



CHRONICLES

PART

5

HOPE'S FLAME

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FLIGHT FROM DARKNESS INTO DARKNESS.

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The dragonarmy officer slowly descended the stairs from the second floor of the Saltbreeze Inn. It was past midnight. Most of the inn's patrons had long since gone to bed. The only sound the officer could hear was the crashing of waves of Blood Bay on the rocks below.

The officer paused a moment on the landing, casting a quick, sharp glance around the common room that lay spread out below him. It was empty, except for a draconian sprawled across a table, snoring loudly in a drunken stupor. The dragonman's wings shivered with each snort. The wooden table creaked and swayed beneath it.

The officer smiled bitterly, then continued down the stairs. He was dressed in the steel dragonscale armor copied from the real dragonscale armor of the Dragon Highlords. His helm covered his head and face, making it difficult to see his features. All that was visible beneath the shadow cast by the helm was a reddish brown beard that marked him—racially—as human.

At the bottom of the stairs, the officer came to a sudden halt, apparently nonplussed at the sight of the innkeeper, still awake and yawning over his account books. After a slight nod the dragon officer seemed about to go on out of the inn without speaking, but the innkeeper stopped him with a question.

"You expecting the Highlord tonight?"

The officer halted and half turned. Keeping his face averted, he pulled out a pair of gloves and began putting them on. The weather was bitterly chill. The sea city of Flotsam was in the grip of a winter storm the like of which it had not experienced in its three hundred years of existence on the shores of Blood Bay.

"In this weather?" The dragonarmy officer snorted. "Not likely! Not even dragons can outfly these gale winds!"

"True. It's not a fit night out for man or beast," the innkeeper agreed. He eyed the dragon officer shrewdly. "What business do you have, then, that takes you out in this storm?"

The dragonarmy officer regarded the innkeeper coldly. "I don't see that it's any of your business where I go or what I do."

"No offense," the innkeeper said quickly, raising his hands as if to ward off a blow. "It's just that if the Highlord comes back and happens to miss you, I'd be glad to tell her where you could be found."

"That won't be necessary," the officer muttered. "I—I've left her a—note . . . explaining my absence. Besides, I'll be back before morning. I—I just need a breath of air. That's all."

"I don't doubt that!" The innkeeper sniggered. "You haven't left her room for four days! Or should I say four nights! Now, don't get mad"—this on seeing the officer flush angrily beneath the helm, "I admire the man can keep *her* entertained that long! Where was she bound for?"

"The Highlord was called to deal with a problem in the west, somewhere near Solamnia," the officer replied, scowling. "I wouldn't inquire any further into her affairs if I were you."

"No, no," replied the innkeeper hastily. "Certainly not. Well, I bid you good evening. What was your name? She introduced us, but I failed to catch it."

"Tanis," the officer said, his voice muffled. "Tanis Half-Elven. And a good evening to you."



Nodding coldly, the officer gave his gloves a final sharp tug, then, pulling his cloak around him, he opened the door to the inn and stepped out into the storm. The bitter wind swept into the room, blowing out candles and swirling the innkeeper's papers around. For a moment, the officer struggled with the heavy door while the innkeeper cursed fluently and grabbed for his scattered accounts. Finally the officer succeeded in slamming the door shut behind him, leaving the inn peaceful, quiet, and warm once more.

Staring out after him, the innkeeper saw the officer walk past the front window, his head bent down against the wind, his cloak billowing out behind him.

One other figure watched the officer as well. The instant the door shut, the drunken draconian raised its head, its black, reptilian eyes glittering. Stealthily it rose from the table, its steps quick and certain. Padding lightly on its clawed feet, it crept to the window and peered outside. For a few moments, the draconian waited, then it too flung open the door and disappeared into the storm.

Through the window, the innkeeper saw the draconian head in the same direction as the dragonarmy officer. Walking over, the innkeeper peered out through the glass. It was wild and dark outside, the tall iron braziers of flaming pitch that lit the night streets sputtering and flickering in the wind and the driving rain. But the innkeeper thought he saw the dragonarmy officer turn down a street leading to the main part of town. Creeping along behind him, keeping to the shadows, came the draconian.

Shaking his head, the innkeeper woke the night clerk, who was dozing in a chair behind the desk. "I've a feeling the Highlord will be in tonight, storm or no storm," the innkeeper told the sleepy clerk. "Wake me if she comes."

Shivering, he glanced outside into the night once more, seeing in his mind's eye the dragonarmy officer walking the empty



streets of Flotsam, the shadowy figure of the draconian slinking after him.

"On second thought," the innkeeper muttered, "let me sleep."



The storm shut down Flotsam tonight. The bars that normally stayed open until the dawn straggled through their grimy windows were locked up and shuttered against the gale. The streets were deserted, no one venturing out into the winds that could knock a man down and pierce even the warmest clothing with biting cold.

