with orcs and bandits, Igan had never even seen a drake. He looked forward to it with a mix of eagerness and dry-mouthed trepidation, despite the fact that he still might not behold a living wyrm up close. His master had assigned him to help guard four of the magicians, a contingent positioned to the rear of most of the men-at-arms, and it was entirely possible no dragon would attack so far behind the front line.

Like the majority of mounts, even war-horses, Rain, Igan’s dappled destrier, quite possibly lacked the courage to stand before a dragon. Accordingly, Igan tied him up, then, carrying his lance to use as a spear, took up his position in front of the warlocks. After that, he had little to do but wait and imagine his comrades making their preparations for combat out there in the dark. Archers were surely stringing their bows, warriors tightening the pommels of their swords, clerics praying for the blessing of Ilmater and the other gods of light, and mages conjuring wards of their own. Indeed, flickers of silver, blue, and greenish light across the moor gave evidence of spellcasting.

One of the magicians stalked up to Igan and the other men who were his protectors. His squint, the tight set of his jaw, and the tension in his shoulders gave him a clenched, dyspeptic look that was habitual. Igan knew the wizard's name was Sergor Marsk, but little else about him.

"Stand a few yards farther forward," Sergor said.

The sergeant, a short, wiry man with a bushy white mustache, a gimp leg, and a missing pinkie likely severed on some forgotten battlefield, said, "We're better able to guard you if we stay close."

"Do as I say!" Sergor snapped, and perhaps realizing how sharp he'd sounded, continued in a more moderate tone. "We'll be conjuring forces that could hurt you if you stand too near, and the dragons won't molest us anyway. They won't even see us."

"Have it your way," the sergeant said. "You heard him, boys. Move thataway." The line shifted forward.

Sergor returned to his colleagues, murmured words of power, and brandished a scrap of fleece. The air rippled and turned colder for a second, and the four warlocks twisted into the form of a cart heaped high with baggage. Igan assumed that in actuality, the mages were still there, hidden behind an illusion.

"That's odd," he said, frowning.

"What is?" the sergeant replied.

"If Goodman Marsk wanted to conjure a veil, why not hide all of us behind it, wizards and guards alike?"

The old soldier snorted. "It probably never occurred to him. High-and-mighty magicians don't give a rat's whisker about folk who can't cast spells. The sooner you learn that, the better off—Oh, Tempus, here they come!"

Igan jerked around. At first glance, he spotted half a dozen dragons, a couple soaring, one, cloaked in shimmering light, proceeding over the ground in a series of prodigious bounds aided by snaps of its wings, and the others striding as fast as a horse could run. One of the striders glowed like a hot coal. All had presumably fallen prey to the Rage, the madness that

made wyrms rampage across country killing everything in their path.

The king's men were elite warriors all. Even so, a few threw down their weapons and shields and ran, overwhelmed by fear. Others lost control of the panicked steeds whose mettle they'd trusted too well, and the destriers bore them helplessly away. But most of the company stood its ground.

Volley of arrows thrummed and whistled through the air, and flares of fiery breath leaped and hissed in answer. The first dying men and horses screamed. The air above the heath sparkled and rippled, and Igan felt a momentary surge of vertigo, as a number of spellcasters conjured attacks all at once. One of the flying dragons fell and hit the earth with a crash. Warriors cheered, but the celebration was premature. The wyrm heaved itself to its feet, shook itself like a wet hound, and charged the nearest group of humans.

Igan realized something else that struck him as peculiar. "The mages we're guarding haven't attacked yet."

"They're working on it, I expect," the sergeant said. "I guess some spells take longer than others."

"How can they even see past the illusion Goodman Marsk conjured to pick a target?"

"I reckon they can do it because they're wizards. Now stop worrying about their job and do yours. Which is to shut up and stand ready."

Embarrassed, Igan resolved to do just that, for after all, he didn't know himself why he was so concerned with what the warlocks were or weren't doing. It was just a manifestation of his jitters, he supposed.

