



CHRONICLES

PART

6

A DAWN OF DRAGONS

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AN OLD MAN AND A GOLDEN DRAGON.

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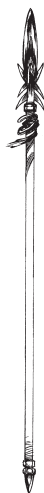


He was an ancient gold dragon, the oldest of his kind. In his day, he had been a fierce warrior. The scars of his victories were visible on his wrinkled golden skin. His name had once been as shining as his glories, but he had forgotten it long ago. A few of the younger, irreverent gold dragons referred to him affectionately as Pyrite, Fool's Gold, due to his not infrequent habit of mentally fading out of the present and reliving his past.

Most of his teeth were gone. It had been eons since he had munched up a nice bit of deer meat or torn apart a goblin. He was able to gum a rabbit now and then, but mostly he lived on oatmeal.

When Pyrite lived in the present, he was an intelligent, if irascible, companion. His vision was dimming, though he refused to admit it, and he was as deaf as a doorknob. His mind was quick. His conversation was still sharp as a tooth, so the saying went among dragons. It was just that he rarely discussed the same topic as anyone else in his company.

But when he was back in his past, the other golds took to their caves. For when he remembered them, he could still throw spells remarkably well, and his breath weapons were as effective as ever.





On this day, however, Pyrite was neither in past nor in present. He lay on the Plains of Estwilde, napping in the warm spring sunshine. Next to him sat an old man doing the same thing, his head pillowed on the dragon's flank.

A battered and shapeless pointed hat rested over the old man's face to shield his eyes from the sun. A long white beard flowed out from under the hat. Booted feet stuck out from beneath long, mouse-colored robes.

Both slept soundly. The gold dragon's flanks heaved and thrummed with his wheezing breath. The old man's mouth was wide open, and he sometimes woke himself with a prodigious snore. When this happened, he would sit bolt upright—sending his hat rolling onto the ground (which did not help its appearance)—and look around in alarm. Seeing nothing, he would grunt to himself in annoyance, replace his hat (after he found it), poke the dragon irritably in the ribs, then go back to his nap.

A casual passerby might have wondered what in the name of the Abyss these two were doing calmly sleeping on the Plains of Estwilde, even though it was a fine, warm spring day. The passerby might have supposed the two were waiting for someone, for the old man would occasionally awaken, remove his hat, and peer solemnly up into the empty sky.

A passerby might have wondered, had there been any passersby. There were not. At least no friendly ones. The Plains of Estwilde were crawling with draconian and goblin troops. If the two knew they were napping in a dangerous place, they did not seem to mind.

Awakening from a particularly violent snore, the old man was just about to scold his companion sternly for making such terrible noises when a shadow fell across them.

"Ha!" the old man said angrily, staring up. "Dragonriders! A whole passel of 'em. Up to no good, too, I suppose." The old man's white eyebrows came together in a V-shape above his nose. "I've

had about enough of this. Now they have the nerve to come and cut off my sunshine. Wake up!" he shouted, poking at Pyrite with a weather-beaten old wooden staff.

The gold dragon grumbled, opened one golden eye, stared at the old man (seeing only a mouse-colored blur), and calmly shut his eye again.

The shadows continued to pass over, four dragons with riders.

"Wake up, I say, you lazy lout!" the old man yelled. Snoring blissfully, the gold rolled over on his back, his clawed feet in the air, his stomach turned to the warm sun.

The old man glared at the dragon for a moment, then, in sudden inspiration, ran around to the great head. "War!" he shouted gleefully, directly into one of the dragon's ears. "It's war! We're under attack—"

The effect was startling. Pyrite's eyes flared open. Rolling over onto his stomach, his feet dug into the ground so deeply he nearly mired himself. His head reared up fiercely, his golden wings spread and began to beat, sending clouds of dust and sand a mile high.

"War!" he trumpeted. "War! We're called. Gather the flights! Mount the attack!"

The old man appeared rather taken aback by this sudden transformation, and he was also rendered momentarily speechless by the accidental inhalation of a mouthful of dust. Seeing the dragon start to leap into the air, however, he ran forward, waving his hat.

"Wait!" he yelled, coughing and choking. "Wait for me!"

"Who are you that I should wait?" Pyrite roared. The dragon stared through the billowing sand. "Are you my wizard?"

"Yes, yes," the old man called hastily. "I'm—uh—your wizard. Drop your wing a bit so I can climb on. Thanks, there's a good fellow. Now I . . . oh! Whoah! I'm not strapped in! . . . Look out! My hat! Confound it, I didn't tell you to take off yet!"



