



The Age of Mortals Series

Conundrum
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The Lioness
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Dark Thane
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DARK THANE

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CHAPTER

I

Tarn Bellowgranite hurried along the tunnel, surrounded by his personal guard of twelve dwarf warriors in jangling plate armor. A stiff, wet wind shrilled in his face, whipping his straw-colored beard over his shoulder like a scarf. Miles behind him now, King Gilthas led the last of the refugee elves away from their homeland of Qualinesti. Against the advice of his own Council of Thanes, Tarn and his dwarves had dug escape tunnels to help the elves avoid detection as they fled the green dragon Beryl. Somewhere ahead, Tarn's army of dwarves was battling Beryl and her legions of goblins, draconians, and human Knights of Neraka. Somewhere behind, the elves they had come to save were fleeing to safety.

For a moment, the thirteen dwarves slowed their steps as they listened to the wind blowing up the tunnel. Dwarves could tell by the sighing of an underground breeze what kinds of stone it had blown through, or so it was said. It was also said that a dwarf could hear a copper coin rattle in the shoe of a troll standing in a cesspit. What Tarn heard, though, were screams. Terror, pain, anger, and the rending of stone, the scream of the very earth as it succumbed to some great force.

The floor of the tunnel suddenly dropped from beneath their feet, sending the dwarves plunging down a slope of loose gravel and soil that had not been there moments before. The thirteen heavily armored dwarves crashed in a heap on a level twenty feet below, sounding as if a tinker's cart full of pots had been thrown down a well.

"What in the name of the Abyss!" Tarn swore as he rose, groaning and knuckling his back. The other dwarves climbed to their feet, battered and bruised, covered in dust and gravel, grumbling like the dead crawling out of their graves.

A wild-eyed dwarf with an unkempt beard jutting furiously from his mail coif leaned against the damp stone wall as though caressing it. "The very rock groans," he hissed after a few moments.

"I can feel the strain of the earth through the soles of my boots," Tarn said. "What I want to know is why?"

"The dragon," one of the other dwarves cryptically pronounced. The others nodded while dusting off their beards.

"Where are we now?" Tarn asked. The collapsed tunnel had dumped them into a deeper passage, one that crossed beneath their tunnel at right angles. All around them, they smelled the soft, peaty loam excreted by the monstrous Urkhan worms the dwarves had used to delve these tunnels.

"Urkhan holding pen," the first dwarf said. "If we follow this passage, it should lead us back to a main tunnel."

"You know these passages better than I, Captain Mog. Lead the way," Tarn said.

The other dwarves fell into protective positions around Tarn as they trotted off together. Mog ranged ahead a dozen yards to scout the way. The round passage led them along a meandering course through more worm pens and past the abandoned quarters of the worm wranglers. Several worm harnesses still hung from the wall of a chamber

chewed from the earth by the worms' passage. All the pens in this area were empty, as the Urkhan worms had been moved into the tunnels beneath the city in preparation for the dragon's attack. Eventually, the tunnel led them into a wider passage.

"This is not the same passage as before," Tarn said as he examined their surroundings. "There's no wind here, and these walls are shored with timbers."

"This tunnel's not so deep as the previous one, m'lord Thane," Captain Mog said.

"Just so long as it takes us to Qualinost," Tarn grunted. "Lead on."

They hurried along the passageway, their iron-shod boots tramping the soft earthen floor. Soon, they passed several wooden support beams that had fallen across the tunnel, partially blocking the way, and these they had to scramble over or under as best they could. Each damaged section of the tunnel filled Tarn with a deepening sense of unease. The air stank of the forest just a few yards above their heads, and the tunnel felt close and dank. There was an unnatural silence, as though of the grave.

Tarn and his companions traveled without benefit of light from torches or lanterns. The long dark of the tunnel was no hindrance to them, for they were blessed with darkvision. Not all dwarves possessed the ability to see in the dark—Tarn had it by his mother, Garimeth Bellowsmoke, a Daergar. His personal guard was made up of warriors from the Klar clan, who like the Daergar and Theiwar also had the gift. Tarn considered himself lucky to have been born with his mother's eyes. She gave him little else. He might have inherited his Hylar father's blindness to the dark, forcing him to travel in the deep places of the earth with torch or lantern light. Darkvision was a distinct advantage to those who dwelt underground.

The bends and turns gnawed through the earth by the Urkhan worms thus appeared to Tarn's eyes as though lit

by bright moonlight. His companions were outlined in warm red, especially wherever their flesh was exposed to the open air. They wore iron-shod boots to hide their footprints from other creatures of the deep earth, who could track the residual heat left in stone by a person's tread. The Klar also painted their faces and caked their beards with white clay before battle, because white was the color of hiding among those with darkvision. To Tarn, their faces were blank masks in the dark, visible only by the heat of their open eyes; to their enemies, such faceless visages were terrifying.

Tarn guessed that they were nearing the city of Qualinost. He urged his guards to greater speed. They began to splash through muddy puddles where before there had been dry stone or moist earth.

"Are we near the tunnel entrance?" Tarn huffed as they jogged along.

