



CHRONICLES
VOLUME TWO

DRAGONS
OF
A
WINTER NIGHT

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I

White-winged ships.

Hope lies across the Plains of Dust.

Tanis Half-Elven sat in the meeting of the Council of Highseekers and listened, frowning. Though officially the false religion of the Seekers was now dead, the group that made up the political leadership of the eight hundred refugees from Pax Tharkas was still called that.

"It isn't that we're not grateful to the dwarves for allowing us to live here," stated Hederick expansively, waving his scarred hand. "We are all grateful, I'm certain. Just as we're grateful to those whose heroism in recovering the Hammer of Kharas made our move here possible." Hederick bowed to Tanis, who returned the bow with a brief nod of his head. "But we are not dwarves!" This emphatic statement brought murmurs of approval, causing Hederick to warm to his audience.

"We *humans* were never meant to live underground!" Loud calls of approval and some clapping of hands.

"We are farmers. We cannot grow food on the side of a mountain! We want lands like the ones we were forced to leave behind. And I say that those who forced us to leave our old homeland should provide us with new!"

"Does he mean the Dragon Highlords?" Sturm whispered sarcastically to Tanis. "I'm certain they'd be happy to oblige."

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"The fools ought to be thankful they're alive!" Tanis muttered. "Look at them, turning to Elistan—as if it were *his* doing!" The cleric of Paladine—and leader of the refugees—rose to his feet to answer Hederick.

"It is because we need new homes," Elistan said, his strong baritone resounding through the cavern, "that I propose we send a delegation south, to the city of Tarsis the Beautiful."

Tanis had heard Elistan's plan before. His mind wandered over the month since he and his companions had returned from Derkin's Tomb with the sacred Hammer.

The dwarven Thaners, now consolidated under the leadership of Hornfel, were preparing to battle the evil coming from the north. The dwarves did not greatly fear this evil. Their mountain kingdom seemed impregnable. And they had kept the promise they made Tanis in return for the Hammer: the refugees from Pax Tharkas could settle in Southgate, the southernmost part of the mountain kingdom of Thorbardin.

Elistan brought the refugees to Thorbardin. They began trying to rebuild their lives, but the arrangement was not totally satisfactory.

They were safe, to be sure, but the refugees, mostly farmers, were not happy living underground in the huge dwarven caverns. In the spring they could plant crops on the mountainside, but the rocky soil would produce only a bare living. The people wanted to live in the sunshine and fresh air. They did not want to be dependent on the dwarves.

It was Elistan who recalled the ancient legends of Tarsis the Beautiful and its gull-winged ships. But that's all they were—legends, as Tanis had pointed out when Elistan first mentioned his idea. No one on this part of Ansalon had heard anything about the city of Tarsis since the Cataclysm three hundred years ago. At that time, the dwarves had closed off the mountain kingdom of Thorbardin, effectively shutting off all communication between the south and north, since the only way through the Kharolis Mountains was through Thorbardin.

Tanis listened gloomily as the Council of Highseekers voted unanimously to approve Elistan's suggestion. They proposed sending a small group of people to Tarsis with instructions to find what ships came into port, where they were bound, and how much it would cost to book passage—or even to buy a ship.

"And who's going to lead this group?" Tanis asked himself silently, though he already knew the answer.

All eyes now turned to him. Before Tanis could speak, Raistlin, who had been listening to all that was said without comment, walked forward to stand before the Council. He stared around at them, his strange eyes glittering golden.

"You are fools," Raistlin said, his whispering voice soft with scorn, "and you are living in a fool's dream. How often must I repeat myself? How often must I remind you of the portent of the stars? What do you say

to yourselves when you look into the night sky and see the gaping black holes where the two constellations are missing?"

The Council members shifted in their seats, several exchanging long-suffering glances indicative of boredom.

Raistlin noticed this and continued, his voice growing more and more contemptuous. "Yes, I have heard some of you saying that it is nothing more than a natural phenomenon—a thing that happens, perhaps, like the falling of leaves from the trees."

