



# CHRONICLES

VOLUME 4

# DRAGONS OF SUMMER FLAME

**The landing party. The prophecy.  
AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.**



It was hot that morning, damnably hot.

Far too hot for late spring on Ansalon. Almost as hot as midsummer. The two knights, seated in the boat's stern, were sweating and miserable in their heavy steel armor; they looked with envy at the half-naked men plying the boat's oars.

The knights' black armor, adorned with skull and death lily, had been blessed by the high cleric, was supposed to withstand the vagaries of wind and rain, heat and cold. But their Dark Queen's blessing was apparently not responding to this unseasonable heat wave. When the boat drew near the shore, the knights were first out, jumping into the shallow water, laving the water onto their reddening faces and sun-burned necks. But the water was not particularly refreshing.

"Like wading in hot soup," one of the knights grumbled, splashing ashore. Even as he spoke, he scrutinized the shoreline carefully, eyeing bush and tree and dune for signs of life.

"More like blood," said his comrade. "Think of it as wading in the blood of our enemies, the enemies of our queen. Do you see anything?"

"No," the other replied. He waved his hand without looking back, heard the sound of men leaping into the water, their harsh laughter and conversation in their uncouth, guttural language.

One of the knights turned around. "Bring that boat to shore," he said unnecessarily, for the men had already picked up the heavy boat, were running with it through the shallow water. Grinning, they dumped the boat on the sand beach and looked to the knight for further orders.

He mopped his forehead, marveled at their strength and—not for the first time—thanked Queen Takhisis that these barbarians were on their side. The brutes, they were known as. Not the true name of their race. That name—their name for themselves—was unpronounceable, and so the knights who led the barbarians had begun calling them the shortened version: brutes.

The name suited the barbarians well. They came from the east, from a continent that few people on Ansalon knew existed. Every one of the men stood well over six feet; some were as tall

## DRAGONLANCE Chronicles

as seven. Their bodies were as bulky and muscular as humans, but their movements were as swift and graceful as elves. Their ears were pointed like those of the elves, but their faces were heavily bearded like humans or dwarves. They were as strong as dwarves, and loved battle as well as dwarves. They fought fiercely, were loyal to those who commanded them, and—outside of a few grotesque customs, such as cutting off various parts of the body of a dead enemy to keep as trophies—the brutes were ideal foot soldiers.

“Let the captain know we’ve arrived safely and that we’ve encountered no resistance,” said the knight to his comrade. “We’ll leave a couple of men here with the boat, move inland.”

The other knight nodded. Taking a red silk pennant from his belt, he unfurled it, held it above his head, and waved it slowly three times. An answering flutter of red could be seen coming from the enormous black dragon-prowed ship anchored some distance away. This was a scouting mission, not an invasion. Orders had been quite clear on that point.

The knights sent out their patrols, dispatching some to range up and down the beach, sending others farther inland, where towering hills of chalk-white rock—barren of vegetation—rose from the trees like cat claws to tear at the sky. Breaks in the rock led to the island’s interior. The ship had sailed around the island; now they knew it was not large. Their patrols would be back soon.

This done, the two knights moved thankfully to the meager shadow cast by a squat and misshapen tree. Two of the brutes stood guard. The knights remained wary, watchful, even as they rested. Seating themselves, they drank sparingly of the fresh water they’d brought with them. One of them grimaced.

“The damn stuff’s hot.”

“You left the waterskin sitting in the sun. Of course it’s hot.”

“Where the devil was I supposed to put it? There was no shade on that cursed boat. I don’t think there’s any shade left in the whole blasted world. I don’t like this place at all. I get a queer feeling about this island, like it’s magicked or something.”

“I know what you mean,” agreed his comrade somberly. He kept glancing about, back into the trees, up and down the beach. All he could see were the brutes, and they were certainly not bothered by any ominous feelings. But then they were barbarians. “We were warned not to come here, you know.”

“What?” The other knight looked astonished. “I didn’t know.

## DRAGONS OF SUMMER FLAME

Who told you that?”

“Brightblade. He had it from Lord Ariakan himself.”

“Brightblade should know. He’s on Ariakan’s staff, though I hear he’s asked to be transferred to a fighting talon. Plus Ariakan’s his sponsor.” The knight appeared nervous, asked softly, “Such information’s not secret, is it?”

