



THE LOST CHRONICLES

VOLUME TWO

DRAGONS OF THE HIGH LORD SKIES

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I

GRAG reports to the EMPEROR. The Blue Lady receives a shock.



ate autumn and the leaves, their colors once bold and defiant, were dead, their brittle brown corpses scattered by the winds to lie upon the ground, waiting to be mercifully buried beneath the coming winter snows.

Winter was almost upon Ansalon, and with it would come the end of the campaign season. Takhisis's forces under the leadership of Emperor Ariakas occupied much of Ansalon—from Nordmaar in the west to Kalaman in the east, Goodlund in the north to Abanasinia in the south. He had plans for conquering the rest of Ansalon, and Queen Takhisis was impatient for him to act on those plans. She wanted him to push on with the war, but she was told this was not possible. Armies cannot march on snow-choked roads. Supply wagons tumble down ice-rimed cliffs or get bogged down on rain-wet trails. Better to wait until spring. Winter was a time to

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hunker down and rest and heal the wounds of autumn's battles. Her armies would emerge in the spring, strong and rejuvenated.

Ariakas assured her, however, that just because her soldiers were not marching, the war was still being waged. Dark and secret schemes and plots were in the works. Once Takhisis heard this, she felt better.

The dragonarmy's soldiers, pleased with their recent victories, occupied the conquered towns and cities, lived in the comfort and warmth of captured castles, and enjoyed the spoils of war. They commandeered the grain from the barns, took any woman they fancied, and ruthlessly killed those who tried to protect property and family. The soldiers of Takhisis would live well this coming winter, while those under the claws of the dragon faced starvation and terror.

But not all was going well for the emperor.

He had been planning to spend the winter in his headquarters in Sanction when he had received disturbing reports that his campaign in the west was not going as intended. The goal had been to wipe out the elves of Qualinesti and then to seize and occupy the dwarven kingdom of Thorbardin by year's end. First there came word that Verminaard, Dragon Highlord of the Red Army, who had conducted such a brilliant campaign in the land of Abanasinia, had met an untimely death at the hands of his own slaves. Then came the news that the Qualinesti elves had managed to escape and flee into exile. Then the emperor was informed that Thorbardin was lost.

This was the first real setback the dragonarmies had suffered, and Ariakas was forced to travel across the

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continent to his headquarters in Neraka to find out what had gone wrong. He ordered the commander currently in charge of the fortress of Pax Tharkas to come to Neraka to make his report. Unfortunately, there was some confusion over who was in charge now that Verminaard was dead.

A hobgoblin—one Fewmaster Toede—claimed the late Verminaard had made him second in command. Toede was packing his bags for the trip when word reached the hob that Ariakas was in a towering rage over the loss of Thorbardin and that someone was going to be made to pay. At this, the Fewmaster suddenly remembered he had urgent business elsewhere. He ordered the draconian commander of Pax Tharkas to report to the Emperor, then Toede promptly decamped.

Ariakas moved into his quarters in the military headquarters in Neraka, capital city of the Dark Queen's empire, and awaited the arrival of the commander with impatience. Ariakas had valued Verminaard and the emperor was angered at the loss of such a skilled military commander. Ariakas wanted answers and he expected this Commander Grag to provide them.

Grag had never been to Neraka before, but he did not plan to take in the sights. Other draconians had warned him that their kind were not welcome in the city, though "their kind" were giving up their lives to help the Dark Queen win her war. Grag did see what he'd wanted to see and that was the Dark Queen's Temple.

When Istar had been destroyed by the gods, Takhis had taken the foundation stone of the Kingpriest's temple and carried it to a high plain in the Khalkist mountains. She placed the stone in a wooded glade

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and slowly the temple began to grow around it. She was secretly using the temple as a gate through which to travel to the world when her gate was inadvertently slammed shut by a young man named Berem, and his sister, Jasla.

Coming upon the foundation stone, Berem was entranced by the jewels adorning it and he wanted to pry one loose. His sister, Jasla, sensed the evil in the gems and sought to prevent him. Berem grew angry. He dug out the stone, and when Jasla tried to stop him, he shoved her from him. She fell, striking her head on the stone, and died. The green gem fused to Berem's chest and he was fused to that point in time. He could not die. He did not age. Horrified at his crime, he fled.

