

# R.A. SALVATORE

FORGOTTEN REALMS

*The New York Times Best-Selling Author*



## THE ORC KING

T R A N S I T I O N S

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THE ORC KING

TRANSITIONS



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INSPIRED BY R.A. SALVATORE

KINGDOM OF ORCS THAT WILL CHANGE THE MAP OF FAERÛN FOREVER!

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## WELCOME TO MANY-ARROWS

...Toogwik Tuk said with a respectful bow. “The presence of Clan Karuck and its worthy leader makes us greater.”

Grguch let his gaze drift slowly across the three visitors then around the gathering to Hakuu. “You will learn the truth of your hopeful claim,” he said, his eyes turning back to Toogwik Tuk. “when I have the bones of dwarves and elves and ugly humans to crush beneath my boot.”

Dnark couldn't suppress a grin as he looked to Ung-thol, who seemed similarly pleased. Despite their squeamishness at being so badly outnumbered among the fierce and unpredictable tribe, things were going quite well.

# Ore King



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# PRELUDE

**D**rizzt Do'Urden crouched in a crevice between a pair of boulders on the side of a mountain, looking down at a curious gathering. A human, an elf, and a trio of dwarves—at least a trio—stood and surveyed around three flat-bedded wagons that were parked in a triangle around a small campfire. Sacks and kegs dotted the perimeter of the camp, along with a cluster of tents, reminding Drizzt that there were more to the company than the five in his view. He looked past the wagons to a small, grassy meadow where several draft horses grazed. Just to the side of them, he saw again that which had brought him to the edge of the camp: a pair of stakes capped with the severed heads of orcs.

The band and their missing fellows, then, were indeed members of *Casin Cu Calas*, the “Trip C,” an organization of vigilantes who took their name from the Elvish saying that meant “honor in battle.”

Given the reputation of *Casin Cu Calas*, whose favorite tactic was to storm orc homesteads in the dark of night and decapitate any males found inside, Drizzt found the name more than a little ironic and more than a little distasteful.

“Cowards, one and all,” he whispered as he watched one man hold up a full-length black and red robe. The man flapped it clean of the night’s dirt and reverently folded it, bringing it to his lips to kiss it before he replaced it in the back of one wagon. He reached down and picked up the second tell-tale garment, a black hood. He moved to put that, too, in the wagon but hesitated, then slipped the hood over his head, adjusting it so that he could see through the two eye-holes. That drew the attention of the other four.

The other *five*, Drizzt noted as the fourth dwarf walked back around a corner of the wagon to regard the hooded man.

“*Casin Cu Calas!*” the man proclaimed, and held up both his arms, fists clenched, in an exaggerated victory pose. “Suffer no orc to live!”

“Death to the orcs!” the others cried in reply.

The hooded fool issued a barrage of insults and threats against the porcine-featured humanoid. Up on the side of the hill, Drizzt Do'Urden shook his head and deliberately slid his bow, Taulmarion, off his shoulder. He put it up, notched an arrow, and drew back in one fluid motion.

“Suffer no orc to live,” the hooded man said again—or started to, until a flash of lightning struck through the camp and drove into a keg of warm ale beside him. As the keg exploded, liquid flying,

sheet of dissipating electricity momentarily stole the darkness from the growing twilight.

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All six of the companions fell back, shielding their eyes. When they regained their sight, one and all saw the lone figure of a lean dark elf standing atop one of their wagons.

“Drizzt Do’Urden,” gasped one of the dwarves, a fat fellow with an orange beard and an enormous temple-to-temple eyebrow.

A couple of the others nodded and mouthed their agreement, for there was no mistaking the dark elf standing before them, with his two scimitars belted at his hips and Taulmaril, the Heartseeker, again slung over one shoulder. The dwarf’s long, thick white hair blew in the late afternoon breeze, his cloak flapped out behind him, and even the dull light remaining could do little to diminish the shine of his silvery-white mithral-lined shirt.

Slowly pulling off his hood, the human glanced at the elf then back at Drizzt. “Your reputation precedes you, Master Do’Urden,” he said. “To what do we owe the honor of your presence?”

“‘Honor’ is a strange word,” Drizzt replied. “Stranger still coming from the lips of one who would wear the black hood.”

A dwarf to the side of the wagon bristled and even stepped forward, but was blocked by the arm of the orange-bearded fellow.

The human cleared his throat uncomfortably and tossed the hood into the wagon behind him. “That thing?” he asked. “Found along the road, of course. Do you assign it any significance?”