Several Council members muttered among themselves, nodding. Raistlin watched silently for a moment, his lip curled in derision. Then he spoke once more. "I repeat, you are fools. The constellation known as the Queen of Darkness is missing from the sky because the Queen is present here upon Krynn. The Warrior constellation, which represents the ancient God Paladine, as we are told in the Disks of Mishakal, has also returned to Krynn to fight her."

Raistlin paused. Elistan, who stood among them, was a prophet of Paladine, and many here were converts to this new religion. He could sense the growing anger at what some considered his blasphemy. The idea that gods would become personally involved in the affairs of men! Shocking! But being considered blasphemous had never bothered Raistlin.

His voice rose to a high pitch. "Mark well my words! With the Queen of Darkness have come her 'shrieking hosts,' as it says in the Canticle. And the shrieking hosts are dragons!" Raistlin drew out the last word into a hiss that, as Flint said, "shivered the skin."

"We know all this," Hederick snapped in impatience. It was past time for the Theocrat's nightly glass of mulled wine, and his thirst gave him courage to speak. He immediately regretted it, however, when Raistlin's hourglass eyes seemed to pierce the Theocrat like black arrows. "W-what are you driving at?"

"That peace no longer exists anywhere on Krynn," the mage whispered. He waved a frail hand. "Find ships, travel where you will. Wherever you go, whenever you look up into the night sky, you will see those gaping black holes. Wherever you go, there will be dragons!" Raistlin began to cough. His body twisted with the spasms, and he seemed likely to fall, but his twin brother, Caramon, ran forward and caught him in his strong arms.

After Caramon led the mage out of the Council meeting, it seemed as if a dark cloud had been lifted. The Council members shook themselves and laughed—if somewhat shakily—and talked of children's tales. To think that war had spread to all of Krynn was comic. Why, the war was near an end here in Ansalon already. The Dragon Highlord, Verminaard, had been defeated, his draconian armies driven back.

The Council members stood and stretched and left the chamber to head for the alehouse or their homes.

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They forgot they had never asked Tanis if he would lead the group to Tarsis. They simply assumed he would.

Tanis, exchanging grim glances with Sturm, left the cavern. It was his night to stand watch. Even though the dwarves might consider themselves safe in their mountain fortress, Tanis and Sturm insisted that a watch be kept upon the walls leading into Southgate. They had come to respect the Dragon Highlords too much to sleep in peace without it—even underground.

Tanis leaned against the outer wall of Southgate, his face thoughtful and serious. Before him spread a meadow covered by smooth, powdery snow. The night was calm and still. Behind him was the great mass of the Kharolis Mountains. The gate of Southgate was, in fact, a gigantic plug in the side of the mountains. It was part of the dwarven defenses that had kept the world out for three hundred years following the Cataclysm and the destructive Dwarven Wars.

Sixty feet wide at the base and almost half again as high, the gate was operated by a huge mechanism that forced it in and out of the mountain. At least forty feet thick in its center, the gate was as indestructible as any known on Krynn, except for the one matching it in the north. Once shut, they could not be distinguished from the faces of the mountain, such was the craftsmanship of the ancient dwarven masons.

Yet, since the arrival of the humans at Southgate, torches had been set about the opening, allowing the men, women, and children access to the outside air—a human need that seemed an unaccountable weakness to the subterranean dwarves.

As Tanis stood there, staring into the woods beyond the meadow and finding no peace in their quiet beauty, Sturm, Elistan, and Laurana joined him. The three had been talking—obviously of him—and fell into an uncomfortable silence.

“How solemn you are,” Laurana said to Tanis softly, coming near and putting her hand on his arm. “You believe Raistlin is right, don’t you, Tanthal—Tanis?” Laurana blushed. His human name still came clumsily to her lips, yet she knew him well enough now to understand that his elven name only brought him pain.

Tanis looked down at the small, slender hand on his arm and gently put his own over it. Only a few months earlier the touch of that hand would have irritated him, causing confusion and guilt as he wrestled with love for a human woman against what he told himself was a childhood infatuation with this elfmaiden. But now the touch of Laurana’s hand filled him with warmth and peace, even as it stirred his blood. He pondered these new, disturbing feelings as he responded to her question.