"We've got to reach the battle in time," Pyrite cried fiercely. "Huma's fighting alone!"

"Huma!" The old man snorted. "Well, you're not going to arrive in time for *that* battle! Few hundred years late. But that's not the battle I had in mind. It's those four dragons there, to the east. Evil creatures! We've got to stop them—"

"Dragons! Ah, yes! I see them!" roared Pyrite, swooping up in hot pursuit of two extremely startled and highly insulted eagles.

"No! No!" yelled the old man, kicking the dragon in the flanks. "East, you ninny! Fly two more points to the east!"

"Are you sure you're my wizard?" Pyrite asked in a deep voice. "My wizard never spoke to me in that tone."

"I'm—uh, sorry, old fellow," the old man said quickly, "just a bit nervous. Upcoming conflict and all that."

"By the gods, there are four dragons!" Pyrite said in astonishment, having just caught a blurred glimpse of them.

"Take me in close so I can get a good shot at them," the old man shouted. "I have a really wonderful spell—Fireball. Now," he muttered, "if I can just remember how it goes."



Two dragonarmy officers rode among the flight of four brass dragons. One rode at the front. A bearded man, his helm seemed slightly large for him and was worn pulled well down over his face, shadowing his eyes. The other officer rode behind the group. He was a huge man, nearly splitting out of his black armor. He wore no helm—there probably wasn't one large enough—but his face was grim and watchful, particularly over the prisoners who rode the dragons in the center of the flight.

It was an odd assortment of prisoners, a woman dressed in mismatched armor, a dwarf, a kender, and a middle-aged man with long, unkempt gray hair.



The same passerby who had observed the old man and his dragon might have noticed that the officers and their prisoners went out of their way to avoid detection by any ground troops of the Dragon Highlord. Indeed, when one group of draconians spotted them and began to shout, trying to attract their attention, the dragonarmy officers studiously ignored them. A truly sharp observer might also have wondered what brass dragons were doing in the Dragon Highlord's service.

Unfortunately, neither the old man nor his decrepit golden dragon was a sharp observer.

Keeping in the clouds, they sneaked up on the unsuspecting group.

"Whiz down out of here at my command," the old man said, cackling to himself in high glee over the prospect of a fight. "We'll attack 'em from the rear."

"Where's Sir Huma?" the gold asked, peering blearily through the cloud.

"Dead," muttered the old man, concentrating on his spell.

"Dead!" roared the dragon in dismay. "Then we're too late?"

"Oh, never mind!" snapped the old man irritably. "Ready?"

"Dead," repeated the dragon sadly. Then his eyes blazed. "But we'll avenge him!"

"Yes, quite," said the old man. "Now . . . at my signal, No! Not yet! You—"

The old man's words were lost in a rush of wind as the gold dove out of the cloud, plummeting down on the four smaller dragons beneath him like a spear shooting from the sky.

The big dragonarmy officer in the back caught a glimpse of movement above him and glanced up. His eyes widened.

"Tanis!" he yelled in alarm at the officer in the front.

The half-elf turned. Alerted by the sound of Caramon's voice, he was ready for trouble, but at first he couldn't see anything. Then Caramon pointed.



Tanis looked up.

“What in the name of the gods—” he breathed.

Streaking down out of the sky, diving straight for them, was a golden dragon. Riding on the dragon was an old man, his white hair flying out behind him (he’d lost his hat), his long white beard blowing back over his shoulders. The dragon’s mouth was bared in a snarl that would have been vicious if it hadn’t been toothless.

“I think we’re under attack,” Caramon said in awe.

Tanis had come to the same conclusion. “Scatter!” he yelled, swearing under his breath. Down below them, an entire division of draconians watched the aerial battle with intense interest. The last thing he had wanted to do was call attention to the group, now some crazy old man was ruining everything.

The four dragons, hearing Tanis’s command, broke instantly from formation, but not soon enough. A brilliant fireball burst right in their midst, sending the dragons reeling in the sky.

Momentarily blinded by the brilliant light, Tanis dropped the reins and threw his arms around the creature’s neck as it went rolling about out of control.

Then he heard a familiar voice.

“That got ’em! Wonderful spell, Fireball—”

“Fizban!” Tanis groaned.

Blinking his eyes, he fought desperately to bring his dragon under control. But it seemed the beast knew how to handle himself better than the inexperienced rider, for the brass soon righted himself. Now that Tanis could see, he flashed a glance around at the others. They appeared unhurt, but they were scattered all over the sky. The old man and his dragon were pursuing Caramon—the old man had his hand outstretched, apparently all set to cast another devastating spell. Caramon was yelling and gesturing—he, too, had recognized the befuddled old mage.

