



THE LOST CHRONICLES

VOLUME ONE

# DRAGONS OF THE DWARVEN DEPTHS

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## PROLOGUE



standing over the bloody body of the fallen Dragon Highlord Verminaard, the aurak draconian, Dray-yan, saw his destiny flare before him.

The brilliant flash hit him with the force of a comet falling from the sky, burning his blood and sending a tingling sensation throughout his scaly body down to his clawed fingers. After the initial burst, a cascade of more ideas followed, showering down on him. His entire plan formed in seconds.

Dray-yan whipped off his ornate cloak and dropped it over the body of the Dragon Highlord, hiding the corpse and the large pool of blood beneath it from view. The aurak draconian was panicked, or so it must appear to those watching. Shouting furiously for help, he grabbed several baaz (draconians of lowly stature, notable for their obtuse gullibility) and ordered them to fetch a litter.

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“Make haste! Lord Verminaard is grievously wounded! We must carry Lord Verminaard to his chambers! Swiftly! Swiftly, before his lordship succumbs to his wounds.”

Fortunately for Dray-yan, the situation inside the fortress of Pax Tharkas was chaotic: escaping slaves, two red dragons battling each other, the sudden thunderous fall of tons of rocks blocking the pass and crushing a vast number of soldiers. No one was paying any attention to the fallen Highlord being carried inside the fortress or to the aurak who was accompanying him.

When Verminaard’s corpse was safely inside his chambers, Dray-yan shut the doors, posted the baaz draconians who had carried the litter outside as guards, and gave orders that no one was to enter.

Dray-yan then helped himself to a bottle of Verminaard’s finest wine and sat down at Verminaard’s desk and began to go through Verminaard’s secret papers. What Dray-yan read intrigued and impressed him. He sipped the wine, studied the situation, and went over his plans in his mind. Occasionally someone would come to the door demanding orders. Dray-yan would shout that his lordship was not to be disturbed. Hours passed and then, when night had fallen, Dray-yan opened the door a crack.

“Tell Commander Grag that he is wanted in Lord Verminaard’s chambers.”

It took some time before the large bozak commander arrived. During the interval, Dray-yan pondered whether or not to take Grag into his confidence. His instinct was to trust no one, particularly a draconian Dray-yan considered inferior to himself. Dray-yan was forced to concede, however, that he could not do this alone. He was going to need help, and though he held Grag in

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disdain, he had to admit that Grag was not as stupid or incompetent as most other bozaks Dray-yan had encountered. Grag was, in fact, quite intelligent, an excellent military commander. If Grag had been in charge of Pax Tharkas instead of that muscle-bound, muscle-headed human Verminaard, there would have been no slave uprising. This disaster would have never happened.

Unfortunately, no one would have even considered putting Grag in command of humans, who believed that the “lizard-men,” with their shining scales, wings, and tails, were bred for killing and nothing else. Draconians were incapable of rational thought, unfit for any type of leadership role in the Dark Queen’s army. Dray-yan knew Takhisis herself believed this, and he secretly despised his goddess for it.

He would show her. Draconians would prove themselves to her. If he succeeded, he might well be the next Dragon Highlord.

One clawed step at a time, however.

“Commander Grag,” announced one of the baaz.

The door opened, and Grag walked inside. The bozak stood well over six feet in height, and his large wings made him appear far taller. He had bronze scales covered by minimal armor, for he relied on his scales and tough hide to protect him. His scales at the moment were smeared with dirt and dust and streaked with blood. He was obviously exhausted. His long tail swept slowly from side to side. His lips were tightly pressed over his fangs. His yellow eyes narrowed as they stared hard at Dray-yan.

“What do *you* want?” Grag demanded churlishly. He waved a claw. “It had better be important. I’m needed out there.” Then he caught sight of the figure on the bed.

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"I heard his lordship was wounded. Are you treating him?"

Grag neither liked nor trusted the aurak, as Dray-yan well knew. Bozak draconians were bred to be warriors. Like auraks, bozaks were granted magical spells by their Queen, but bozak magic was martial in nature and not nearly as powerful as that of the auraks. In personality, the large and burly bozaks tended to be open, forthright, blunt, and to the point.

