



## Chapter One

Kang lay flat on his belly, his huge scaled body crushing the long grass beneath him. He gripped his battle-axe in his clawed hand. He had spread his wings to cover his arms and his torso so that no errant beam of sunshine would flash off his armor or his scales to reveal his location. He could see nothing except grass, and because he'd been lying here over an hour, he'd come to know the grass really well. It was long and brownish green and slightly sticky and it made an irritating clicking sound when the wind blew.

Kang had come to know all the sounds of his surroundings quite well, too, in these past slow-moving minutes. He'd thought the late summer's day silent when he had first taken up his position, but now the noise drummed in his head. Cicadas buzzed frantically, for no good reason that Kang could tell, perhaps trying

to find some way to avoid the coming of winter and death. Crickets chirped mindlessly; no sense, crickets. Tree frogs burred and gulped. The dry grass rustled in the wind. Kang lay there, hating them all collectively and individually and fighting against the urge to yell at them, demand that they all shut up. He was listening for two sounds—the flapping of goblin feet and the rattle of goblin armor, and he couldn't hear a thing with the flora and fauna making this blasted racket.

Kang couldn't see the other members of his command group. He couldn't hear them, either, which pleased him but did not surprise him. Slith lay several paces to the right. The sivak draconian was Kang's second-in-command. Slith could have also worn the ranks of Best Friend, Adviser, and Confidant, if such ranks had existed among the First Dragonarmy Draconian Engineers. Granak, the newly promoted standard bearer, lay behind Kang. Granak was a giant sivak—huge even by draconian standards. He would be holding his sword in one hand and the precious standard in the other, the standard that bore the symbol of the First Engineers—a black field with a mailed fist holding crossed pick and hammer. Other draconian warriors lay close by, waiting, listening.

Late afternoon. The sun was starting to slide down the bowl of the sky, but it was still hot. Lizards basked in the hot sun, dozing, sleeping. Draconians are not lizards, although they have some resemblance to lizards—big seven-foot lizards that walk humanlike on two legs and wield sword and spear with more skill than most humans. Born of the eggs of the metallic dragons, which were perverted by evil magic long ago during the War of the Lance, draconians had been Queen Takhisis's shock troops, her best and most feared soldiers. The draconian armies had confidently

believed that they were going to win the War of the Lance and it had come as quite a shock to them when they didn't.

Not only had they lost, but after the war, they had been abandoned by the Queen's commanders. Abandoned to be harried and hunted by the cursed Solamnnc Knights, the thrice-cursed elves and the other so-called races of Light, with no help from those on the side of Darkness. Strong, powerful, gifted with the intelligence and magicks of their unwitting parents—gold, silver, bronze and brass dragons—the draconians had been viewed as a danger to all of mankind since there was no longer a use for them in the war.

Some draconian bands had turned to robbery and murder to make their way in the world. Kang had predicted what would happen to those who tried to live that sort of life and his predictions had proved true. They were slaughtered. If the war had taught Kang anything, it was that life was precious and fleeting. He had kept his command together and he led them into the Kharolis Mountains, far from civilization. He had hoped that the world would leave them alone.

After all, their race was doomed. They were dying out, and after them there would be no more. A race created by magic, brought forth from the stolen eggs of metallic dragons, draconians could not breed, they could not reproduce, due to the fact that there were no draconian females. Only males had been born from the dragon eggs, or so it was believed; the Dark Queen's commanders having reasoned that such powerful beings as draconians should be around only as long as they were needed. They could be easily removed when their usefulness had ended.

The world owes us this much, Kang thought. Just to be left alone . . .

“Sir!” came a hissing sound.

Kang’s eyes blinked open. His body jerked with the alarmed, panicked feeling experienced by those who fall asleep and don’t mean to.

“Sir,” came Slith’s smothered whisper and Kang thought that he heard a suspicious chuckle, “you were snoring!”

Furious at himself—Kang would have tongue-lashed and demoted the tail off any of his men caught snoozing in such a situation—Kang concentrated grimly on the task at hand. He could make excuses for himself. He couldn’t recall the last night he’d had a really good sleep. But he would not have accepted such an excuse from any of his men, and he damn well wouldn’t accept it from himself. To make matters worse, a fly landed on his snout. Kang twitched his snout, and the fly flew off. The blamed insect continued to buzz around him, however, adding its irritating sound to the cacophony of rustles, clicks, buzzes, and blurps.