The other knight appeared amused. “You don’t know Steel Brightblade very well if you think he would break any oath, pass along information he was told to keep to himself. He’d sooner let his tongue be ripped out by red-hot tongs. No, Lord Ariakan discussed things openly with all the regimental commanders before deciding to proceed.”

The knight shrugged. Picking up a handful of pebbles, he began tossing them idly into the water. “The Gray Knights started it all. Some sort of augury revealed the location of this island and that it was inhabited by large numbers of people.”

“So who warned us not to come?”

“The Gray Knights. The same augury which told them of this island warned them not to come near it. They tried to persuade Ariakan to leave well enough alone. Said that this place could mean disaster.”

The other knight frowned, glanced around with growing unease. “Then why were we sent?”

“The upcoming invasion of Ansalon. Lord Ariakan felt this move was necessary to protect his flanks. The Gray Knights couldn’t say exactly what sort of threat this island posed. Nor could they say specifically that the disaster would be caused by our landing on the island. As Lord Ariakan pointed out, disaster might come even if we did nothing. And so he decided to follow the old dwarven dictum: It is better to go looking for the dragon than have the dragon go looking for you.”

“Good thinking,” his companion agreed. “If there is an army of Solamnic Knights on this island, it’s better that we deal with them now. Not that it seems likely.”

He gestured at the wide stretches of sand beach, at the dunes covered with grayish green grass, and, farther inland, a forest of the ugly, misshapen trees butting up against the clawlike hills. “I can’t imagine why the Solamnics would come here. I can’t imagine why anyone would come here. Elves wouldn’t live in a place this ugly.”

“No caves, so the dwarves wouldn’t like it. Minotaur would have attacked us by now. Kender would have walked off with

## DRAGONLANCE Chronicles

the boat and our armor. Gnomes would have met us with some sort of fiend-driven fish-catching machine. Humans like us are the only race foolish enough to live on such a wretched isle," the knight concluded cheerfully. He picked up another handful of rocks.

"Perhaps a rogue band of draconians or hobgoblins. Ogres even. Escaped twenty-some odd years ago, after the War of the Lance. Fled north, across the sea, to avoid capture by the Solamnic Knights."

"Yes, but they'd be on our side," his companion answered. "And our knight wizards wouldn't have their gray robes in a knot over it. Ah, here come our scouts, back to report. Now we'll find out."

The knights rose to their feet. The brutes who had been sent into the island's interior hurried forward to meet their leaders. The barbarians were grinning hugely. Their near-naked bodies glistened with sweat. The blue paint, with which they had covered themselves, and which was supposed to possess some sort of magical properties such as causing arrows to bounce right off, ran down their muscular bodies in rivulets. Long scalp-locks, decorated with colorful feathers, bounced on their backs as they loped easily over the sand dunes.

The two knights exchanged glances, relaxed.

"What did you find?" the knight asked the leader, a gigantic, red-haired fellow who towered over both knights, could have probably picked up each of them and held them above his head, and who regarded both knights with unbounded reverence and respect.

"Men," answered the brute. They were quick to learn and had adapted easily to the Common language spoken by most of the various races of Krynn. Unfortunately, to the brutes, all people not of their race were known as "men."

The brute lowered his hand near the ground to indicate small men, which might mean dwarves but was more probably children. He moved it to waist height, which most likely indicated women. This the brute confirmed by cupping two hands over his breast and wiggling his hips. His comrades laughed and nudged each other.

"Men, women and children," said the knight. "Many men? Lots of men? Big buildings? Walls? Cities?"

The brutes apparently thought this was hilarious, for they all burst into raucous laughter.

## DRAGONS OF SUMMER FLAME

"What did you find?" repeated the knight sharply, scowling. "Stop the nonsense."

The brutes sobered rapidly.

"Many men," said the leader, "but no walls. Houses." He made a face, shrugged, shook his head and added something in his own language.

"What does that mean?" asked the knight of his comrade.

"Something to do with dogs," said the other, who had led brutes before and had started picking up some of their language. "I think he means that these men live in houses only dogs would live in."

Several of the brutes now began walking about stoop-shouldered, swinging their arms around their knees and grunting. Then they all straightened up, looked at each other, and laughed again.

"What in the name of our Dark Majesty are they doing now?" the knight demanded.