“No more so than the significance I assign the robe you so reverently folded and kissed.”

That brought another glance at the elf, who, Drizzt noticed, was sliding a bit more to the side—noticeably behind a line etched in the dirt, one glittering with shiny dust. When Drizzt brought his attention more fully back to the human, he noted the change in the man’s demeanor, a clear scowl replacing the feigned innocence.

“A robe you yourself should wear,” the man said boldly. “To honor King Bruenor Battlehammer whose deeds—”

“Speak not his name,” Drizzt interrupted. “You know nothing of Bruenor, of his exploits and his judgments.”

“I know that he was no friend of—”

“You know nothing,” Drizzt said again, more forcefully.

“The tale of Shallows!” one of the dwarves roared.

“I was there,” Drizzt reminded him, silencing the fool.

The human spat upon the ground. “Once a hero, now gone soft,” he muttered. “On orcs, no less.”

~~“Perhaps,” Drizzt replied, and in the blink of an astonished eye, he brought his scimitars out~~ his black-skinned hands. “But I’ve not gone soft on highwaymen and murderers.”

“Murderers?” the human retorted incredulously. “Murderers of orcs?”

Even as he finished speaking, the dwarf at the side of the wagon pushed through his orange-bearded companion’s arm and thrust his hand forward, sending a hand-axe spinning at the drow.

Drizzt easily side-stepped the unsurprising move, but not content to let the missile harmlessly fly past, and seeing a second dwarf charging from over to the left, he snapped out his scimitar Icingdeath into the path of the axe. He drew the blade back as it contacted the missile, absorbing the impact. A twist of his wrist had the scimitar’s blade firmly up under the axe’s head. In a single fluid movement Drizzt pivoted back the other way and whipped Icingdeath around, launching the axe at the charging dwarf.

The rumbling warrior brought his shield up high to block the awkwardly spinning axe, which clunked against the wooden buckler and bounced aside. But so too fell away that dwarf’s determined growl when he again lowered the shield, to find his intended target nowhere in sight.

For Drizzt, his speed enhanced by a pair of magical anklets, had timed his break perfectly with the rise of the dwarf’s shield. He had taken only a few steps, but enough, he knew, to confuse the determined dwarf. At the last moment, the dwarf noticed him and skidded to a stop, throwing out a weak, backhanded swipe with his warhammer.

But Drizzt was inside the arch of the hammer, and he smacked its handle with one blade, stealing the minimal momentum of the swing. He struck harder with his second blade, finding the crease between the dwarf’s heavy gauntlet and his metal-banded bracer. The hammer went flying, and the dwarf howled and grabbed at his bleeding, broken wrist.

Drizzt leaped atop his shoulder, kicked him in the face for good measure, and sprang away charging at the orange-bearded dwarf and the axe thrower, both of whom were coming on fast.

Behind them, the human urged them in their charge, but did not follow, reaffirming Drizzt’s suspicions regarding his courage, or lack thereof.

Drizzt’s sudden reversal and rush had the two dwarves on their heels, and the drow came furiously, his scimitars rolling over each other and striking from many different angles. The axe thrower, a second small axe in hand, also held a shield, and so fared better in blocking the blades, but the poor orange-bearded fellow could only bring his great mace out diagonally before him, altering its angle furiously to keep up with the stream of strikes. He got nicked and clipped half a dozen times, drawing howls and grunts, and only the presence of his companion, and those others all around demanding the attention of the drow, prevented him from being seriously wounded, or even slain at the spot. For Drizzt could not finish his attacks without opening himself up to counters from the dwarf’s companions.

After the initial momentum played out, the drow fell back. With typical stubbornness, the two

dwarves advanced. The one with the orange beard, his hands bleeding and one finger hanging by a thread of skin, attempted a straightforward overhead chop. His companion half turned to lead with his shield then pivoted to launch a horizontal swing meant to come within a hair's breadth of his companion and swipe across from Drizzt's left to right.

The impressive coordination of the attack demanded either a straight and swift retreat or a complex two-angled parry, and normally, Drizzt would have just used his superior speed to skip back out of range.

But he recognized the orange-bearded dwarf's tenuous grip, and he was a drow, after all, whose entire youth was spent in learning how to execute exactly those sorts of multi-angled defenses. He thrust his left scimitar out before him, rode his hand up high and turned the blade down to intercept the sidelong swing, and brought his right hand across up high over his left, blade horizontal, to block the downward strike.