"Not yet," Captain Mog answered from the front of the party. "This tunnel will slope down to join the main passage before entering the city. But we're close."

Tarn grunted in acknowledgement, hiding his anxiety under his customary gruff exterior of command. He feared the worst. The evacuation of the elves had been going as planned, with the last refugees escaping into the tunnels before Beryl's expected daylight attack. He and King Gilthas had been rounding up stragglers when a great blast of chill, wet air roared up behind them, from the direction of the city. The young elf king had wanted to return, but Tarn had urged him to lead the refugees to safety while he took his personal guard and investigated. Gilthas had reluctantly assented, marching off with his elves while Tarn turned back, the damp wind in his face speaking volumes that only a dwarf could read.

He dared not speculate as to the cause of the wind or the tunnel collapse that had dumped them into the Urkhan pen, but as he had said, he could feel the tension of

the earth through his feet as he ran. The ground almost seemed to vibrate with the strain, the floor to hum like a harp string pulled to the breaking point.

They stopped at another partial collapse of the tunnel. Fallen beams crisscrossed the passage like the web of a spider, and sections of the roof had fallen, blocking the way. Captain Mog led the digging, clearing a path through the rubble for their king to follow. Tarn impatiently slapped the pommel of his sword while he watched them excavate. The Klar were not careful miners, but they were quick, strong-backed, and stubborn. They heaved beams aside or hacked through those too tightly wedged against the tunnel walls to budge. They clove through mounds of rubble with their hands, pushing, clawing, snarling, and cursing at the work. Earth, dust, and small pebbles sifted down from the unstable roof, threatening to bury them all, yet they pushed onward, needing little encouragement.

Soon, they cleared a path, but as they crawled through the last few feet of rubble, the beams around them groaned and cracked, pouring black soil, leaves, and twigs onto their heads. At the same time, something large and heavy struck the wall a tremendous blow. They clambered to their feet to find another section of tunnel collapsed not thirty feet ahead. Half-buried by tons of stone, an Urkhan worm was thrashing in pain and torment, its huge head hammering the walls, floor, and groaning roof. The monster was enormous, the largest and oldest in their stables. They had used it to burrow out the main passageways. Its tubular body was as thick as three dwarves standing on each other's shoulders. Its three jaws were large and powerful enough to shear through granite boulders. Two horns, each thicker than Tarn's wrist, sprouted from the creature's enormous head. With each blow, dirt and pebbles poured through ever-widening cracks in the ceiling.

"Kill that thing before it brings down the whole tunnel!" Tarn shouted.

Four of his Klar bodyguard rushed the monster, but their axes seemed to bounce off its rubbery reddish-brown skin. One dwarf dived beneath the creature's upraised body and stabbed with his dagger into the joint between two of its body sections. He disappeared with a sickening crunch beneath the monster as it flailed him to a pulp. Another dwarf managed to hack off one of the worm's horns, to which was still attached a length of broken harness rein. Writhing in agony, the huge worm spat a glob of clear viscous fluid. The glob splashed over the dwarf's upraised shield, coating his face and left hip. Immediately, his flesh began to hiss and smoke. Screaming in agony, he dropped shield and axe to claw at his dissolving face. Tarn jumped toward him and jerked him out of the way just as the worm's enormous head swept down, flattening his shield like the blow of an enormous hammer.

As captain of Tarn's personal guard, Mog leaped in front of his thane, sword raised. The blind worm seemed to sense his movement and lashed out. Mog ducked the blow that would have crushed him then jabbed with his sword into the creature's neck, just behind the huge misshapen skull. The worm flailed back, seeking to crush and destroy, but the Klar warrior rolled free, his sword dripping black blood that hissed on the stone. Another dwarf landed an axe blow between the creature's horns, and the blade stuck fast in the hard bone, jerking the weapon free of his grasp as the worm reared up in agony and bashed its head against the ceiling, vomiting corrosive spittle over the weakened roof. The force of the blow drove the axe blade deep into its tiny brain. Acid saliva dripped from its champing mouth as its enormous head wove uncertainly in the air.

Mog drove in again with his sword and stabbed behind the skull. This time, his sword found its mark. The creature collapsed as though struck by a thunderbolt. The floor, shattered by its death throes, opened in a hole that swallowed both the worm and the rubble that had crushed and

trapped it. No longer supported by the rubble pile, the roof followed floor and worm down, widening the chasm. Tarn tried to drag the injured dwarf to safety but had to release his hold or be killed himself, as a whole elm tree dropped roots first through the roof and smashed to the ground, branches snapping, then toppled through the hole in the floor. He and his remaining band of dwarves scrambled to the other side of the tunnel as the last sections of the floor broke free beneath their feet.

After a few terrifying seconds, the collapse ended. Hazy yellow sunlight streamed down through gaping cracks in the tunnel's ceiling, sending dusty shafts of light probing the yawning black hole in the floor. The eleven surviving dwarves clung to the walls, staring down into the hole with eyes half-blinded by the sudden light. At the bottom of the hole black water swirled and churned like an underground river.