Auraks, by contrast, were not intended to fight battles. Tall and slender, they were secretive by nature, sly and subtle, their magic extremely powerful.

Aurak and bozak draconians had been raised to hate and mistrust each other by humans who feared they would otherwise become too powerful—or at least that's what Dray-yan had come to believe.

"His lordship is grievously wounded," said Dray-yan, loudly for the benefit of the baaz, who were probably eavesdropping, "but I am praying to Her Dark Majesty and there is every hope he will recover. Please come in, Commander, and shut the door behind you."

Grag hesitated then did as he was told.

"Make certain that door is shut and bolted," Dray-yan added. "Now, come here."

Dray-yan motioned Grag to Verminaard's bedside.

Grag looked down then looked back up.

"He's not wounded," said Grag. "He's dead."

"Yes, he is," said Dray-yan dispassionately.

"Then why tell me he's alive?"

"I wasn't telling you so much as I was telling the baaz guards."

"What slime you auraks are," Grag sneered. "You have to twist everything—"

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"The point is," said Dray-yan, "we're the only two who know he's dead.

Grag stared, puzzled.

"Let me make this clear, Commander," Dray-yan said. "We—you and I—are the only two beings in this world who know that Lord Verminaard is no more. Even those baaz who carried his lordship inside this room think he still lives."

"I still don't see your point—"

"Verminaard is dead. There is no Highlord, no one in command of the Red Dragonarmy," said Dray-yan.

Grag shrugged then said bitterly, "Once Emperor Ariakas finds out Verminaard is dead, another human will be sent to take over. It's only a matter of time."

"You and I both know that would be a mistake," said Dray-yan. "You and I both know there are others who are better qualified."

Grag looked at Dray-yan and the bozak's yellow eyes flickered. "Who did you have in mind?"

"The two of us," said Dray-yan.

"Us?" Grag repeated with a curl of his lip

"Yes, us," said Dray-yan coolly. "I know very little of military tactics and strategies. I would leave all that up to your wise expertise."

Grag's eyes flickered again, this time with amusement at the aurak's attempt at flattery. He glanced back at the corpse. "So I am to command the Red Dragonarmy, while you are doing . . . what?"

"I will be Lord Verminaard," said the aurak.

Grag turned to ask Dray-yan what in the Abyss he meant by that last remark, only to find Lord Verminaard standing beside him. His lordship, in all his hulking glory, stood glaring at Grag.

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“Well, what do you think, Commander?” Dray-yan asked in a perfect imitation of Verminaard’s deep, rasping voice.

The illusion cast by the aurak was so perfect, so compelling, that Grag glanced involuntarily back at the corpse to reassure himself the human was, indeed, truly dead. When he looked back, Dray-yan was himself once more—golden scales, small wings, stubby tail, pretentious arrogance and all.

“How would this work?” Grag asked, still not trusting the aurak.

“You and I will determine our course of action. We make plans for the disposition of the armies, prosecute the battles, etc. I would, of course, defer to you in such matters,” Dray-yan added smoothly.

Grag grunted.

“I issue the commands and take his lordship’s place whenever he needs to be seen in public.”

Grag thought this over. “We put out the word that Verminaard was wounded but that, with the Dark Queen’s blessing, he’s recovering. Meanwhile you act in his place, relaying his commands from his ‘sick bed.’”

“Within a short time,” Dray-yan said, “with the Dark Queen’s blessing his lordship will be fit enough to resume his normal duties.”

Grag was intrigued. “It just might work.” He regarded Dray-yan with grudging admiration.

Dray-yan didn’t notice. “Our biggest problem will be disposing of the body.” He cast a scathing glance at the corpse. “There was such a lot of him.”

Lord Verminaard had been an enormous human—standing nearly seven feet tall, big-boned, fleshy, and heavily muscled.

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"The mines," suggested Grag. "Dump the body in a mine shaft and then bring down the shaft on top of it."

"The mines are outside the fortress walls. How do we smuggle out the body?"

"You auraks can walk through air, or so I've heard," Grag replied. "You should have no trouble carrying the body out of here unseen."

"We walk the halls of magic, of time and space," said Dray-yan reprovingly. "I could carry the bastard, I suppose, though he weighs a ton. Still, one must make sacrifices for the cause. I'll dispose of him tonight. Now, tell me what's going on in the fortress. Have the escaped slaves been recaptured?"