Tanis walked swiftly, his head bowed, keeping near the darkened buildings that broke the full force of the gale. His beard was soon rimed with ice. Sleet stung his face painfully. The half-elf shook with the cold, cursing the dragonarmor's cold metal against his skin. Glancing behind him occasionally, he watched to see if anyone had taken an unusual interest in his leaving the inn. But the visibility was reduced to almost nothing. Sleet and rain swirled around him so that he could barely see tall buildings looming up in the darkness, much less anything else. After a while, he realized he had better concentrate on finding his way through town. Soon he was so numb with cold that he didn't much care if anyone was following him or not.

He hadn't been in the town of Flotsam long—only four days to be precise. And most of those days had been spent with her.

Tanis blocked the thought from his mind as he stared through the rain at the street signs. He knew only vaguely where he was going. His friends were in an inn somewhere on the edge of town, away from the wharf, away from the bars and brothels. For a moment he wondered in despair what he would do if he got lost. He dared not ask about them. . . .

And then he found it. Stumbling through the deserted streets, slipping on the ice, he almost sobbed in relief when he saw the

sign swinging wildly in the wind. He hadn't even been able to remember the name, but now he recognized it—the Jetties.

Stupid name for an inn, he thought, shaking so with the cold he could barely grasp the door handle. Pulling the door open, he was blown inside by the force of the wind, and it was with an effort that he managed to shove the door shut behind him.

There was no night clerk on duty, not at this shabby place. By the light of a smoking fire in the filthy grate, Tanis saw a stub of a candle sitting on the desk, apparently for the convenience of guests who staggered in after hours. His hands shook so he could barely strike the flint. After a moment he forced his cold-stiffened fingers to work, lit the candle, and made his way upstairs by its feeble light.

If he had turned around and glanced out the window, he would have seen a shadowy figure huddle in a doorway across the street. But Tanis did not look out the window behind him, his eyes were on the stairs.



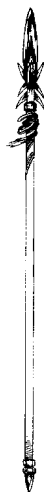
“Caramon!”

The big warrior instantly sat bolt upright, his hand reaching reflexively for his sword, even before he turned to look questioningly at his brother.

“I heard a noise outside,” Raistlin whispered. “The sound of a scabbard clanking against armor.”

Caramon shook his head, trying to clear the sleep away, and climbed out of bed, sword in hand. He crept toward the door until he, too, could hear the noise that had wakened his light-sleeping brother. A man dressed in armor was walking stealthily down the hall outside their rooms. Then Caramon could see the faint glow of candlelight beneath the door. The sound of clanking armor came to a halt, right outside their room.

Gripping his sword, Caramon motioned to his brother. Raistlin nodded and melted back into the shadows. His eyes were



abstracted. He was calling to mind a magic spell. The twin brothers worked well together, effectively combining magic and steel to defeat their foes.

The candlelight beneath the door wavered. The man must be shifting the candle to his other hand, freeing his sword hand. Reaching out, Caramon slowly and silently slid the bolt on the door. He waited a moment. Nothing happened. The man was hesitating, perhaps wondering if this was the right room. He'll find out soon enough, Caramon thought to himself.

Caramon flung open the door with a sudden jerk. Lunging around it, he grasped hold of the dark figure and dragged him inside. With all the strength of his brawny arms, the warrior flung the armor-clad man to the floor. The candle dropped, its flame extinguishing in melted wax. Raistlin began to chant a magic spell that would entrap their victim in a sticky web-like substance.

"Hold! Raistlin, stop!" the man shouted. Recognizing the voice, Caramon grabbed hold of his brother, shaking him to break the concentration of his spellcasting.

"Raist! It's Tanis!"

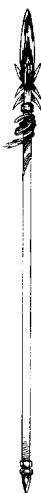
Shuddering, Raistlin came out of his trance, arms dropped limply to his sides. Then he began to cough, clutching his chest.

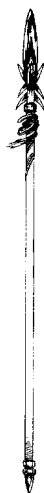
Caramon cast an anxious glance at his twin, but Raistlin warding him away with a wave of the hand. Turning, Caramon reached down to help the half-elf to his feet.

"Tanis!" he cried, nearly squeezing the breath out of him with an enthusiastic embrace. "Where have you been? We were sick with worry. By all the gods, you're freezing! Here, I'll poke up the fire. Raist"—Caramon turned to his brother—"are you sure you're all right?"

"Don't concern yourself with me!" Raistlin whispered. The mage sank back down on his bed, gasping for breath. His eyes glittered gold in the flaring firelight as he stared at the half-elf, who huddled thankfully beside the blaze. "You'd better get the others."

"Right." Caramon started out the door.





"I'd put some clothes on first," Raistlin remarked caustically.