Kang had been dreaming of their home in the mountains, the draconians’ fortress home that had gone up in smoke. He had been dreaming of the pesky dwarves, who had been their neighbors—the draconians’ bane at the beginning and, in the end, the draconians’ blessing. The dwarves raided the draconians. The draconians raided the dwarves. Back and forth for years. Then came the Chaos War. The First Dragonarmy Engineers had marched out to offer their services to the Dark Knights of Takhisis. Their services had been accepted. They had been put to digging latrines. Angry and insulted, Kang and his engineers had left the army. They had returned to their home, only to find that in their absence, the dwarves had set fire to their dwellings.

But out of the ashes of that tragedy had risen a blessing. Through a series of odd circumstances that Kang,

looking back on, now saw were the result of the guiding hand of his Dark Queen. The dwarves had led the draconians to a treasure worth more than all the jewels in the Dark Queen's navel. Only a few miles from where Kang and his men lay in the long grass, waiting to ambush the goblins that had been following them and harassing them and killing them for months now, was a group of twenty draconian females.

Over a year old, they were almost full-grown, as near as Kang could tell. They were not yet of breeding age and he had no idea how long it would be before they were. He seemed to recall hearing that female metallic dragons did not start to breed until they were over fifty years old. Kang hoped that female draconians would be somewhat quicker to develop, else there might not be any males left alive to do their part. But he knew full well that there were some things that could not be hurried. Meanwhile, the females were the salvation of his race, the future of his race. He kept them as he would have kept any valuable treasure—under close guard, confined to quarters, watched day and night.

It had all seemed so simple, in the beginning. Kang had decided that they would leave the Kharolis Mountains and travel north to found their own city. They had a map, given to them by a dwarf, that showed an abandoned dwarven stone city named Teyr just ready for the taking. Once inside Teyr, a city with walls and guard towers and gates, a city that could be defended, the draconians would be safe from attack. They would be free to breed and raise their children, free to set up shops and taverns, smithies and mills, free to live as every other race on Krynn lived—looking to the future.

The draconians had left the Kharolis Mountains and traveled across the Plains of Dust, covering the first hundred miles in just two weeks. Then, out of nowhere,

## Don Perrin with Margaret Weis

came the goblins. Kang's small force was attacked by hordes of the accursed creatures. Descending out of the north, the goblins hit the draconians hard. For a month, Kang and his soldiers and the precious baby females were pinned down, holed up in a farmstead that they had fortified. They remained there until the food ran out and winter began setting in. They could leave or starve to death.

Breaking out of the siege, they had traveled no farther than twenty miles when winter weather forced the cold-susceptible draconians to seek shelter for the remainder of the season. The goblin attacks abated during that winter, but never ceased entirely. Goblins were always on hand to ambush draconian patrols, pick off draconian hunting parties. Spring dawned late in the south that year. Kang moved his force north ten miles at a time. They had little food, were forced to forage for extended periods just to find enough for them and their oxen, who hauled the now nearly empty supply wagons.

The First Draconian Engineers had been on the move for over a year now, but they had traveled only a few hundred miles in that time.

Other military units would have broken under the strain. Kang's draconians held together. Kang had sworn an oath to the rest of his command that he would keep the females alive and provide a safe home for their children. The rest of the regiment had sworn the same. To a draconian, they had kept that oath.

The regiment was now south of Kari-Khan by some fifty miles, or so his ancient map indicated, in the foothills of the Khur Mountains. Their destination was another hundred and fifty miles beyond that. Kang's current objective was to reach a road that led northeast and then east, exactly the direction that they were heading. Kang could move his forces along at an accelerated

pace on the road and possibly even put some distance between him and the goblins.

The rolling foothills and plains of tall grass would give Kang his chance to halt the goblins, drive them back, allowing him to make dash for the road fifty miles north. The draconians had taken casualties in the fighting during the past year. For every draconian that had fallen, ten goblins had died, but still they hung on, like starving wolves to a bloody haunch. Kang had never known goblins to be so persistent, so dedicated to a cause.

Someone more feared than draconians must be behind the goblins. Someone holding a whip of flame. Kang just wished he knew who that someone was. He'd take that whip and shove it up . . .

Kang raised his head a fraction, sniffed the air. He shook his head ruefully. He needn't have bothered straining his ears. The smell of goblin—like rotting, maggot-covered meat—tickled his snout, much like the fly. The smell was close and coming closer.

Kang saw Slith lift his head cautiously, look toward his commander. Kang touched his nose. Slith nodded, pointed south, toward the tree line some fifty yards away.