When Takhisis next went to leave the Abyss through the gate, she found the good spirit of Jasla had entered the foundation stone, there to await the return of her repentant brother. Takhisis was barred. Only her avatar could now walk Krynn, thus greatly reducing her power to affect world events. But she foresaw a greater danger to herself. If Berem returned and joined with his sister, the gate would slam shut and she would be forever barred from the world. The only way to reopen the gate and ensure it stayed open was to find Berem and slay him. Thus began the search for the Green Gemstone Man.

The temple continued to grow around the foundation stone that was buried far beneath it. The temple was now an immense structure, dominating the land all around it, visible from miles away. Its walls twisted and distorted, it looked much like a claw thrust up out of the earth, trying to snag heaven. Grag considered it impressive and he paid his reverence to it, albeit from a distance.

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Commander Grag did not have to enter the city proper to make his way to the Blue Army's barracks where Ariakas had established his headquarters, and that was fortunate for the draconian. The city's narrow streets were clogged with people, most of them human, with no love for the likes of Grag. He would have been in a fight before he walked a block. He kept to the byways and even then ran into a slaver leading a clanking row of chained slaves to market, who said something to his companion in a loud voice about slimy "lizard-men," adding that they should crawl back into the swamp out of which they'd emerged. Grag would have liked to have broken the man's neck, but he was already late and he kept walking.

Ariakas had formal chambers inside his Queen's temple, but he did not like to conduct business there. Although he was a devout worshiper and highly favored by his goddess, Ariakas had little use for his Queen's priests. He suspected they spied upon him when he was in the Temple, and he was right. The High Priest of Takhisis, known as the Nightlord, thought that he should be the Emperor of Ansalon, and that Ariakas, a mere military commander, should answer to him. He was particularly outraged that Ariakas had direct access to Her Dark Majesty instead of going through him as an intermediary on his behalf. The Nightlord spent much of his time working to undermine Ariakas and end his reign.

Ariakas had therefore ordered Grag to meet him in the Blue Quarter, where the Blue Wing of the dragon-army resided when they were in the city. Currently, the Blue Wing was in the west, preparing for the invasion

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of Solamnia in the spring. Their commander, a Dragon Highlord known as the Blue Lady, had also been ordered to Neraka to meet with Commander Grag.

With the Blue Wing in Solamnia, their quarters had been commandeered by Ariakas, who had brought with him his staff and his bodyguards. An aide found Grag wandering about lost and escorted him to the short, squat, and unprepossessing building in which Ariakas lived and worked.

Two of the largest ogres Grag had ever seen stood guard outside the door. The ogres were clad in plate and chain mail armor and were heavily armed. The draconian detested ogres as being thick-skulled and brutish, and the feeling was mutual, for ogres considered draconians arrogant upstarts and interlopers. Grag tensed, expecting trouble, but the two ogres were members of Ariakas's own personal bodyguard and they went about their business in a professional manner.

"Weapons," growled one, and held out a huge, hairy hand.

No one entered the presence of the emperor armed. Grag knew that, yet he had worn a sword from practically the moment he'd been able to shake the eggshell out of his eyes, and he felt naked and vulnerable without it.

The ogre's yellow eyes narrowed at Grag's hesitation. Grag unbuckled his sword belt and handed it to the ogre, also turning over a long-bladed knife. He was not completely defenseless. He had his magic after all.

One ogre kept an eye on Grag while the other went in to report to Ariakas that the bozak he was expecting had arrived. Grag paced nervously outside the door. From inside came a human male's booming laughter and a

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human female's voice, not quite as deep as the man's, but deeper than that of most women, rich and husky.

The ogre returned and jerked a sausage-like thumb, indicating Grag was to enter. He had a feeling this interview was not going to go well when he saw the gleam in the ogre's squinty yellow eyes and saw the ogre's comrade show all his rotting teeth in a wide grin.

Bracing himself, folding his wings as tightly as possible, his bronze-colored scales twitching, his clawed hands flexing nervously, Grag entered the presence of the most powerful and most dangerous man in all of Ansalon.