As the hammer coming across connected with his blade, Drizzt punched his hand forward and turned his scimitar to divert the dwarf's weapon low, and in doing so, the drow was able to take half a step to his left, lining himself up more fully with the other's overhead strike. When he made contact with that weapon, he had his full balance, his feet squarely set beneath his shoulders.

He dropped into a crouch as the weapon came down, then pushed up hard with all his strength. The dwarf's badly-injured top hand could not hold, and the drow's move forced the diminutive warrior to go right up to his tip-toes to keep any grasp on his weapon at all.

Drizzt turned back to the right as he rose, and with a sudden and powerful move, he angled and drove the dwarf's weapon across to his right, putting it in the path of the other dwarf's returning backhand. As the pair tangled, Drizzt disengaged and executed a reverse spin on the ball of his left foot, coming all the way around to launch a circle kick into the back of the orange-bearded dwarf that shoved him into his companion. The great mace went flying, and so did the dwarf with the orange beard, as the other dwarf ducked a shoulder and angled his shield to guide him aside.

"Clear for a shot!" came a cry from the side, demanding Drizzt's attention, and the drow abruptly halted and turned to see the elf, who held a heavy crossbow leveled Drizzt's way.

Drizzt yelled and charged at the elf, diving into a forward roll and turning as he went so that he came up into a sidelong step. He closed rapidly.

Then he rammed into an invisible wall, as expected, for he understood that the crossbow had been only a ruse, and no missile could have crossed through to strike at him through the unseen magic barrier.

Drizzt rebounded back and fell to one knee, moving shakily. He started up, but seemed to stumble again, apparently dazed.

He heard the dwarves charging in at his back, and they believed beyond any doubt that there was no way he could recover in time to prevent their killing blows.

“And all for the sake of orcs, Drizzt Do’Urden,” he heard the elf, a wizard by trade, remark, and he saw the lithe creature shaking his head in dismay as he dropped the crossbow aside. “Not a honorable an end for one of your reputation.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Taugmaelle lowered her gaze, stunned and fearful. Never could she have anticipated a visit from King Obould VI, Lord of Many-Arrows, particularly on this, the eve of her departure for the Glimmerwood, where she was to be wed.

“You are a beautiful bride,” the young orc king remarked, and Taugmaelle dared glance up to see Obould nodding appreciatively. “This human—what is his name?”

“Handel Aviv,” she said.

“Does he understand the good fortune that has shone upon him?”

As that question digested, Taugmaelle found courage. She looked up again at her king and did not avert her eyes, but rather met his gaze.

“I am the fortunate one,” she said, but her smile went away almost immediately as Obould responded with a scowl.

“Because he is human?” Obould blustered, and the other orcs in the small house all stepped away from him fearfully. “A higher being? Because you, a mere orc, are being accepted by this Handel Aviv and his kin? Have you elevated yourself above your race with this joining, Taugmaelle of Clan Bignance?”

“No, my king!” Taugmaelle blurted, tears rushing from her eyes. “No. Of course, nothing of that sort...”

“Handel Aviv is the fortunate one!” Obould declared.

“I...I only meant that I love him, my king,” Taugmaelle said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The sincerity of that statement was obvious, though, and had Taugmaelle not averted her gaze to the floor again, she would have seen the young orc king shift uncomfortably, his bluster melting away.

“Of course,” he replied after a while. “You are both fortunate, then.”

“Yes, my king.”

“But do not ever view yourself as his lesser,” Obould warned. “You are proud. You are orc. You are Many-Arrows orc. It is Handel Aviv who is marrying above his heritage. Do not ever forget that.”

“Yes, my king.”

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Obould looked around the small room to the faces of his constituents, a couple standing slack-jawed as if they had no idea how to react to his unexpected appearance, and several others nodding dully.

“You are a beautiful bride,” the king said again. “A sturdy representative of all that is good in the Kingdom of Many-Arrows. Go forth with my blessing.”

“Thank you, my king,” Taugmaelle replied, but Obould hardly heard her, for he had already turned on his heel and moved out the door. He felt a bit foolish for his overreaction, to be sure, but he reminded himself pointedly that his sentiments had not been without merit.

“This is good for our people,” said Taska Toill, Obould’s court advisor. “Each of these extra-racial joinings reinforces the message that is Obould. And that this union is to be sanctified in the former Moonwood is no small thing.”