Kang waited. An ambush works only when the prey is in the trap and not before. He forced himself to be patient when what he really wanted to do was to rise up, screaming, and launch his attack.

He began to count silently to himself. "One, two, three . . ." His hand gripped the shaft of his fighting axe. The wood was warm in the sun. His count continued. He wondered, idly, if it was true that gully dwarves could not count past two. "—one hundred ninety-nine, two hundred."

Kang hoisted himself out of the grass. He looked

across the glade. A hundred goblins had crossed out of the wood line and were no more than twenty-five yards distant. The other draconians of his command squad, hidden in the grass, stared up at Kang in glittering-eyed expectation, hands clutching their weapons, fangs bared, tails twitching.

Notoriously shortsighted, the squint-eyed goblins were slow to notice the seven-foot bozak draconian that had just risen in front of them. They kept marching. Then one of the goblins turned its piss-yellow face in Kang's direction. He saw its squinty eyes widen in terror, its mouth open.

"Regiment . . . charge!" Kang shouted.

Draconians sprang up like fast-growing weeds. Lethal weeds, as far as the goblins were concerned. To the right of Kang was First Squadron, numbering nearly seventy draconians. Second Squadron was to his left with sixty. Together, the two squadrons and Kang's command group charged the startled enemy.

Goblins fight with spears and scythe-like swords that are crudely made. The draconians had learned that an ugly, rusted, notched goblin blade could kill just as surely as the finely polished blade of the most spit-and-polished Solamnic. Goblins also use short bows to fire arrows as long as they can maintain range on their opponents. Goblin archery was not the most accurate in the world, but a volley of arrows that fills the air like wasps from a plundered hive is bound to hit something. Kang had lost over fifty draconians during their running battles with the goblins. He had not come to respect the goblins. He had come to actively hate them.

Kang ran ahead of his bodyguard, lunging to attack the still stunned goblins. One of the yellow-skinned, splayed-legged, slobbering-mouthed creatures jabbed at him with a spear. A blow from Kang's axe split the

spear in two and a well-placed kick caved in the goblin's chest and sent him flying. Kang's axe caught a second goblin in the ribs. Blood gushed and the goblin crumpled like a wet sack.

Then Kang's draconians were all around him, slashing with sword and axe, battling with claws and fist, tail and feet. The clash of steel on steel, pierced by the screams of the dying, were sounds that Kang knew well. Though the racket was deafening and he couldn't have made himself heard if he'd wanted, these sounds didn't seem as loud to him as the incessant buzzing of the locusts had only moments earlier.

Kang saw Slith to his right only five yards away, fighting two opponents at once, but having no trouble with either of them. A single stroke of the blade decapitated both goblins simultaneously. Slith caught sight of his commander and grinned before carrying on with his attack. Kang was glad to see Slith resist the temptation to assume the image of those he had just killed, one of the magical powers with which sivaks are born. In some circumstances, changing from draconian into a goblin would have been an advantage, but not in a close hand-to-hand brawl. Too easy to get confused and find yourself battling for your life, all the while trying to convince one of your fellows that, Hey, I'm a draconian too, you dolt!

Kang dodged sideways to avoid a spear thrust. He swung his axe at his opponent but missed. Closing the gap with two hasty steps, he brought his axe down again. The goblin tried to block the swing with his spear, but the spear's haft split in two. The goblin jumped to the side and drew his sword.

Kang was about to sweep the goblin's head from its scrawny shoulders when his foot slipped in goblin brains leaking out of a cracked skull. He lost his balance.

The goblin, red eyes gleaming with the kill, leapt at

him. Granak strode in front of the fallen Kang. Granak held the Regiment's standard high in his left hand. In the right he brandished a longsword. He thrust the sword clean through the creature, held the goblin spitted on his sword for a moment, then, using his foot, pushed the body off his weapon.

Kang regained his feet and pivoted to face the next threat to find that none existed. The goblins were in full retreat. Kang's men brandished their weapons and yelled wildly.

Kang glared at them. "Less cheering and more fighting, men," he shouted. "After them! I don't want a single goblin left alive!"

The baaz and sivak draconians that made up the line engineer squadrons chased after the enemy, whooping and hollering and shouting out gleefully what terrors they were going to do to the goblins when they caught them.

Kang hobbled after them. He had never been a swift runner and he'd twisted his ankle when he slipped.

"Go!" he shouted to his bodyguard. "I'll catch up!"