A sinuous shadow at the heart of a bulb of glowing light, the leaping dragon—a fang dragon, if Igan wasn't mistaken—rushed at the archers who were harrying it. Swirling tendrils of black mist appeared in its path, and five radiant spheres, each a different color, hurtled at it. Unfortunately, the spell effects failed to hinder it in the slightest. To Igan, it looked as if the curls of mist and brilliant orbs withered out

of existence on contact with the reptile's shimmering aura, before they could touch its body.

The archers scattered, but they weren't all quick enough. The fang dragon pounced in among them and started killing. It struck so fast its motions were a blur, and every snatch of its talons, snap of its jaws, flick of a wing, or lash of its tail left at least one man mangled on the ground.

A party of lancers charged it. Their course carried them in front of the drake that was blazing hot, casting them briefly into vivid silhouette, enabling Igan to pick out Dragonsbane galloping a pace or two in advance of the others. The youth smiled, anticipating the deadly blow his master was about to strike, for how could it be otherwise? The king's very name bespoke his skill at slaying wyrms.

Then the greatest champion in Damara swayed like a cripple in his saddle. The point of his lance flopped down to catch in the ground, and the pressure tumbled him backward over his horse's rump. The knights riding closest to him hauled on their reins to keep from trampling him, and veered into the comrades on their other flanks. Other lancers, focused on the fang dragon, raced on without realizing anything was wrong.

"Ilmater's tears!" Igan cried. "What happened?"

"A dragon struck him down with a spell," the sergeant answered. "They're sorcerers, you know."

Igan did know, but he still wasn't sure the older warrior was correct. It was his impression that all the drakes had been busy with other targets at that particular moment.

Something implored him to act. It might have been the whisper of a god or merely the urging of his own folly, but either way, he meant to heed it. He dropped the long, heavy lance—a good weapon for fending off a dragon but otherwise awkward for a combatant afoot—drew his broadsword, wheeled, and strode toward the illusory cart. The sergeant called after him, but Igan ignored him.

The interior of the phantasm resembled an artist's palette, but with all the dabs of luminous, multicolored paint twisting

and crawling around one another. Fortunately, the space was only a few feet across. Two more strides carried Igan out the other side before he could lose either his bearings or the contents of his stomach.

When he emerged, a single glance confirmed the worst of his suspicions. One of the mages lay dead or at least insensible on the ground. After striking him down, his companions had proceeded to the real point of their treachery.

Pulling as if it were a garrote, Sergor held the end of a thin black cord in either fist. In the middle, the tight coils cutting into it, hung an entangled rag doll. Though the figure was crudely fashioned, its tinsel crown, fringe of yellow beard, and the golden chalice emblem stitched to its torso made it plain it represented the king. The other two traitorous warlocks stood facing it, crooning to it in some sibilant, esoteric language, weaving their hands in cabalistic passes. Their fingers left fleeting smears of deeper blackness on the night.

Igan rushed in. He wanted to kill Sergor first, but the wizard saw him coming, squawked a warning to his fellows, and scrambled backward out of range. Igan had to content himself with a thrust at a different target. The traitor was still turning when the point drove into his side. He crumpled.

As Igan yanked his blade free, Sergor's other comrade jabbered a rhyme. Something flickered at the edge of the squire's vision. He pivoted in time to see the jagged length of conjured ice fly at him, but not in time to dodge. The missile exploded against his chest. Though the shards failed to pierce his breastplate, a pang of ghastly cold stabbed through his torso and doubled him over.

As he struggled against shock, he heard both magicians chanting, and realized with a surge of dread that he couldn't reach either one in time to stop his conjuring. He would have to endure two more magical attacks.

Then, however, the sergeant strode out of the illusory cart. Judging by the way he goggled, he hadn't realized anything was amiss. He'd simply come to drag an errant squire back

to his assigned duty. But he only needed an instant to recover from his surprise. Then he lowered his spear, ran forward, and rammed it into the belly of the mage who'd produced the dart of ice.