“I have long found Raistlin’s advice sound,” he said, knowing how this would upset them. Sure enough, Sturm’s face darkened. Elistan frowned. “And I think he is right this time. We have won a battle, but we

are a long way from winning the war. We know it is being fought far north, in Solamnia. I think we may safely assume that it is not for the conquest of Abanasinia alone that the forces of darkness are fighting."

"But you are only speculating!" Elistan argued. "Do not let the darkness that hangs around the young mage cloud your thinking. He may be right, but that is no reason to give up hope, to give up trying! Tarsis is a large seaport city—at least according to all we know of it. There we'll find those who can tell us if the war encompasses the world. If so, then surely there still must be havens where we can find peace."

"Listen to Elistan, Tanis," Laurana said gently. "He is wise. When our people left Qualinesti, they did not flee blindly. They traveled to a peaceful haven. My father had a plan, though he dared not reveal it—"

Laurana broke off, startled to see the effect of her speech. Abruptly Tanis snatched his arm from her touch and turned his gaze on Elistan, his eyes filled with anger.

"Raistlin says hope is the denial of reality," Tanis stated coldly. Then, seeing Elistan's care-worn face regard him with sorrow, the half-elf smiled wearily. "I apologize, Elistan. I am tired, that's all. Forgive me. Your suggestion is good. We'll travel to Tarsis with hope, if nothing else."

Elistan nodded and turned to leave. "Are you coming, Laurana? I know you are tired, my dear, but we have a great deal to do before I can turn the leadership over to the Council in my absence."

"I'll be with you presently, Elistan," Laurana said, flushing. "I—I want to speak a moment with Tanis."

Elistan gave them both an appraising, understanding look, then walked through the darkened gateway with Sturm. Tanis began dousing the torches, preparatory to the closing of the gate. Laurana stood near the entrance, her expression growing cold as it became obvious Tanis was ignoring her.

"What is the matter with you?" she said finally. "It almost sounds as if you are taking that dark-souled mage's part against Elistan, one of the best and wisest humans I have ever met!"

"Don't judge Raistlin, Laurana," Tanis said harshly, thrusting a torch into a bucket of water. The light vanished with a hiss. "Things aren't always black and white, as you elves are inclined to believe. The mage has saved our lives more than once. I have come to rely upon his thinking—which, I admit, I find easier to rely on than blind faith!"

"*You* elves!" Laurana cried. "How typically human that sounds! There is more elven in you than you care to admit, Tanthalas! You used to say you didn't wear the beard to hide your heritage, and I believed you. But now I'm not so certain. I've lived around humans long enough to know how they feel about elves! But I'm proud of my heritage. You're not! You're ashamed of it. Why? Because of that human woman you're in love with! What's her name, Kitiara?"

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"Stop it, Laurana!" Tanis shouted. Hurling down a torch to the ground, he strode to the elven maiden standing in the doorway. "If you want to discuss relationships, what about you and Elistan? He may be a cleric of Paladine, but he's a man, a fact to which you can, no doubt, testify! All I hear from you," he mimicked her voice, "is 'Elistan is so wise,' 'Ask Elistan, he'll know what to do,' 'Listen to Elistan, Tanis—' "

"How dare you accuse me of your own failings?" Laurana returned. "I love Elistan. I reverence him. He is the wisest man I have known, and the gentlest. He is self-sacrificing—his entire life is wrapped up in serving others. But there is only one man I love, only one man I have ever loved—though now I am beginning to ask myself if perhaps I haven't made a mistake! You said, in that awful place, the Sla-Mori, that I was behaving like a little girl and I had better grow up. Well, I have grown, Tanis Half-Elven. In these past few bitter months, I have seen suffering and death. I have been afraid as I never knew fear existed! I have learned to fight, and I have dealt death to my enemies. All of that hurt me inside until I'm so numb I can't feel the pain anymore. But what hurts worse is to see you with clear eyes."

"I never claimed to be perfect, Laurana," Tanis said quietly.