His troops swept around him and soon passed him. He lumbered on and had just reached the first row of trees in the wood line when he heard what sounded like a vicious battle being waged in front of him. He could hear his men shouting, swords clanking. The sounds startled and worried him. The goblins had turned tail and run and he had expected them to keep on running until they ran off the face of Krynn. Those he didn't kill would think twice before they attacked the First Draconian Engineers again. That's what he'd expected. He didn't expect a fight.

An enormous figure stepped out from behind a tree and stood in front of Kang. The figure had the same yellowish skin as the goblin, but it was taller, wider,

stronger. Its eyes were cunning and clever, not squinty and shortsighted. It was clad in heavy armor and it wielded a sword with skill.

Hobgoblin! That damn thing's a hobgoblin! was Kang's first amazed thought. The second was, There aren't any hobgoblins around here! This second thought was, unfortunately, quickly dispelled by the first thought.

The hobgoblin attacked, slashing with its sword. Kang swung with his axe. The hobgoblin deftly parried the blow and returned with a skilled slice that very nearly took off Kang's sword arm.

Shaken, Kang fell back a step to recover. The hobgoblin pressed the attack, swung again. Kang parried the blow with his axe, then whipped his tail around, caught his foe in the knee, sweeping his leg out from under him. The hobgoblin lost his balance and staggered back against a tree trunk. Kang smashed his axe through the hobgoblin's breastplate, drove the axe head into the creature's midriff. He didn't take time to see if his enemy died or not. He'd stopped the hob for the moment and that was all that counted. Kang had to find out what was going on.

His bodyguards were around him, extracting themselves from their own fights to return to protect him. Ahead in the trees, he could see fighting and hear the sounds of a much larger battle.

Slith came crashing out of the trees. The sivak was covered with goblin blood. He had a gash on his arm and one on his thigh.

"Sir!" Slith shouted. "It's an ambush!"

"I know it's an ambush, damn it," Kang thundered back. "We planned it to be an ambush—"

"We didn't plan this one, sir," Slith said grimly.

Kang finally realized what Slith was saying. The

draconians had meant to ambush the goblins. Instead, it happened the other way around. The goblins had ambushed the draconians.

“There must be five hundred hobs in those woods!” Slith said, panting, his lizard-tongue flicking. “And at least a thousand gobbos.”

Kang swore roundly. His plan to hit the enemy and then steal a march on the goblin troops lay in bloody ruins at his feet. It had been a good plan, too, damn it. It was hard to let such a good plan go, but it was obvious to Kang that the plan had failed, and if he didn’t do something quickly, the plan wouldn’t be the only thing in ruined tatters.

Kang turned to his bodyguard, motioned to the nearest draconian, a bozak named Harvah’k.

“Go find Gloth,” Kang ordered tersely, pointing ahead into the chaos. “He’s in the fight somewhere. Tell him to take First Squadron and retreat with all speed back to Support Squadron. We’ll fall back under their covering fire.

“Leshhak!” Kang called out to another draconian. “Find Yethik in command of the Second Squadron and tell him the same thing.

“Slith, run back to tell Fulkth to get Support Squadron in position at the bottom of the ridge to cover our withdrawal. He’s got to buy us some time until we can reform ranks and get the hell out of here!”

Slith didn’t say a word. He began to run. Kang watched the sivak flit through the forest, swift, silent, deadly. If anyone could get the word through, it would be Slith.

Kang turned to the rest of his command staff. “We’re going to give the regiment a place they can fall back to. Granak, I want that standard held high so that the men can see it. You know the drill.”

## Draconian Measures

Ten minutes later, both Gloth's and Yethik's draconians began pulling back from the forest. They formed a battle line with the troops drawn up in proper alignment centered on Granak's standard, which he held high just as Kang had ordered, and began to fall back across the field of long grass, their faces to the enemy. Behind them was a high ridge. Fulkth and Support Squadron were posted at the top of the ridge, guarding the females and the supply wagon. Kang was already forming a new plan.

The goblins did not pursue them out into the grass, but stopped at the tree line. A few goblins fired arrows at the draconians, but otherwise they did not attack—a bad sign. Normally in a situation like this the undisciplined, rapacious goblins would have rushed headlong after their enemy, their thoughts on slaughter. Someone was holding them in check. The same someone who had planned that clever ambush. Someone smarter than goblins had coordinated that attack. The same someone who was maintaining the goblin army in disciplined order. The same someone who had brought in hobgoblins to strengthen his forces. There was someone new in command across the glade. Someone who stood between Kang and the road to his dream.

Kang had only one option, an option that he had never before now considered, an option that brought bitter bile flooding to his mouth.

Retreat.