That disrupted the one casting, but Sergor finished a split second later. He thrust out his hand and a bolt of yellow flame leaped from his fingertips. Igan tried to jump aside, but the fire brushed him anyway, searing him.

Refusing to let the pain balk him, Igan charged. Sergor scrambled backward and commenced a rhyme. His hands swirled in a complex figure. Power howled through the air. But the whine died abruptly when Igan's sword smashed through the warlock's ribs.

As soon as Sergor collapsed, Igan felt the fierce heat gnawing at the left side of his body. He dropped and rolled until the fire went out. By that time the sergeant was standing beside him.

"What is all this?" the old warrior asked.

"A rag doll . . . we have to find it . . . Sergor must have dropped it so he could throw other—"

Igan saw the doll and snatched it up.

The black cord still cut into the cloth figure even though no one was pulling on the ends. Igan hauled off his steel gauntlet so he could use his fingertips more deftly, and with considerable difficulty, stripped the binding coils away. Then he ran back through the illusory cart to survey the battlefield.

He cursed when it appeared that the king was as crippled as before. Some of his retainers were trying to hoist the big man in his heavy plate over the back of his horse so they could take him to safety. Others had positioned themselves between the fang dragon and the stricken monarch. The gigantic reptile, still cloaked in its shimmering aura of protection, lunged, raked, and bit amid a shambles of shredded human and equine corpses.

A rider on the wyrm's flank chopped at its foreleg with an axe. In response, the drake simply shifted the limb and brushed the axeman and his mount. An armored knight

and charger might have been able to withstand such a comparatively light bump, except that the edges of a fang dragon's scales were as sharp as blades. They stripped away the steel and leather layers of protection to flay the flesh beneath.

The dragon snatched up another warrior in its jaws, chewed, swallowed, then pounced at the knot of men surrounding the king. Its bulk smashed through the final rank of defenders, reducing the scene to chaos. Men dropped, pulped and shattered. Horses bolted. The wyrm was within easy reach of Dragonsbane, and those who'd hoped to remove the king from harm's way had no choice but to turn and fight.

Igan looked around, hoping to see other men-at-arms rushing to the king's aid. Nobody was. They were busy fighting the other wyrms.

Igan snatched up the lance he'd dropped and ran for Rain, still tethered among a dozen other horses to the twisted steel stake his rider had screwed into the ground. The sergeant scrambled after him. They untied their mounts and swung themselves into their saddles, but the older warrior's steed balked at going any closer to the dragons. Igan was on his own.

As he galloped onto the field, the fang dragon steadily obliterated the king's defenders, one every heartbeat or so.

"Steady, Rain," Igan crooned. "Steady, good boy, don't be scared, just do it the way we practiced. . . ."

The closer he rode to the dragon, the better he could see it, and the more hideous it became. Its hide was dark and mottled, and bony spurs projected from its joints. The tail forked into two long, bladelike projections, and the orange eyes smoldered. Resisting his swelling dread as best he could, Igan galloped to within several yards of it, and it turned its glittering gaze on him.

Rain whinnied in terror as some magical force the wyrm had invoked heaved him and his rider twenty feet into the air. It slammed them down again a second later.

Igan lay on his side. For a moment, he couldn't remember

why, where he was, or what was happening. Then he realized that when the dragon had dashed him and Rain to the ground, it must have knocked him unconscious for a time. He was lucky it hadn't done worse than that, almost certainly luckier than poor Rain, who sprawled motionless, his weight pressing down on his rider's leg.

Igan kicked his feet out of the stirrups, then awkwardly squirmed and dragged himself out from under the destrier. By the time he stood up, the dragon, intent on other foes, had pivoted away from him. Still, he had to take a steadying breath, gathering his courage, before he could bring himself to poise the lance and run at the creature.

It sensed him coming, swung back toward him, but not quite quickly enough. By more good fortune, the lance punched through what must have been a thin spot in its scales and jabbed deep into the base of its neck. The drake let out a weak hiss, stamped, reached in a shuddering, faltering way to seize Igan in its jaws, then flopped over onto its flank.