"Beats me," said his comrade. "I think we should have a look for ourselves." He drew his sword partway out of its black leather scabbard. "Danger?" he asked the brute. "We need steel?"

The brute laughed again. Taking his own short sword (the brutes fought with two, long and short, as well as with bows and arrows), he thrust it into the tree, turned his back on it.

The knight, reassured, returned his own sword to its scabbard. The two followed their guides. Leaving the beach, they walked deeper into the forest of misshapen trees. They walked about half a mile along what appeared to be an animal path, then reached the village.

Despite the antics of the brutes, the knights were completely unprepared for what they found. It seemed that they had come upon a people who had been stranded in the shallows, as the great river Time flowed past them, leaving them untouched.

"By Hiddukel," one said in a low voice to the other. "'Men' is too strong a term. Are these men? Or are they beasts?"

"They're men," said the other, staring around, amazed. "But such men as we're told walked Krynn during the Age of Twilight. Look! Their tools are made of wood. They carry wooden spears. And crude ones at that."

"Wooden-tipped, not stone," said the other. "Mud huts for houses. Clay cooking pots. Not a piece of steel or iron in sight. What a pitiable lot! I can't see how they could be much danger,

## DRAGONLANCE Chronicles

unless it's from filth. By the smell, they haven't bathed since the Age of Twilight either."

"Ugly bunch. More like apes than men. Don't laugh. Look stern and threatening."

Several of the male humans—if human they were, it was so difficult to tell beneath the animal hides they wore—crept up to the knights. The "man-beasts" walked bent over, their arms swinging at their sides, knuckles almost dragging on the ground. Their heads were covered with long, shaggy hair; unkempt beards almost hid their faces. They bobbed and shuffled and gazed at the knights in openmouthed awe. One of the man-beasts actually drew near enough to reach out a grimy hand to touch the black, shining armor.

A brute moved to interpose his own massive body in front of the knight.

The knight waved the brute off, drew his sword. The steel flashed in the sunlight. He turned to one of the squat trees. With their twisted limbs and gnarled trunks, the trees very much resembled the people who lived underneath them. The knight raised his sword and sliced off a tree limb with one swift stroke.

The man-beast dropped to his knees, groveled in the dirt, making piteous, blubbing sounds.

"I think I'm going to vomit," said the knight to his comrade. "Gully dwarves wouldn't associate with this lot."

"You're right there." The knight continued his inspection. "You and I between us could wipe out the entire tribe."

"We could, but we'd never be able to clean the stench off our swords," said the other.

"What should we do? Kill them?"

"Small honor in it. These wretches obviously aren't any threat to us. Our orders were to find out who or what was inhabiting the island, then return and make our report. For all we know, these people may be the favorites of some god, who might be angered if we harmed them. Perhaps that is what the Gray Knights meant by disaster."

"I doubt if that could be the case," said the other knight. "I can't imagine any god treating his favorites like this."

"Morgion, perhaps," said the other, with a wry grin.

The knight grunted. "Well, we've certainly done no harm just by looking at them. The Gray Knights can't fault us for that. Send out the brutes to scout the rest of the island. Let's go back to the shore. I need some fresh air."

## DRAGONS OF SUMMER FLAME

The two knights walked back to the beach. Sitting in the shade of the tree, waiting for the other patrols to return, they passed the time talking of the upcoming invasion of Ansalon, discussing the vast armada of black dragon-prowed ships, manned by minotaur, that was speeding across the Courrain Ocean, bearing thousands and thousands more barbarian warriors. All was nearly ready for the two-pronged invasion of the continent, which would take place on Summer's Eve.

The Knights of Takhisis did not know precisely where they were attacking; such information was kept secret. But they had no doubt of victory. This time the Dark Queen would succeed. This time her armies would be victorious. This time she knew the secret to victory.

The brutes returned within a few hours, made their reports. The isle was not large, perhaps five miles long and as many miles around. The brutes found no other people. The tribe of man-beasts had all slunk off, probably hiding in their mud huts until the strange beings left.

The knights returned to their shore boat. The brutes pushed it off the sand, leaped in, grabbed the oars. The boat skimmed across the surface of the water, heading for the black ship that flew the standard of the Knights of Takhisis: the death lily, the skull, and the thorn.

The knights left behind an empty, deserted beach.

But their leave-taking was noted, as their coming had been.