The silver moon and the red had risen, neither of them full yet, but shining brightly enough for Tanis to see tears in Laurana's luminous eyes. He reached out his hands to take her in his arms, but she took a step backwards.

"You may never claim it," she said scornfully, "but you certainly enjoy allowing us to think it!"

Ignoring his outstretched hands, she grabbed a torch from the wall and walked into the darkness beyond the gate of Thorbardin. Tanis watched her leave, watched the light shine on her honey-colored hair, watched her walk, as graceful as the slender aspens of their elven homeland of Qualinesti.

Tanis stood for a moment, staring after her, scratching the thick, reddish beard that no elf on Krynn could grow. Pondering Laurana's last statement, he thought, incongruously, of Kitiara. He conjured up pictures in his mind of Kit's cropped, curly black hair, her crooked smile, her fiery, impetuous temper, and her strong, sensual body—the body of a trained swordswoman, but he discovered to his amazement that now the picture dissolved, pierced by the calm, clear gaze of two slightly slanted, luminous, elven eyes.

Thunder rolled out from the mountain. The shaft that moved the huge stone gate began to turn, grinding the door shut. Tanis, watching it shut, decided he would not go in. "Sealed in a tomb." He smiled, recalling Sturm's words, but there was a shiver in his soul as well. He stood for long moments, staring at the door, feeling its weight settle between him and Laurana. The door sealed shut with a dull boom. The face of the mountain was blank, cold, forbidding.

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With a sigh, Tanis pulled his cloak about him and started toward the woods. Even sleeping in the snow was better than sleeping underground. He had better get used to it anyway. The Plains of Dust they would be traveling through to reach Tarsis would probably be choked with snow, even this early in the winter.

Thinking of the journey as he walked, Tanis looked up into the night sky. It was beautiful, glittering with stars. But two gaping black holes marred the beauty. Raistlin's missing constellations.

Holes in the sky. Holes in himself.

After his fight with Laurana, Tanis was almost glad to start on the journey. All the companions had agreed to go. Tanis knew that none of them felt truly at home among the refugees.

Preparations for the journey gave him plenty to think about. He was able to tell himself he didn't care that Laurana avoided him. And, at the beginning, the journey itself was enjoyable. It seemed as if they were back in the early days of fall instead of the beginning of winter. The sun shone, warming the air. Only Raistlin wore his heaviest cloak.

Conversation as the companions walked through the northern part of the Plains was light-hearted and merry, filled with teasing and bantering and reminding each other of the fun they had shared in earlier, happier days in Solace. No one spoke of the dark and evil things they had seen in the recent past. It was as if, in the contemplation of a brighter future, they willed these things never to have existed.

At night, Elistan explained to them what he was learning of the ancient gods from the Disks of Mishakal, which he carried with him. His stories filled their souls with peace and reinforced their faith. Even Tanis—who had spent a lifetime searching for something to believe in and now that they had found it viewed it with skepticism—felt deep in his soul that he could believe in this if he believed in anything. He wanted to believe in it, but something held him back, and every time he looked at Laurana, he knew what it was. Until he could resolve his own inner turmoil, the raging division between the elven and human inside of him, he would never know peace.

Only Raistlin did not share in the conversations, the merriment, the pranks and jokes, the campfire talks. The mage spent his days studying his spellbook. If interrupted, he would answer with a snarl. After dinner, of which he ate little, he sat by himself, his eyes on the night sky, staring at the two gaping black holes that were mirrored in the mage's black hour-glass-shaped pupils.

It was only after several days that spirits began to flag. The sun was obscured by clouds and the wind blew chill from the north. Snow fell so thickly that one day they could not travel at all but were forced to seek shelter in a cave until the blizzard blew itself out. They set double watch

at night, though no one could say exactly why, only that they felt a growing sense of threat and menace. Riverwind stared uneasily at the trail they left in the snow behind them. As Flint said, a blind gully dwarf could follow it. The sense of menace grew, the sense of eyes watching and ears listening.

Yet who could it be, out here in the Plains of Dust where nothing and no one had lived for three hundred years?