It occurred to Igan then that he likely had won his spurs today, but he didn't even care. Only Dragonsbane mattered. He scurried to his master, helped to carry him from the field, and stayed with him for the remainder of the battle, watching as various learned folk attended him. At first the clerics worked alone. Then, when their efforts proved unavailing, they sent for wizards to help them.

That was no use, either.

Out on the heath, the company slew the last surviving dragon, and Drigor turned to the onlookers and announced what everyone already realized: "I don't understand. His Majesty isn't dead. He isn't even wounded. But neither Master Kulenov nor I can rouse him."



Cloaked in the diminutive form of an aged gnome with nut-brown, wrinkled skin, Lareth, King of Justice, sovereign of the gold dragons of Faerûn—indeed, of all metallic wyrms,

until the present crisis passed—sat on an outcropping, watched the morning sun creep higher into a clear blue sky, and wondered about the taste of human flesh.

He'd never sampled it, of course, or the meat of any sentient creature, even a slinking goblin or brutish orc. No metal dragon had. It was against their laws, to the extent that such proud and independent beings could be said to have any.

He'd never questioned the wisdom of such a prohibition, but now he didn't see the point of it. Naturally no dragon of goodly character would eat a human of similar inclinations, but if you had to kill a wicked man to stop him from doing evil, wherein lay the harm of devouring the body afterward?

Was the meat so succulent that the wyrm might develop a compulsion to eat it on a regular basis? Lareth tried to imagine a feast as delicious as that, the sweet, warm, bloody flesh melting on his tongue, the dainty bones cracking between his fangs and giving up their marrow—

And avidity gave way to a surge of nausea. Lords of light, what was the matter with him?

Of course, he knew the answer. It was the Rage, madness and bloodlust nibbling at his mind. He needed to rest, but first he'd have to wake another sentinel to take his place.

Knowing he'd sleep better in his natural form, he swelled into a gleaming, sinuous creature with a gold's characteristic "catfish whiskers," twin horns sweeping back from the skull, and wings that sprouted at the shoulders to extend almost all the way down to the tip of the tail. He turned, spread his pinions, and leaped upward. Below him, in a valley nestled among the frigid peaks called the Galenas, dozens of his kin lay slumbering, their scales—gold, brass, silver, bronze, or copper—glittering in the sun.

Furling his wings, Lareth landed beside a fellow gold nearly as huge as himself. It was Tamarand, first among the lords. Tamarand was snoring, an odd little puff and whistle that made Lareth smile for a moment. Then he recited the incantation Nexus, greatest of all draconic wizards, had

taught him. Power groaned through the air, and tufts of coarse mountain grass caught fire.

Tamarand's blank, luminous amber eyes fluttered open. He heaved himself to his feet, then inclined his head in a show of respect.

"Your Resplendence . . ."

"I need you to take over for a while," Lareth said. "I . . . the frenzy was . . ." He realized he didn't need or want to explain the shameful impulse that had crept unbidden into his mind. "Just take over."

Tamarand eyed him. "Are you all right?"

Under the circumstances, the question shouldn't have annoyed Lareth, but it did anyway. It even made fire warm his throat and brought smoke fuming out of his maw and nostrils before he stifled the emotion.

"I'm fine. It's just . . . you know what it is. This is why we take turns standing watch. Because it's dangerous for any of us to remain awake for too long at a stretch."

"Of course."

"Lay the enchantment on me, and—"

Lareth heard wings lashing overhead, and peered up at the sky to see Azhaq swooping lower. A member of the martial fellowship of silvers called the Talons of Justice, Azhaq was one of the few metallic drakes who enjoyed Lareth's permission to stay awake and wander abroad.

Lareth should have greeted Azhaq with the decorum befitting their respective stations, but he was too eager to hear what the shield dragon, as silvers were often called, had to say. Before Azhaq's talons even touched the earth, the King cried, "Give me your news. Did you find Karasendrieth, or any of the other rogues?"