Ariakas was a large and imposing human male, with long black hair and, though clean-shaven, the dark stubble of a black beard. He was somewhere near the age of forty, which made him middle-aged among humans, but he was in superb condition. Stories about his legendary physical prowess circulated among the ranks of his men, the most famous being that he had once hurled a spear clean through a man's body.

Ariakas was wearing a fur-lined cloak, tossed casually over one broad shoulder, revealing a hand-tooled, heavy leather vest beneath. The vest was intended to protect against a knife in the back, for even in Neraka there were those who be glad to see Ariakas relieved of both his command and his life. A sword hung from a belt around his waist. Bags of spell components and a scroll case were also suspended from his sword belt, something remarkable, for most wizards were prohibited by their gods from wearing armor or carrying steel weapons.

Ariakas had no care for the laws of the gods of magic. He received his spells directly from the Dark Queen herself, and in this he and Grag shared something in

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common. It had not occurred to Grag until this moment that Ariakas actually made use of his spellcasting abilities, but the fact that he carried magical paraphernalia alongside his weapons proved he was as comfortable with magic as with steel.

Ariakas had his back to Grag. The man merely glanced at the draconian over his shoulder, then turned back to his conversation with the woman. Grag shifted his attention to her, for she was as famous among the soldiers of the dragonarmies as was Ariakas—if not more so.

Her name was Kitiara uth Matar. She was in her early thirties, with black curly hair worn short for ease and convenience. She had dark eyes and an odd habit of quirking her lips when she smiled, making her smile slightly crooked. Grag knew nothing about her background. He was a reptile, related to dragons, who had crawled out of an eggshell himself, and he had no idea who his parents were, nor did he care about the parentage of others. All he had heard about Kitiara was that she had been born a warrior and Grag believed it. She wore her sword with jaunty ease and she was not the least bit intimidated by the size and strength and physical presence of Ariakas.

Grag wondered if there was truth to the rumor that the two were lovers.

At length, their conversation ended and Ariakas deigned to give Grag an audience. The emperor turned around and looked straight into the draconian's eyes. Grag flinched. It was like looking into the Abyss, or rather, it was like entering the Abyss, for Grag felt himself drawn in, skinned, dissected, pulled apart, and tossed aside—all in an instant.

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Grag was so shaken he forgot to salute. He did so belatedly when he saw Ariakas's heavy black brows contract in frowning displeasure. Kitiara, standing behind Ariakas, folded her arms across her chest and smiled her crooked smile at the draconian's discomfiture, as though she knew and understood what Grag was feeling. She had evidently just arrived, for she still wore her blue dragon armor, and it was dusty from her journey.

Ariakas was not one to mince words or waste time in pleasantries. "I have heard many different versions of how Lord Verminaard died," he stated in cold and measured tones, "and how Thorbardin came to be lost. I ordered you here, Commander, to tell me the truth."

"Yes, my lord," said Grag.

"Swear by Takhisis," said Ariakas.

"I swear by my allegiance to her Dark Majesty that my words are true," said Grag. "May she wither my sword hand if they are not."

Ariakas appeared to find this satisfactory, for he indicated with a gesture that Grag was to proceed. Ariakas did not sit down, nor did he invite the draconian to be seated. Kitiara could not sit down either, since her commander was still upright, but she made herself at ease by leaning back against a table.

Grag related the tale of how Verminaard had died at the hands of assassins; how the aurak, Dray-yan, had conceived the idea of masquerading as Verminaard in order to keep up the pretence that the Dragon Highlord was still alive; how Grag and Dray-yan had plotted the downfall of Thorbardin; how they would have been successful, but their plans were thwarted by magic, treachery, and the gods of Light.

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Grag could see Ariakas growing more and more enraged as he went on with his report. When Grag reluctantly reached the part where Dray-yan toppled into the pit, Kitiara burst out laughing. Ariakas, infuriated, drew his sword from its sheath and began to advance on the draconian.

Grag ceased talking abruptly and backed up a step. His clawed fingers twitched; he was readying a magic spell. He might die, but by Takhisis he would not die alone.

Still chuckling, Kitiara casually reached out her hand and laid it restrainingly on Ariakas's massive forearm.

"At least do not slay Commander Grag until he has finished his report, my lord," Kitiara said. "I, for one, am curious to hear the rest of the story."