Racing toward Fizban from behind came Flint and Tassle-hoff, the kender shrieking in glee and waving his hands, Flint hanging on for dear life. The dwarf looked positively green.

But Fizban was intent upon his prey. Tanis heard the old man shout several words and extend his hand. Lightning shot from his fingertips. Fortunately his aim was off. The lightning streaked past Caramon's head, forcing the big man to duck but otherwise not injuring him.

Tanis swore an oath so vile he startled himself. Kicking his dragon in the flanks, he pointed at the old man.

"Attack!" he commanded the dragon. "Don't hurt him, just drive him out of here."

To his amazement, the brass refused. Shaking his head, the dragon began to circle, and it suddenly occurred to Tanis that the creature intended to land!

"What? Are you mad?" Tanis swore at the dragon. "You're taking us down into the dragonarmies!"

The dragon seemed deaf, and now Tanis saw that all the other brass dragons were circling, preparing to land.

In vain Tanis pleaded with his dragon. Berem, sitting behind Tika, clutched the woman so desperately she could barely breathe. The Everman's eyes were on the draconians, who were swarming over the plains toward where the dragons were going to land. Caramon was flailing about wildly, trying to avoid the lightning bolts that zapped all around him. Flint had even come to life, tugging frantically at his dragon's reins, roaring in anger, while Tas was still yelling wildly at Fizban. The old man followed after them all, herding the brass dragons before him like sheep.

They landed near the foothills of the Khalkist Mountains. Looking quickly across the plains, Tanis could see draconians swarming toward them.



We might bluff our way out of this, Tanis thought feverishly, though their disguises had been intended only to get them into Kalamán, not to deceive a party of suspicious draconians. However, it was worth a shot. If only Berem would remember to stay in the background and keep quiet.

But before Tanis could say a word, Berem leaped from the back of his dragon and took off, running frantically into the foothills. Tanis could see the draconians pointing at him, yelling.

So much for keeping in the background. Tanis swore again. The bluff might still work. . . . They could always claim a prisoner was trying to escape. No, he realized in despair, the draconians would simply chase after Berem and catch him. According to what Kitiara had told him, all the draconians in Krynn had descriptions of Berem.

"In the name of the Abyss!" Tanis forced himself to calm down and think logically, but the situation was fast getting out of control. "Caramon! Go after Berem. Flint, you—No, Tasslehoff, get back here! Damn it! Tika, go after Tas. No, on second thought, stay with me. You, too, Flint—"

"But Tasslehoff's gone after that crazy old—"

"And if we're lucky, the ground will open and swallow them both!" Tanis glanced back over his shoulder and swore savagely. Berem—driven by fear—was clambering over rocks and scrub bushes with the lightness of a mountain goat, while Caramon—hampered by the dragonarmor and his own arsenal of weapons—slipped down two feet for every foot he gained.

Looking back across the Plains, Tanis could see the draconians clearly. Sunlight gleamed off their armor and their swords and spears. Perhaps there was still a chance, if the brass dragons would attack.

But just as he started to order them into battle, the old man came running up from where he had landed his ancient gold

dragon. "Shoo!" said the old man to the brass dragons. "Shoo—get away! Go back to wherever you came from!"

"No! Wait!" Tanis nearly tore out his beard in frustration, watching as the old man ran among the brass dragons, waving his arms like a farmer's wife driving her chickens to shelter. Then the half-elf stopped swearing for—to his astonishment—the brass dragons prostrated themselves flat on the ground before the old man in his mouse-colored robes. Then, lifting their wings, they soared gracefully into the air.

In a rage, forgetting he was dressed in captured dragonarmy armor, Tanis ran across the trampled grass toward the old man, following Tas. Hearing them coming, Fizban turned around to face them.

"I've a good mind to wash your mouth out with soap," the old mage snapped, glowering at Tanis. "You're my prisoners now, so just come along quietly or you'll taste my magic—"

"Fizban!" cried Tasslehoff, throwing his arms around the old man.

The old mage peered down at the kender hugging him, then staggered backward in amazement.

"It's Tasse—Tasse—" he stammered.

"Burrfoot," Tas said, backing off and bowing politely. "Tasslehoff Burrfoot."

"Great Huma's ghost!" Fizban exclaimed.

"This is Tanis Half-Elven. And that is Flint Fireforge. You remember him?" Tasslehoff continued, waving a small hand at the dwarf.

"Uh, yes, quite," Fizban muttered, his face flushing.