"No," said Grag, adding bluntly, "and they won't be. Both Pyros and Flamestrike are dead. The fool dragons killed each other. The triggering of the defense mechanism caused the boulders to clog the pass, effectively blocking our troops who are now trapped on other side."

"You could send the forces we have here after the slaves," suggested Dray-yan.

"Most of my men lie buried under the rock fall," said Grag grimly. "That's where I was when you summoned me—trying to dig them out. It would take days, maybe weeks of work even if we had the manpower, which we don't."

Grag shook his head. "We need dragons to help us; that would make a difference. There are eight red dragons assigned to this army, but I have no idea where they are—Qualinesti, maybe, or Abanasinia."

"I can find out." Dray-yan jerked a claw at the piles of papers that lay scattered about on the desk. "I'll summon them in the name of Lord Verminaard."

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"The dragons won't take orders from the likes of us," Grag pointed out. "Dragons despise us, even those who are on our side, fighting for the same cause. The reds would just as soon fry us as not. Your Verminaard illusion had better be able to fool them. Either that or . . ."

He paused, thoughtful.

"Or?" Dray-yan asked worriedly. The aurak was confident his illusion would fool humans and other draconians. He was not all that certain about dragons.

"We could ask Her Dark Majesty for help. The dragons would obey her, if not us."

"True," Dray-yan conceded. "Unfortunately, our queen's opinion of us is almost as low as that of her dragons."

"I have some ideas." Grag was starting to grow enthusiastic. "Ideas about how dragons and draconians can work together in ways that humans cannot. I could speak to Her Majesty, if you like. I think that once I explain—"

"You do that!" said Dray-yan hastily, glad to be relieved of this burden.

Bozak were known for their devotion to the goddess. If Takhisis would listen to anyone, it would be Grag.

Dray-yan went back to the original topic under discussion. "So the humans escaped. How did that happen?"

"My men tried to stop them," Grag said defensively. He felt he was being blamed. "There were too few of us. This fortress is undermanned. I repeatedly requested more troops, but his lordship said they were needed elsewhere. Some human warriors, led by an accursed Solamnic knight and an elven female, held off my forces, while other humans ransacked the supply room and

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hauled off whatever they could lay their hands on in stolen wagons. I had to let them go. I didn't have enough men to send after them."

"The humans have to travel south, a route that will take them into the Kharolis mountains. With winter coming on, they will need to find shelter and food. How many got away?"

"About eight hundred. Those who worked in the mines. Men, women, children."

"Ah, they have children with them." Dray-yan was pleased. "That will slow them down. We can take our time, Commander, pursue them at our leisure."

"What about the mines? The army needs steel. The emperor will be upset if the mines close."

"I have some thoughts on that. As to the humans—"

"Unfortunately, they have leaders now," Grag complained. "Intelligent leaders, not like those doddering old idiots, the Seekers. The same leaders who planned the slave revolt and fought and killed his lordship."

"That was luck, not skill," Dray-yan said dismissively. "I saw those so-called leaders of yours—a half-breed elf, a sickly mage, and a barbarian savage. The others are even less worthy of note. I don't think we need worry overmuch about them."

"We have to pursue the humans," Grag insisted. "We have to find them and bring them back here, not only to work in the mines. There is something about them that is vitally important to Her Dark Majesty. She has ordered me to go after them."

"I know what that is," said Dray-yan triumphantly. "Verminaard has it in his notes. She fears they might dig up some moldy old artifact, a hammer or something. I forget what it is called."

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Grag shook his head. He had no interest in artifacts.

"We will go after them, Grag, I promise you," Dray-yan said. "We will bring back the men to work in the mines. We won't bother with the women and children. They only cause trouble. We'll simply dispose of them—"

"Don't dispose of *all* the women," Grag said with a leer. "My men need some amusement—"

Dray-yan grimaced. He found the unnatural lust some draconians had for human females disgusting.

"In the meantime, there are other more important events happening in the world, events that could have a significant impact on the war and on us."

Dray-yan poured Grag a glass of wine, sat him down at the table, and shoved forward a stack of papers.

"Look through these. Take special note of a place labeled, 'Thorbardin' . . ."