“The steps are slow,” the king lamented.

“Not so many years ago, we were hunted and killed,” Taska reminded. “Unending war. Conquest and defeat. It has been a century of progress.”

Obould nodded, though he did remark, “We are still hunted,” under his breath. Worse, he thought, but did not say, were the quiet barbs, where even those who befriended the people of Many-Arrows did so with a sense of superiority, a deep-set inner voice that told them of their magnanimity in befriending, even championing the cause of such lesser creatures. The surrounding folk of the Silver Marches would often forgive an orc for behavior they would not accept among their own, and they wounded Obould as greatly as those elves, dwarves, and humans who outwardly and openly sneered at his people.

\* \* \* \* \*

Drizzt looked up at the elf wizard’s superior smile, but when the dwarf, too, grinned, and even offered a wink, the elf’s face went blank.

A split second later, the elf shrieked and flew away, as Guenhwyvar, six hundred pounds of feline power, leaped against him, taking him far, and taking him down.

One of the dwarves charging at Drizzt let out a little cry in surprise, but despite the revelation of a panther companion, neither of the charging dwarves were remotely prepared when the supposedly stunned Drizzt spun up and around at them, fully aware and fully balanced. As he came around, backhand from Twinkle, the scimitar in his left hand, took half the orange beard from one dwarf, who was charging with abandon, his heavy weapon up over his head. He still tried to strike at Drizzt, b

swirled and staggered, lost within the burning pain and shock. He came forward with his strike, but the scimitar was already coming back the other way, catching him across the wrists.

His great mace went flying. The tough dwarf lowered his shoulder in an attempt to run over his enemy, but Drizzt was too agile, and he merely shifted to the side and trailed his left foot, over which the wounded dwarf tumbled, cracking his skull against the magical wall.

His companion fared no better. As Twinkle slashed across in the initial backhand, the dwarf shifted back on his heels, turning to bring his shield in line, and brought his weapon arm back to begin a heavy strike. Drizzt's second blade thrust in behind the backhand, however, the dwarf cleverly turning his wrist over so that the curving blade of the scimitar rolled over the edge of the shield and dived down to strike that retracted weapon arm right where the bicep met the shoulder. As the dwarf went too far into his move to halt it completely, came around and forward with the strike, his own momentum drove the scimitar deeper into his flesh.

He halted, he howled, he dropped his axe. He watched his companion go tumbling away. Then came a barrage as the deadly dwarf squared up against him. Left and right slashed the scimitars, always just ahead of the dwarf's pathetic attempts to get his shield in their way. He got nicked, he got slashed, he got shaved, as edges, points and flats of two blades made their way through his defenses. Every blow stung, but none of them were mortal.

But he couldn't regain his balance and any semblance of defense, nor did he hold anything with which to counter, except his shield. In desperation, the dwarf turned and lunged, butting his shield against the forward. The dwarf easily rolled around it, though, and as he pivoted to the dwarf's right he punched out behind him, driving the pommel of his right blade against the dwarf's temple. He followed with a heavy left hook as he completed his turn, and the dazed dwarf offered no defense at all as fist and hammer smashed him across the face.

He staggered two steps to the side, and crumbled into the dirt.

Drizzt didn't pause to confirm the effect, for back the other way, the first dwarf he had cut went back to his feet and staggering away. A few quick strides brought Drizzt up behind him, and the dwarf's scimitar slashed across the back of the dwarf's legs, drawing a howl and sending the battered creature whimpering to the ground.

Again, Drizzt looked past him even as he fell, for the remaining two members of the outlaw band were fast retreating. The dwarf put up Taulmaril and set an arrow retrieved from the enchanted quiver he wore on his back. He aimed center mass on the dwarf, but perhaps in deference to King Bruenor-or Thibbledorf, or Dagnabbit, or any of the other noble and fierce dwarves he had known thousands of decades before, he lowered his angle and let fly. Like a bolt of lightning, the magical arrow slashed through the air and drove through the fleshy part of the dwarf's thigh. The poor dwarf screamed and veered, then fell down.

Drizzt notched another arrow and turned the bow until he had the human, whose longer legs had taken him even farther away, in his sight. He took aim and drew back steadily, but held his shot as he saw the man jerk suddenly then stagger.

He stood there for just a moment before falling over, and Drizzt knew by the way he tumbled that he was dead before he ever hit the ground.