Blushing, Caramon hurried back to his bed and grabbed a pair of leather breeches. Pulling these on, he slipped a shirt over his head, then went out into the hallway, softly closing the door behind him. Tanis and Raistlin could hear him knocking gently on the Plainsmen's door. They could hear Riverwind's stern reply and Caramon's hurried, excited explanation.

Tanis glanced at Raistlin, saw the mage's strange hourglass eyes focused on him with a piercing stare, and turned uncomfortably back to gaze into the fire.

"Where *have* you been, Half-Elf?" Raistlin asked in his soft, whispering voice.

Tanis swallowed nervously. "I was captured by a Dragon Highlord," he said, reciting the answer he had prepared. "The Highlord thought I was one of his officers, naturally, and asked me to escort him to his troops, who are stationed outside of town. Of course, I had to do as he asked or make him suspicious. Finally, tonight, I was able to get away."

"Interesting." Raistlin coughed the word.

Tanis glanced at him sharply. "What's interesting?"

"I've never heard you lie before, Half-Elf," Raistlin said softly. "I find it . . . quite . . . fascinating."

Tanis opened his mouth, but, before he could reply, Caramon returned, followed by Riverwind and Goldmoon and Tika, yawning sleepily.

Hurrying to him, Goldmoon embraced Tanis swiftly. "My friend!" she said brokenly, holding onto him tightly. "We've been so worried—"

Riverwind clasped Tanis by the hand, his usually stern face relaxed in a smile. Gently he took hold of his wife and removed her from Tanis's embrace, but it was only to take her place.

"My brother!" Riverwind said in Que-shu, the dialect of the Plains people, hugging the half-elf tightly. "We feared you were captured! Dead! We didn't know—"

"What happened? Where were you?" Tika asked eagerly, coming forward to hug Tanis.

Tanis looked over at Raistlin, but he was lying back on his hard pillow, his strange eyes fixed on the ceiling, seemingly uninterested in anything being said.

Clearing his throat self-consciously, intensely aware of Raistlin listening, Tanis repeated his story. The others followed it with expressions of interest and sympathy. Occasionally they asked questions. Who was this Highlord? How big was the army? Where was it located? What were the draconians doing in Flotsam? Were they really searching for them? How had Tanis escaped?

Tanis answered all their questions glibly. As for the Highlord, he hadn't seen much of him. He didn't know who he was. The army was not large. It was located outside of town. The draconians were searching for someone, but it was not them. They were looking for a human named Berem or something strange like that.

At this Tanis shot a quick look at Caramon, but the big man's face registered no recognition. Tanis breathed easier. Good, Caramon didn't remember the man they had seen patching the sail on the *Perechon*. He didn't remember or he hadn't caught the man's name. Either way was fine.

The others nodded, absorbed in his story. Tanis sighed in relief. As for Raistlin . . . well, it didn't really matter what the mage thought or said. The others would believe Tanis over Raistlin even if the half-elf claimed day was night. Undoubtedly Raistlin knew this, which was why he didn't cast any doubts on Tanis's story. Feeling wretched, hoping no one would ask him anything else and force him to mire himself deeper and deeper in lies, Tanis yawned and groaned as if exhausted past endurance.

Goldmoon immediately rose to her feet, her face soft with concern. "I'm sorry, Tanis," she said gently. "We've been selfish.





You are cold and weary and we've kept you up talking. And we must be up early in the morning to board the ship."

"Goldmoon, don't be a fool! We won't board any ship in this gale!" Tanis snarled.

Everyone stared at him in astonishment, even Raistlin sat up. Goldmoon's eyes were dark with pain, her face set in rigid lines, reminding the half-elf that no one spoke to her in that tone. Riverwind stood beside her, a troubled look on his face.

The silence grew uncomfortable. Finally Caramon cleared his throat with a rumble. "If we can't leave tomorrow, we'll try the next day," he said comfortably. "Don't worry about it, Tanis. The draconians won't be out in this weather. We're safe—"

"I know. I'm sorry," he muttered. "I didn't mean to snap at you, Goldmoon. It's been—nerve-racking these last few days. I'm so tired I can't think straight. I'll go to my room."

"The innkeeper gave it to someone else," Caramon said, then added hurriedly, "but you can sleep here, Tanis. Take my bed—"

"No, I'll just lie down on the floor." Avoiding Goldmoon's gaze, Tanis began unbuckling the dragonarmor, his eyes fixed firmly on his shaking fingers.

"Sleep well, my friend," Goldmoon said softly.

Hearing the concern in her voice, he could imagine her exchanging compassionate glances with Riverwind. There was the Plainsman's hand on his shoulder, giving him a sympathetic pat. Then they were gone. Tika left, too, closing the door behind her after a murmured goodnight.