"I'm glad you find it so damn amusing," Ariakas snarled, seething. He slammed his sword back into its sheath, though he kept his hand on the hilt and eyed Grag grimly. "I do not see anything funny about it. Thorbardin remains in the control of the Hylar dwarves, who are now stronger than ever, since they have recovered that magical hammer, and they have opened their long-sealed gates to the world. The iron, steel and wealth of the dwarven kingdom which should be flowing into *our* coffers is flowing into the hands of our enemies! All because Verminaard managed to get himself assassinated and then some fool aurak with delusions of grandeur takes a dive into a bottomless pit!"

"The loss of Thorbardin is a blow," said Kitiara calmly, "but certainly not a fatal one. True, the wealth of the dwarven kingdom would have come in handy, but you can get along without it. What is more to be feared

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is the dwarven army entering the war and I do not see that happening. The humans hate the elves, who distrust the humans, and no one likes the dwarves, who despise the other two. They're far more likely to turn on each other than they are to fight us."

Ariakas grunted. He was not accustomed to losing and he was still not pleased, but Grag, glancing at Kitiara, saw from her slight wink that the crisis was past. The bozak relaxed and let go of the magical spell he'd had ready to use to defend himself. Unlike some of the emperor's human toadies, who would have said meekly, "Thank you for the attention, my lord," as Ariakas chopped off their heads, the draconian would have not gone to his death without a fight, and Grag was a formidable foe. He might not have been able to kill the powerful Ariakas, but the bozak, with his massive scaled body, clawed feet and hands, and large wings, could at least do some damage to the human. The Blue Lady had seen the danger, and this had been the reason for her intervention.

Grag was a descendant of dragons, and like dragons, had little use for any human, but he gave the Blue Lady a slight nod of gratitude. She flashed her crooked smile at him and her dark eyes glittered and he realized, suddenly, that she was enjoying this.

"Regale us with the details of Verminaard's death," said Kitiara. "He was set upon by assassins masquerading as slaves. Are these assassins still on the loose, Commander?"

"Yes, my lady," said Grag stiffly. "We tracked them to Thorbardin. According to my spies, they are still there."

"I will offer a bounty for their capture as I did with

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the Green Gemstone man," said Ariakas. "Our forces all across Ansalon will be on the lookout for them."

"I would think twice about that, my lord," said Kitiara, with that strange quirk of her lips. "You do not want to advertise that slaves were responsible for slaying a Dragon Highlord."

"We will find some other excuse then," Ariakas stated in cold fury. "What do we know of these men?"

Grag's tongue flicked out from between his fangs and slid back in. In truth, he didn't know much. He glanced at the Blue Lady and saw that she was losing interest in the conversation. She lifted her hand to her mouth to conceal a yawn.

Grag scanned his mind for all that his late partner, the aurak Dray-yan, had told him about the assassins.

"Verminaard had placed a spy in their midst. He reported that they were from a town in Abanasinia, my lord. A place by the name of Solace—"

Kitiara's boredom vanished. "Solace, you say?"

Ariakas glanced at her. "Isn't Solace where you were born?"

"Yes," Kitiara replied, "I grew up there."

"Perhaps you know these wretches," Ariakas remarked.

"I doubt it," Kit answered with a shrug. "I have not been back to my home in years."

"What were their names?" Ariakas asked.

"I only know a couple—" Grag began.

"You must have seen them during the battle," Ariakas said curtly. "Describe them, Commander."

"I saw them," Grag muttered dourly. He had seen them close up, in fact. They had captured him at one point and only by the Dark Queen's mercy and his own

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wits had he been able to escape. "They are a rag-tag lot. Their leader is a mongrel half-elf called Tanis. Another is a gray-beard dwarf, and yet another is a sniveling kender. The rest are human: a red-robe wizard, a foul Solamnic knight named Sturm, and a muscle-bound warrior named Caramon."

Kitiara made a slight sound, a sort of strangled gasp.

"Do you recognize these criminals?" Ariakas demanded, turning to her.

Kitiara composed her features in an instant. She smiled her crooked smile and said, "I am afraid not, my lord."

"You better not," said Ariakas grimly. "If I find out that you had something to do with Verminaard's death—"

"I assure you, my lord, I know nothing about it," Kitiara said with a shrug.