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The drow glanced back over his shoulder, to see the three wounded dwarves struggling, but defeated, and the elf wizard still pinned by the ferocious Guenhwyvar. Every time the poor elf moved, Guenhwyvar smothered his face under a huge paw.

By the time Drizzt looked back, the killers of the human were in view. A pair of elves moved to gather the arrow-shot dwarf, while another went to the dead man, and another pair approached Drizzt, one riding on a white-winged steed, the pegasus named Sunrise. Bells adorned the mount's harness, bridle, and saddle, tinkling sweetly—ironically so—as the riders trotted up to the drow.

“Lord Hralien,” Drizzt greeted with a bow.

“Well met and well done, my friend,” said the elf who ruled the ancient expanse of the Glimmerwood that the elves still called the Moon-wood. He looked around, nodding with approval. “The Night Riders have been dealt yet one more serious blow,” he said, using another of the names for the orc-killing vigilantes, as did all the elves, refusing to assign a title as honorable as *Casin Cu Cal* to a band they so abhorred.

“One of many we’ll need, I fear, for their numbers do not seem diminished,” said Drizzt.

“They are more visible of late,” Hralien agreed, and dismounted to stand before his old friend. “The Night Riders are trying to take advantage of the unrest in Many-Arrows. They know that King Obould VI is in a tenuous position.” The elf gave a sigh. “As he always seems to be, as his predecessors always seemed to be.”

“He has allies as well as enemies,” said Drizzt. “More allies than did the first of his line, surely.”

“And more enemies, perhaps,” Hralien replied.

Drizzt could not disagree. Many times over the last century, the Kingdom of Many-Arrows had known inner turmoil, most often, as was still the case, brewing from a rival group of orcs. The old cults of Gruumsh One-eye had not flourished under the rule of the Oboulds, but neither had they been fully eradicated. The rumors said that yet another group of shamans, following the old warlike ways of the goblinkind, were creating unrest and plotting against the king who dared diplomacy and trade with the surrounding kingdoms of humans, elves, and even dwarves, the most ancient and hated enemy of the orcs.

“You killed not one of them,” Hralien remarked, glancing around at his warriors who gathered around the five wounded Night Riders. “Is this not in your heart, Drizzt Do’Urden? Do you not strike with surety when you strike to defend the orcs?”

“They are caught, to be justly tried.”

“By others.”

“That is not my province.”

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“You would not allow it to be,” Hralien said with a wry grin that was not accusatory. “A dwarf’s memories are long, perhaps.”

“No longer than a moon elf’s.”

“My arrow struck the human first, and mortally, I assure you.”

“Because you fiercely battle those memories, while I try to mitigate them,” Drizzt replied without hesitation, setting Hralien back on his heels. If the elf, startled though he was, took any real offense, he didn’t show it.

“Some wounds are not so healed by the passage of a hundred years,” Drizzt went on, looking from Hralien to the captured Night Riders. “Wounds felt keenly by some of our captives here, perhaps, or by the grandfather’s grandfather of the man who lies dead in the field beyond.”

“What of the wounds felt by Drizzt Do’Urden, who did battle with King Obould in the orcs’ initial sweep of the Spine of the World?” Hralien asked. “Before the settlement of his kingdom and the treaty of Garumn’s Gorge? Or who fought again against Obould II in the great war in the Year of the Solitary Cloister?”

Drizzt nodded with every word, unable to deny the truth of it all. He had made his peace with the orcs of Many-Arrows, to a great extent. But still, he would be a liar to himself if he failed to admit a twinge of guilt in battling those who had refused to end the ancient wars and ancient ways, and had continued the fight against the orcs—a war that Drizzt, too, had once waged, and waged viciously.

“A Mithral Hall trade caravan was turned back from Five Tusks,” Hralien said, changing his tone as he shifted the subject. “A similar report comes to us from Silverymoon, where one of their caravans was refused entry to Many-Arrows at Ungoor’s Gate north of Nesmé. It is a clear violation of the treaty.”

“King Obould’s response?”

“We are not certain that he even knows of the incidents. But whether he does or not, it is apparent that his shaman rivals have spread their message of the old ways far beyond Dark Arrows Keep.”

Drizzt nodded.

“King Obould is in need of your help, Drizzt,” Hralien said. “We have walked this road before.”