Smelling like rain as his species often did, the broad argent plates on his head reflecting the sun, Azhaq folded his wings and inclined his head. "No, Your Resplendence. The Rage has plunged the North into madness. Flights of our evil kindred lay waste to the land. The Zhentarim and other cabals of wicked men strive to turn the chaos to their own advantage.

Suffice it to say, amid all the terror and confusion, it's difficult to pick up a trail."

Lareth bared his fangs in a show of frustration. "Then why have you returned," he asked, "if not to report success?"

Azhaq lowered his wedge-shaped head with its high dorsal frill in a rueful gesture. "I had to come. The frenzy has its claws in me. I need to sleep, and perhaps it's just as well. On my flight north, I saw something you ought to know about. The creatures of Vaasa have breached the fortifications in Bloodstone Pass. They're pouring into Damara."

"Impossible," Lareth said. "They could never take the Gates, certainly not without the Witch-King to lead them, and Zhengyi is gone."

"I don't know how they managed it," Azhaq said, "but they did, and Damara was already in desperate straits, fighting off dragon flights. I don't know how the humans can deal with hordes of orcs as well."

"It's a pity," Lareth said, "but there's nothing we can do about it at the moment."

"With respect, Your Resplendence," Azhaq said, "I think there might be. Surely the dragons sleeping here can withstand the Rage for just another day or two of wakefulness. That could be all the time we need to turn the goblins back."

"No," Lareth snapped. "Too risky. We stick to our plan."

"Plans must sometimes change to fit changing circumstances," Azhaq said.

Lareth's fire rose in his throat and warmed his mouth. "Wings of our ancestors," he snarled, "why didn't I see it before? You and Karasendrieth were comrades in your time."

His eyes like pools of quicksilver, Azhaq blinked in what was surely feigned confusion. "What? No . . . never."

"Since the day I sent you to deal with her, you've caught up with her *twice*—"

"No, only once!"

"—and she 'escaped' both times. It can only be because

you permitted it! You're her accomplice, working to undermine me from within my own court."

Lareth reared to blast forth his flame. Realizing he was in actual danger, Azhaq crouched, his wings unfurling with a snap, as he prepared to spring.

Tamarand lunged between the two combatants. Lareth scrambled, trying to reach a position from which he could expel his fiery breath without hitting his meddling fool of a lieutenant, while Azhaq attempted a corresponding maneuver.

Wings spread to their fullest to make his body a more effective screen, scuttling to keep the king and the Talon separated, Tamarand bellowed, "Llimark! Llimark! Llimark!"

Angry though he was, the shouted name finally registered with Lareth, and he understood he'd been confused. It was Llimark, one of his own golds, who'd been Karasendrieth's friend, and Llimark who, at his monarch's behest, had attempted to bring her to heel the first time. Just as he'd maintained, Azhaq had only caught up with the dragon bard on a single occasion, later on.

The Talon was no liar, and likely wasn't a traitor, either. Lareth abandoned his combative posture and stood still. When Azhaq discerned as much, he too dropped his guard. Tamarand warily edged out from between the other two wyrms.

"My friend," Lareth said, "I'm truly sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Azhaq replied, albeit somewhat stiffly. "It was the frenzy prompting you."

"Yes," said Lareth, "and it shows just how close to the edge all of us truly are. This is why we don't dare fly to the aid of Damara."

Azhaq grimaced. "I suppose."

"Gareth Dragonsbane is a great leader. He saved his people once, and he'll do it again, even without our help. Now lie down and sleep until someone wakes you to take a turn at watch."

Once the silver was asleep, Lareth turned to Tamarand.

“Thank you,” said the king. “You saved me from a terrible mistake.”

“It’s always my honor to serve you,” Tamarand said. “I’m just glad I was able to react quickly enough, because I certainly didn’t foresee the need.”

Lareth felt a pang of annoyance. “What are you getting at?”

“You know Llimark quite well, and you’ve invested countless hours reflecting on Karasendrieth and all reports concerning her. For you to become muddled in that particular way . . .”