Ariakas regarded her intently, trying to dissect her. Assassination was one means of rising to higher rank in the Dark Queen's army, viewed as a way to provide the strongest possible leadership. But Ariakas had valued Verminaard and Kitiara did not want to be accused of having arranged the man's death, especially when the loss of the kingdom of Thorbardin had been the disastrous result.

"Solace has a population of several thousand, my lord," Kitiara said, growing annoyed. "I did not know every man in town."

Ariakas stared at her and she met his gaze unflinchingly. At last, he let her off the hook.

"No, but I'll bet you slept with half of them," he said, and turned his attention back to Grag.

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Kitiara smiled dutifully at his lordship's jest, but her smile vanished when he was no longer watching her. She leaned back against the table, her arms folded, her gaze abstracted.

"Where are these assassins now, Commander?" Ariakas asked.

"The last I heard of them, they were hiding in Thorbardin, my lord." Grag hesitated, then said, with a curl of his lip, "I believe the hobgoblin who styles himself Fewmaster Toede can provide you with more information about them."

Kitiara stirred slightly. "If your Lordship would like, I could travel to Pax Tharkas, talk to this Fewmaster."

"The Fewmaster is not in Pax Tharkas, my lady," said Grag. "That fortress is in shambles and is no longer defensible. The Red Wing has relocated to the city of Haven."

"I will go to Haven, then," Kitiara said.

"Perhaps later," Ariakas told her. "Solamnia takes priority."

Kitiara shrugged again and subsided back into her reverie.

"As for these assassins," Ariakas continued, "they will most likely remain skulking in the caves of Thorbardin through the coming winter. We will hire some dark dwarf—"

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Kitiara interrupted.

"What do you mean?" Ariakas turned to glare at her. "I thought you didn't know these men!"

"I don't, but I know their type," she said, "and so do you, my lord. They are most likely rovers, itinerant sell-words. Such men never remain in one place long. Rest

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assured, they will soon be on the move. A little snow will not stop them.”

Ariakas gave her a strange look, one she did not see, for she was staring down at the toes of her dust-covered boots. He regarded her in silence a moment longer, then turned back to Grag.

“Find out from your agents all you can about these men. If they do leave the dwarven halls, report to me at once,” Ariakas scowled, “and put the word out that I want them captured alive. The death of a Dragon Highlord will not go unpunished. I plan to make an example of them.”

Grag promised he would find out all he could. He and Ariakas spent some time talking about the war in the west and who should take over command of the Red Wing. Grag was impressed by the fact that Ariakas knew all about the Red Wing’s status, the disposition of its forces, the need for supplies, and so forth.

They discussed Pax Tharkas. Ariakas said he had considered retaking it, but given that the fortress was in ruins, he had decided that it would not be worth the effort. His armies would simply go around it.

All this time, Kitiara remained silent and preoccupied. Grag thought she wasn’t listening until he mentioned—with another curl of his lip—Fewmaster Toede’s ambition to become the successor to Verminaard. At that, Kitiara smiled.

Grag did not like to see her smile. He feared she was going to advocate promoting Toede, and Grag did not want to take orders from the bloated, arrogant, self-serving hob. Although, on second thought, having Toede for a commander might be better than some

arrogant human numbskull. Toede could be manipulated, flattered, and cajoled into doing what Grag wanted, whereas a human commander would go his own way. Grag would have to think about this.

The discussion ended soon after. Grag was dismissed. He saluted and walked out the door, which Ariakas shut behind him. Grag found to his amazement that he was trembling and he had to stop a moment to regain his composure.

Once he was himself again, Grag confronted the ogres, who appeared surprised to see him return all in one piece. They handed over his sword and knife in silence, regarding him with more respect.

"Is there a tavern close by?" Grag asked. He held the sword belt in his hand. He wasn't at all sure he could buckle it without fumbling and he wouldn't give the ogres the satisfaction of seeing his weakness. "I could use a shot of dwarf spirits."

The ogre guards grinned.

"Try the Hairy Troll," one said, pointing in the tavern's general direction.

"Thanks," said Grag and walked off, still carrying his sword belt.

There was no doubt in his mind. The Blue Lady knew the assassins, and Ariakas knew she knew—or at least suspected it.

Grag would not have been in her boots for all the dwarf spirits in Thorbardin.