Drizzt nodded in resignation at the unavoidable truth of that statement. There were times when he felt as if the road he walked was not a straight line toward progress, but a circling track, a futile loop. He let that negative notion pass, and reminded himself of how far the region had come—and that in a world gone mad from the Spell-plague. Few places in all of Faerûn could claim to be *more* civilized than they had been those hundred years before, but the region known as the Silver Marches, in no small part because of the courage of a succession of orc kings named Obould, had much to be proud of.

of.

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His perspective and memories of that time a hundred years gone, before the rise of the Empire Netheril, the coming of the aboleths, and the discordant and disastrous joining of two worlds, brought Drizzt thoughts of another predicament so much like the one playing out before him. He remembered the look on Bruenor's face, as incredulous as any expression he had ever seen before since, when he had presented the dwarf with his surprising assessment and astounding recommendations.

He could almost hear the roar of protest: "Ye lost yer wits, ye durned orc-brained, pointy-eared elf!"

On the other side of the magical barrier, the elf shrieked and Guenhwyvar growled, and Drizzt looked up to see the wizard stubbornly trying to crawl away. Guenhwyvar's great paw thumped against his back, and the panther flexed, causing the elf to drop back to the ground, squirming to avoid the extending claws.

Hralien started to call to his comrades, but Drizzt held his hand up to halt them. He could have walked around the invisible wall, but instead he sprang into the air beside it, reaching his hand as high as he could. His fingers slid over the top and caught a hold, and the dwarf rolled his back against the invisible surface and reached up with his other hand. A tuck and roll vaulted him feet-over-head over the wall, and he landed nimbly on the far side.

He bade Guenhwyvar to move aside then reached down and pulled the elf wizard to his feet. He was young, as Drizzt had expected—while some older elves and dwarves were inciting the *Casin Calas*, the younger members, full of fire and hatred, were the ones executing the unrest in brutal fashion.

The elf, uncompromising, stared at him hatefully. "You would betray your own kind," he spat.

Drizzt cocked his eyebrows curiously, and tightened his grip on the elf's shirt, holding him firmly. "My own kind?"

"Worse then," the elf spat. "You would betray those who gave shelter and friendship to the rogue Drizzt Do'Urden."

"No," he said.

"You would strike at elves and dwarves for the sake of orcs!"

"I would uphold the law and the peace."

The elf mocked him with a laugh. "To see the once-great ranger siding with orcs," he muttered, shaking his head.

Drizzt yanked him around, stealing his mirth, and tripped him, shoving him backward into the magical wall.

“Are you so eager for war?” the drow asked, his face barely an inch from the elf’s. “Do you long to hear the screams of the dying, lying helplessly in fields amidst rows and rows of corpses? Have you ever borne witness to that?”

“Orcs!” the elf protested.

Drizzt grabbed him in both hands, pulled him forward, and slammed him back against the wall. Hralien called to Drizzt, but the dark elf hardly heard it.

“I have ventured outside of the Silver Marches,” Drizzt said, “have you? I have witnessed the death of once-proud Luskan, and with it, the death of a dear, dear friend, whose dreams lay shattered and broken beside the bodies of five thousand victims. I have watched the greatest cathedral in the world burn and collapse. I witnessed the hope of the goodly drow, the rise of the followers of Eilistraee. But where are they now?”

“You speak in ridd—” the elf started, but Drizzt slammed him again.

“Gone!” Drizzt shouted. “Gone, and gone with them the hopes of a tamed and gentle world. I have watched once safe trails revert to wilderness, and have walked a dozen-dozen communities that you will never know. They are gone now, lost to the Spellplague or worse! Where are the benevolent gods? Where is the refuge from the tumult of a world gone mad? Where are the candles to chase away the darkness?”

Hralien had quietly moved around the wall and walked up beside Drizzt. He put a hand on the drow’s shoulder, but that brought no more than a brief pause in the tirade. Drizzt glanced at him before turning back to the captured elf.

“They are here, those lights of hope,” Drizzt said, to both elves. “In the Silver Marches. Or they are nowhere. Do we choose peace or do we choose war? If it is battle you seek, fool elf, then get you gone from this land. You will find death aplenty, I assure you. You will find ruins where once proud cities stood. You will find fields of wind-washed bones, or perhaps the remains of a single heart where once an entire village thrived.

“And in that hundred years of chaos, amidst the coming of darkness, few have escaped the swiftness of destruction, but we have flourished. Can you say the same for Thay? Mulhorand? Sembia? You say I betray those who befriended me, yet it was the vision of one exceptional dwarf and one exceptional orc that built this island against the roiling sea.”