“Must mean the Rage has crippled my mind? That it’s time for the first of my Lords to take my place? Is that what you’re implying?”

“No, Your Resplendence. By no means.”

“Our folk elected me King of Justice because I’m the oldest and thus, the strongest, not only in body but in mind and spirit. I can withstand frenzy better than anyone else.”

“I *know* that. It’s just that you’ve stood almost as many watches as the rest of us put together. Perhaps the strain is telling on even you. Perhaps you should rest for a good long while.”

Lareth did his best not to feel doubted, mistrusted, and betrayed. He struggled to believe Tamarand meant well.

“Lie down,” Lareth said.

Tamarand peered at him and asked, “What?”

“You heard me. I’m going to put you back to sleep. You think I’m displaying signs of instability, but in fact, you are. You don’t recognize it because that’s the insidious nature of the affliction.”

“Was I irrational when I stopped you from attacking Azhaq without cause?”

“No, but you are now.”

“When you roused me, you said it was because you yourself needed rest.”

“I was suffering dark fancies, the same kind that plague us all. It’s nothing I can’t endure for a while longer.”

“But you don’t have to! If you don’t trust me, wake Nexus, or one of the others.”

Lareth hesitated. “Well, I admit, that makes sense. As soon as you’re asleep, I will.”

Then Tamarand hesitated. “Your Resplendence . . .”

“Lie down, old friend. I know your mind is in turmoil, but trust me, as we have always trusted one another down the centuries. Or are you turning rogue on me as well?”

Tamarand stood silent for a moment or two, then said, “Of course, I trust and obey you, my liege, as I have always done.”

Lareth cast the enchantment of slumber on Tamarand then returned to the outcropping where he liked to perch. He experienced a twinge of guilt at lying to his lieutenant, but realized he simply didn’t feel inclined to sleep quite yet. Besides, it truly did make sense for the strongest to stand guard as much as possible and so shield lesser drakes from the ravages of frenzy.

It occurred to Lareth that he ought to resume his gnome disguise. Wearing the shape of one of the small folk enhanced a dragon’s ability to resist the Rage. But he didn’t feel like doing that, either. He was too tense, too frustrated by Karasendrieth’s continued defiance, and vexed by Tamarand’s questioning of his competence. At the moment, forsaking his draconic body would make him feel weak and vulnerable, and he very much wanted to feel strong.



Sammaster stood on a ledge in the morning light and watched the orcs stream like ants through Bloodstone Pass. With their access to the lands beyond secured, some of the goblin kin were attacking the various settlements inside the valley. From on high, the battles looked like black twitching knots on the ground. Pillars of gray smoke from burning villages and isolated crofts billowed up to foul the sky.

At first, Sammaster felt satisfied. He didn't know if the brutish inhabitants of Vaasa would actually succeed in conquering Damara, but he didn't care. His only purpose had been to plunge the region into a bloody chaos that would inhibit any effort to find the source of the secret power he'd mastered and halt the process he'd set in motion. Until such time as it didn't matter anymore. Until he and the Cult of the Dragon had created enough dracoliches to subjugate the world and grind humans, dwarves, orcs, giants, and all other races into subservience.

Gradually, though, as was often the case when, to all appearances, everything was going well, the dead man felt contentment eroding into doubt. So many times before, he'd imagined himself on the brink of triumph, only to have one or another of his countless enemies, all the folk who feared and envied his incomparable intellect and magical prowess, thwart and humiliate him, sundering him from the mortal plane for decades, or plunging him into self-loathing and despair.

This time, he reassured himself, he'd planned so well and acquired a tool so powerful that he couldn't possibly fail, yet even so, he wondered. He knew that somewhere there existed an unknown adversary who'd stolen the notes he'd cached in Lyrabar. For a variety of reasons, no one could decipher those pages, and even if somebody managed, it was inconceivable that he could put the information to use in the relatively brief time remaining. But still, if anyone did. . . . !