"Here, let me help you," Caramon offered, knowing that Tanis, unaccustomed to wearing plate armor, found the intricate buckles and straps difficult to manage. "Can I get you something to eat? Drink? Some mulled wine?"

"No," Tanis said wearily, divesting himself thankfully of the armor, trying not to remember that in a few hours he would have to put it on again. "I just need sleep."



"Here—at least take my blanket," Caramon insisted, seeing that the half-elf was shivering with the cold.

Tanis accepted the blanket gratefully, although he was not certain whether he was shaking with the chill or the violence of his turbulent emotions. Lying down, he wrapped himself in both the blanket and his cloak. Then he closed his eyes and concentrated on making his breathing even and regular, knowing that the mother-hen, Caramon, would never sleep until he was certain Tanis was resting comfortably. Soon he heard Caramon get into bed. The fire burned low, darkness fell. After a moment, he heard Caramon's rumbling snore. In the other bed, he could hear Raistlin's fitful cough.

When he was certain both the twins were asleep, Tanis stretched out, putting his hands beneath his head. He lay awake, staring into the darkness.



It was near morning when the Dragon Highlord arrived back at the Saltbreeze Inn. The night clerk could see immediately that the Highlord was in a foul temper. Flinging open the door with more force than the gale winds, she glared angrily into the inn, as if its warmth and comfort were offensive. Indeed, she seemed to be at one with the storm outside. It was she who caused the candles to flicker, rather than the howling wind. It was she who brought the darkness indoors. The clerk stumbled fearfully to his feet, but the Highlord's eyes were not on him. Kitiara was staring at a draconian, who sat at a table and who signaled, by an almost imperceptible flicker in the dark reptilian eyes, that something was awry.

Behind the hideous dragonmask, the Highlord's eyes narrowed alarmingly, their expression grew cold. For a moment she stood in the doorway, ignoring the chill wind that blew through the inn, whipping her cloak around her.

"Come upstairs," she said finally, ungraciously, to the draconian.



The creature nodded and followed after her, its clawed feet clicking on the wooden floors.

"Is there anything—" the night clerk began, cringing as the door blew shut with a shattering crash.

"No!" Kitiara snarled. Hand on the hilt of her sword, she stalked past the quivering man without a glance and climbed the stairs to her suite of rooms, leaving the man to sink back, shaken, into his chair.

Fumbling with her key, Kitiara threw open the door. She gave the room a quick sweeping glance.

It was empty.

The draconian waited behind her, standing patiently and in silence.

Furious, Kitiara tugged viciously at the hinges on the dragonmask and yanked it off. Tossing it on the bed, she spoke over her shoulder.

"Come inside and shut the door!"

The draconian did as it was commanded, closing the door softly.

Kitiara did not turn to face the creature. Hands on her hips, she stared grimly at the rumpled bed.

"So, he's gone." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, Highlord," lisped the draconian in its hissing voice.

"You followed him, as I ordered?"

"Of course, Highlord." The draconian bowed.

"Where did he go?"

Kitiara ran a hand through her dark, curly hair. She still had not turned around. The draconian could not see her face and he had no idea what emotions, if any, she was keeping hidden.

"An inn, Highlord. Near the edge of town. Called the Jetties."

"Another woman?" The Highlord's voice was tense.

"I think not, Highlord." The draconian concealed a smile. "I believe he has friends there. We had reports of strangers staying

in the inn, but since they did not match the description of the Green Gemstone Man, we did not investigate them.”

“Someone is there now, watching him?”

“Certainly, Highlord. You will be informed immediately if he—or any inside—leaves the building.”

The Highlord stood in silence for a moment, then she turned around. Her face was cold and calm, although extremely pale. But there were a number of factors which could have accounted for her pallor, the draconian thought. It was a long flight from the High Clerist’s Tower, rumor had it her armies had been badly defeated there, the legendary Dragon-lance had reappeared, along with the dragon orbs. Then there was her failure to find the Green Gemstone Man, so desperately sought by the Queen of Darkness, and who was reported to have been seen in Flotsam. The Highlord had a great many things to worry about, the draconian thought with amusement. Why concern herself over one man? She had suitors aplenty, most of them much more charming, much more eager to please than that moody half-elf. Bakarlis, for example . . .

“You have done well,” Kitiara said finally, breaking in on the draconian’s musings. Stripping off her armor with a careless lack of modesty, she waved a negligent hand. She almost seemed herself again. “You will be rewarded. Now leave me.”

The draconian bowed again and left, eyes staring at the floor. The creature was not fooled. As it left, the dragonman saw the Highlord’s gaze fall upon a scrap of parchment resting on the table. The draconian had seen that parchment upon entering. It was, the creature noted, covered with writing in a delicate elvish script. As the draconian shut the door, there came a crashing sound, the sound of a piece of dragonarmor being hurled full force against a wall.