The elf, his expression more cowed, nonetheless began to speak out again, but Drizzt pulled him forward from the wall and slammed him back even harder.

“You fall to your hatred and you seek excitement and glory,” the drow said. “Because you do not know. Or is it because you do not care that your pursuits will bring utter misery to thousands in your wake?”

Drizzt shook his head, and threw the elf aside, where he was caught by two of Hralien’s warriors and escorted away.

“I hate this,” Drizzt admitted to Hralien, quietly so that no one else could hear. “All of it. It is a noble experiment a hundred years long, and still we have no answers.”

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“And no options,” Hralien replied. “Save those you yourself just described. The chaos encroaches, Drizzt Do’Urden, from within and without.”

Drizzt turned his lavender eyes to watch the departure of the elf and the captured dwarves.

“We must stand strong, my friend,” Hralien offered, and he patted Drizzt on the shoulder and walked away.

“I’m not sure that I know what that means anymore,” Drizzt admitted under his breath, too soft for anyone else to hear.

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PART  
1  
THE PURSUIT OF  
HIGHER TRUTH

**THE PURSUIT OF HIGHER TRUTH**

One of the consequences of living an existence that spans centuries instead of decades is the inescapable curse of continually viewing the world through the focusing prism employed by a historian.

I say “curse”—when in truth I believe it to be a blessing—because any hope of prescience requires a constant questioning of what is, and a deep-seated belief in the possibility of what can be. Viewing events as might the historian requires an acceptance that my own initial, visceral reactions to seemingly momentous events may be errant, that my “gut instinct” and own emotional needs may not stand the light of reason in the wider view, or even that these events, so momentous in my personal experience, might not be so in the wider world and the long, slow passage of time.

How often have I seen that my first reaction is based on half-truths and biased perceptions! How often have I found expectations completely inverted or tossed aside as events played out to the fullest!

Because emotion clouds the rational, and many perspectives guide the full reality. To view current events as an historian is to account for all perspectives, even those of your enemy. It is to know the past and to use such relevant history as a template for expectations. It is, most of all, to forego reason ahead of instinct, to refuse to demonize that which you hate, and to, most of all, accept your own fallibility.

And so I live on shifting sands, where absolutes melt away with the passage of decades. It is a natural extension, I expect, of an existence in which I have shattered the preconceptions of so many

people. With every stranger who comes to accept me for who I am instead of who he or she expected me to be, I roil the sands beneath that person's feet. It is a growth experience for them, no doubt, but we are all creatures of ritual and habit and accepted notions of what is and what is not. When truth and reality cuts against that internalized expectation—when you meet a goodly drow!—there is created an internal dissonance, as uncomfortable as a springtime rash.

There is freedom in seeing the world as a painting in progress, instead of a place already painted, but there are times, my friend...

There are times.

And such is one before me now, with Obould and his thousands camped upon the very door of Mithral Hall. In my heart I want nothing more than another try at the orc king, another opportunity to put my scimitar through his yellow-gray skin. I long to wipe the superior grin from his ugly face, to bury it beneath a spray of his own blood. I want him to hurt—to hurt for Shallows and all the other towns flattened beneath the stamp of orc feet. I want him to feel the pain he brought to Shoudu Stargleam, to Dagna and Dagnabbit, and to all the dwarves and others who lay dead on the battlefield that he created.

Will Catti-brie ever walk well again? That, too, is the fault of Obould.

And so I curse his name, and remember with joy those moments of retribution that Innovindil Tarathiel, and I exacted upon the minions of the foul orc king. To strike back against an invading force is indeed cathartic.

That, I cannot deny.

And yet, in moments of reason, in times when I sit back against a stony mountainside and overlook that which Obould has facilitated, I am simply not certain.

Of anything, I fear.

He came at the front of an army, one that brought pain and suffering to many people across the land I name as my home. But his army has stopped its march, for now at least, and the signs are visible that Obould seeks something more than plunder and victory.

Does he seek civilization?

Is it possible that we bear witness now to a monumental change in the nature of orc culture? Is it possible that Obould has established a situation, whether he intended this at first or not, where the interests of the orcs and the interests of all the other races of the region coalesce into a relationship of mutual benefit?

Is that possible? Is that even thinkable?

Do I betray the dead by considering such a thing?

Or does it serve the dead if I, if we all, rise above a cycle of revenge and war and find within us—orc and dwarf, human and elf alike—a common ground upon which to build an era of greater peace?