Sammaster had already decided he couldn't spare the time to hunt down the thief. Though his cultists were useful in their fashion, there were too many tasks across the length and breadth of Faerûn that only the lich himself could perform if his schemes were to come to fruition. As he brooded, it occurred to him that he could take one additional measure to guarantee no one else would discover his secret, if only to buttress his peace of mind.

He swept his skeletal hands through an intricate pass and said, "Come to me, Malazan."

The red dragon would heed the call wherever she was, and sense in which direction she ought to travel. Since no compulsion was involved, Sammaster could only hope she would choose to heed him. Under normal circumstances, the reptile probably would, but if she happened to be berserk in the midst of combat, her scales sweating blood and her already awesome strength and ferocity amplified to preternatural levels, that would be a different matter.

Soon a crimson dot rose up from one of the watchtowers along the Damaran Gate, circled, and soared in Sammaster's direction. The lich's eyes were shriveled, decaying things, but their vision was keener than in life, and he soon discerned a superficial cut on Malazan's shoulder, and a trivial tear in one membranous wing. As he'd expected, she had done more fighting since he'd seen her last, but if she'd chosen to invoke the demonic fury that was her particular gift, the fit had already passed.

Wings snapping and pounding, disturbing the air and making Sammaster's regal purple cloak billow and flap, Malazan settled on the ledge, which was only just broad enough to contain her immensity. As had become his habit, Sammaster scrutinized her features and posture, looking for warning signs that she was about to go mad.

He'd armored her mind, and the minds of all the Sacred Ones with whom he'd come in recent contact, against the Rage, but the protection wouldn't hold forever. The curse cast by the ancient elves, the mythal he'd adapted to his own purposes, was too strong, and growing stronger by the hour. His wizardry notwithstanding, he would prefer not to be caught off guard if a dragon should lapse into frenzy.

Malazan looked all right, though.

"Good morning, Milady," the lich said.

"Your orcs now control almost the entire length of the Damaran Gate," she said. "Only the larger castle remains in human hands, and I trust we can take it within a few days."

“You needn’t concern yourself with that. Even if the occupants manage to hold out indefinitely, it will do nothing to hinder our plans.”

“‘Our plans,’” Malazan echoed. “*Your* plans, you mean. I still don’t understand why you want goblins scurrying all over Damara.”

“As I explained, war serves our purposes. It will distract the likes of the Chosen and the Paladins of the Golden Cup from seeking out and destroying our hidden sanctuaries, thus denying you and your kin the opportunity to become undead and so escape eternal madness.”

“I suppose,” Malazan said. “In any case, now that I’ve accomplished the task you set me, it’s time for me to repair to one of the havens myself.”

It gratified Sammaster to glimpse how eager the red was to commence the process of transformation, how profoundly she feared the Rage. That was the point of all his work, to make her and the other chromatics feel that way.

They couldn’t all become dracoliches right away, however. The process was too lengthy, difficult, and expensive, and the cult’s resources, too limited. Sammaster reckoned that while wyrms like Malazan waited their turns, he might as well make use of them.

“I have one more task for you first,” he said.

Malazan’s lambent eyes glared. A drop of blood oozed from her scaly brow.

“Something else needs destroying,” the lich went on. “It shouldn’t take long. I’m not sending you alone.”

“I’m tired of you presuming to *send* me at all. You’re the servant of dragonkind, not our master.”

“I acknowledge it proudly. It is, however, equally true that I’m your friend and savior, and as such, have earned your respect. Now, you have three choices: You can simply renounce me and my followers, and in time succumb to the Rage. Or, if you want to punish me for what you see as my impertinence, we can fight. I warn you, though, that I’ve slain many wyrms before you—bronzes, silvers, and even

golds—and that even if you manage to destroy me, once again, the end result will be that you fall into frenzy. Or, you can cooperate, perform one more piddling chore to our mutual benefit, and claim your immortality.”

Malazan spat a tongue of yellow flame, but not at Sammaster.

“What do you want me to do?” the dragon growled.