"And Tika . . . and that's Caramon up there . . . oh, well, you can't see him now. Then there's Berem. We picked him up in Kalaman and, oh—Fizban!—he's got a green gem—ugh, ouch, Tanis, that hurt!"

Clearing his throat, Fizban cast a bleak look around.





"You're—uh—*not* with the—er—uh—dragonarmies?"

"No," said Tanis grimly, "we're not! Or at least we weren't." He gestured behind them. "That's likely to change any moment now, though."

"Not with the dragonarmies at all?" Fizban pursued hopefully. "You're sure you haven't converted? Been tortured? Brainwashed?"

"No!" Tanis yanked off his helm. "I'm Tanis Half-Elven, remember—"

Fizban beamed. "Tanis Half-Elven! So pleased to see you again, sir." Grabbing Tanis's hand, he shook it heartily.

"Confound it!" Tanis snapped in exasperation, snatching his hand out of the old man's grip.

"But you were riding dragons!"

"Those were *good* dragons!" Tanis shouted. "They've come back!"

"No one told me!" The old man gasped indignantly.

"Do you know what you've done?" Tanis continued, ignoring the interruption. "You've blown us out of the skies! Sent back our only means to get to Neraka—"

"Oh, I know what I've done," Fizban mumbled. He glanced back over his shoulder. "My, my. Those fellows seem to be gaining. Mustn't be caught by them. Well, what are we doing standing around?" He glared at Tanis. "Some leader you are! I suppose I'll have to take charge. . . . Where's my hat?"

"About five miles back," stated Pyrite with a great yawn.

"You still here?" Fizban said, glaring at the gold dragon in annoyance.

"Where else would I be?" the dragon asked gloomily.

"I told you to go with the others!"

"I didn't want to." Pyrite snorted. A bit of fire flared from his nose, making it twitch. This was followed by a tremendous sneeze. Sniffing, the dragon continued peevishly. "No respect

for age, those brass dragons. They talk constantly! And giggle. Gets on my nerves, that silly giggle. . . .”

“Well, you’ll just have to go back by yourself then!” Fizban stalked up to stare the dragon in its bleary eye. “We’re going on a long journey into dangerous country—”

“We’re going?” Tanis cried. “Look, old man, Fizban, whatever your name is, why don’t you *and* your—uh—friend here go back. You’re right. It’s going to be a long, dangerous journey. Longer, now, that we’ve lost our dragons and—”

“Tanis . . .” said Tika warningly, her eyes on the draconians.

“Into the hills quick,” Tanis said, drawing a deep breath, trying to control his fear and his anger. “Go on, Tika. You and Flint. Tas—” He grabbed the kender.

“No, Tanis! We can’t leave him here!” Tas wailed.

“Tas,” Tanis said in a voice that warned the kender the half-elf had plainly had enough and wasn’t going to stand for anything further. Apparently the old man understood the same thing.

“I’ve got to go with these folks,” he said to the dragon. “They need me. You can’t go back on your own. You’ll just have to sallyforth—”

“Polymorph!” the dragon said indignantly. “The word is ‘polymorph!’ You never get that right—”

“Whatever!” the old man yelled. “Quickly! We’ll take you with us.”

“Very well,” the dragon said. “I *could* use the rest.”

“I don’t think,” Tanis began, wondering what they would do with a large gold dragon, but it was too late.

While Tas watched, fascinated, and Tanis fumed in impatience, the dragon spoke a few words in the strange language of magic. There was a bright flash and then, suddenly, the dragon vanished.

“What? Where?” Tasslehoff looked all around.





Fizban leaned over to pick up something out of the grass.

“Get moving! Now!” Tanis hustled Tas and the old man into the foothills, following after Tika and Flint.

“Here,” Fizban said to Tas as they ran. “Hold out your hand.”

Tas did as instructed. Then the kender caught his breath in awe. He would have come to a dead stop to examine it, except Tanis caught him by the arm and dragged him forward.

In the palm of Tas’s hand gleamed a tiny golden figure of a dragon, carved in exquisite detail. Tas imagined he could even see the scars on the wings. Two small red jewels glittered in the eyes, then—as Tas watched—the jewels winked out as golden eyelids closed over them.

“Oh, Fizban, it—it’s—beautiful! Can I truly keep it?” Tas yelled over his shoulder to the old man, who was puffing along behind.

“Sure, my boy!” Fizban beamed. “At least until this adventure’s ended.”

“Or it ends us,” Tanis muttered, climbing rapidly over the rocks. The draconians were drawing nearer and nearer.