For time beyond the memory of the oldest elves, the orcs have warred with the “goodly” races. For all the victories—and they are countless!—and for all the sacrifices, are the orcs any less populous now than they were millennia ago?

I think not, and that raises the specter of unwinnable conflict. Are we doomed to repeat these wars, generation after generation, unendingly? Are we—elf and dwarf, human and orc alike—condemning our descendants to this same misery, to the pain of steel invading flesh?

I do not know.

And yet I want nothing more than to slide my blade between the ribs of King Obould Man-Of-Arrows, to relish in the grimace of agony on his tusk-torn lips, to see the light dim in his yellow bloodshot eyes.

But what will the historians say of Obould? Will he be the orc who breaks, at long, long last, the cycle of perpetual war? Will he, inadvertently or not, present the orcs with a path to a better life, a road they will walk—reluctantly at first, no doubt—in pursuit of bounties greater than those they might find at the end of a crude spear?

I do not know.

And therein lies my anguish.

I hope that we are on the threshold of a great era, and that within the orc character, there is the same spark, the same hopes and dreams, that guide the elves, dwarves, humans, halflings, and all the rest. I have heard it said that the universal hope of the world is that our children will find a better life than we.

Is that guiding principle of civilization itself within the emotional make-up of goblinkind? Or was Nojheim, that most unusual goblin slave I once knew, simply an anomaly?

Is Obould a visionary or an opportunist?

Is this the beginning of true progress for the orc race, or a fool’s errand for any, myself included, who would suffer the beasts to live?

Because I admit that I do not know, it must give me pause. If I am to give in to the wants of my vengeful heart, then how might the historians view Drizzt Do’Urden?

Will I be seen in the company of those heroes before me who helped vanquish the charge of the orcs, whose names are held in noble esteem? If Obould is to lead the orcs forward, not in conquest, but in civilization, and I am the hand who lays him low, then misguided indeed will be those historians who might never see the possibilities that I view coalescing before me.

Perhaps it is an experiment. Perhaps it is a grand step along a road worth walking.

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Or perhaps I am wrong, and Obould seeks dominion and blood, and the orcs have no sense of commonality, have no aspirations for a better way, unless that way tramples the lands of their mortal and eternal enemies.

But I am given pause.

And so I wait, and so I watch, but my hands are near to my blades.

—Drizzt Do'Urden

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# CHAPTER

## PRIDE AND PRACTICALITY



On the same day that Drizzt and Innovindil had set off for the east to find the body of Ellifain, Catti-brie and Wulfgar had crossed the Surbrin in search of Wulfgar's missing daughter. Their journey had lasted only a couple of days, however, before they had been turned back by the cold winds and darkening skies of a tremendous winter storm. With Catti-brie's injured leg, the pair simply could not hope to move fast enough to out-distance the coming front, and so Wulfgar had refused to continue. Colson was safe, by all accounts, and Wulfgar was confident that the trail would not grow cold during the delay, as all travel in the Silver Marches would come to a near stop through the frozen month. Over Catti-brie's objections, the pair had re-crossed the Surbrin and returned to Mithral Hall.

That same weather front destroyed the ferry soon after, and it remained out of commission though tendays passed. The winter was deep about them, closer to spring than to fall. The Year of Wild Magic had arrived.

For Catti-brie, the permeating cold seemed to forever settle on her injured hip and leg, and she hadn't seen much improvement in her mobility. She could walk with a crutch, but even then every stride made her wince. Still she wouldn't accept a chair with wheels, such as the one the dwarves had fashioned for the crippled Banak Brawnnavil, and she certainly wanted nothing to do with the contraption Nanfoodle had designed for her: a comfortable palanquin meant to be borne by four willing dwarves. Stubbornness aside, her injured hip would not support her weight very well, or for any length of time, and so Catti-brie had settled on the crutch.

For the last few days, she had loitered around the eastern edges of Mithral Hall, across Garumn Gorge from the main chambers, always asking for word of the orcs who had dug in just outside Keeper's Dale, or of Drizzt, who had at last been seen over the eastern fortifications, flying on a pegasus across the Surbrin beside Innovindil of the Moonwood.

Drizzt had left Mithral Hall with Catti-brie's blessing those tendays before, but she missed him dearly on the long, dark nights of winter. It had surprised her when he hadn't come directly back in the halls upon his return from the west, but she trusted his judgment. If something had compelled him to go on to the Moonwood, then it must have been a good reason.

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