



THE WAR OF SOULS

VOLUME TWO

**DRAGONS
OF
A
LOST STAR**

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I

AN ACCOUNTING NIGHTMARE

Morham Targonne was having a bad day. His accounts would not balance. The difference in the totals was paltry, a matter of a few steel. He could have made it up with the spare change from his purse. But Targonne liked things to be neat, orderly. His rows of figures should add up. There should be no discrepancies. Yet here he was. He had the various accounts of moneys coming into the knights' coffers. He had the various accounts of moneys going out of the knights' coffers, and there was a difference of twenty-seven steel, fourteen silver, and five coppers. Had it been a major sum, he might have suspected embezzlement. As it was, he was certain that some minor functionary had made a simple miscalculation. Targonne would have to go back through all the accounts, redo the calculations, track down the error.

An uninformed observer, seeing Morham Targonne seated at his desk, his fingers black with ink, his head bent over his accounts, would have said that he was looking on a loyal and dedicated clerk. The uninformed observer would have been wrong. Morham Targonne was the leader of the Dark Knights of

Neraka and thereby, since the Dark Knights were in control of several major nations on the continent of Ansalon, Morham Targonne held the power of life and death over millions of people. Yet here he was, working into the night, looking with the diligence of the stodgiest clerk for twenty-seven steel, fourteen silver, and five coppers.

But although he was concentrating on his work to the extent that he had skipped supper to continue his perusal of the accounts, Lord Targonne was not absorbed in his work to the exclusion of all else. He had the ability to focus a part of his mental powers on a task and, at the same time, to be keenly alert, aware of what was going on around him. His mind was a desk constructed of innumerable compartments into which he sorted and slotted every occurrence, no matter how minor, placed it in its proper hole, available for his use at some later time.

Targonne knew, for example, when his aide left to go to his own supper, knew precisely how long the man was away from his desk, knew when he returned. Knowing approximately how long it would take a man to eat his supper, Targonne was able to say that his aide had not lingered over his tarbean tea but had returned to his work with alacrity. Targonne would remember this in the aide's favor someday, setting that against the opposite column in which he posted minor infractions of duty.

The aide was staying at work late this night. He would stay until Targonne discovered the twenty-seven steel, fourteen silver, and five coppers, even if they were both awake until the sun's rays crept through Targonne's freshly cleaned window. The aide had his own work to keep him occupied—Targonne saw to that. If there was one thing he hated, it was to see a man idling. The two worked late into the night, the aide sitting at a desk outside the office, trying to see by lamplight as he stifled his yawns, and Targonne sitting inside his sparsely furnished office, head bent over his bookkeeping, whispering the numbers to himself as he wrote them, a habit of his of which he was completely unconscious.

The aide was himself slipping toward unconsciousness when, fortunately for him, a loud commotion in the courtyard outside the fortress of the Dark Knights startled him from a brief nap.

A blast of wind set the window panes rattling. Voices shouted out harshly in irritation or warning. Booted feet came running. The aide left his desk and went to see what was happening at the

same time as Targonne's voice called from his office, demanding to know what was going on and who in the Abyss was making all this blasted racket.

The aide returned almost immediately.

"My lord, a dragonrider has arrived from—"

"What does the fool mean, landing in the courtyard?"

Hearing the noise, Targonne had actually left his accounting long enough to turn to look out his window. He was infuriated to see the large blue dragon flapping about his courtyard. The large blue looked infuriated herself, for she had been forced to alight in an area that was much too small and cramped for her bulk. She had just missed a guard tower with her wing. Her tail had taken out a small portion of the battlements. Other than that, she had managed to land safely and now squatted in the courtyard, her wings folded tight at her sides, her tail twitching. She was hungry and thirsty. There were no dragon stables close by nor any sign that she was going to have anything to eat or drink anytime soon. She glared balefully at Targonne through the window, as though she blamed him for her troubles.

"My lord," said the aide, "the rider comes from Silvanesti—"

"My lord!" The dragonrider, a tall man, stood behind the aide, loomed over him. "Forgive the disruption, but I bring news of such dire urgency and importance that I felt I had to inform you immediately."

"Silvanesti." Targonne snorted. Returning to his desk, he continued writing. "Has the shield fallen?" he asked sarcastically.

"Yes, my lord!" The dragonrider gasped, out of breath.

Targonne dropped his pen. Lifting his head, he stared at the messenger in astonishment. "What? How?"

"The young officer named Mina—" The dragonrider was forced to interrupt himself with a fit of coughing. "Might I have something to drink, my lord? I have swallowed a vast quantity of dust between here and Silvanesti."

Targonne made a motion with his hand, and his aide left to fetch ale. While they waited, Targonne invited the rider to be seated and rest himself.

"Order your thoughts," Targonne instructed, and as the Knight did just that, Targonne used his powers as a mentalist to probe the Knight's mind, to eavesdrop on those thoughts, see what the Knight had seen, hear what the Knight had heard.

The images bombarded Targonne. For the first time in his career, he found himself at a loss to know what to think. Too much was happening too fast for him to comprehend. What was overwhelmingly clear to Morham Targonne was that too much of it was happening without his knowledge and outside his control. He was so disturbed by this that he actually for the moment forgot the twenty-seven steel, fourteen silver, and five coppers, although he wasn't so rattled but that he made a note to himself when he closed his books as to where he left off in his calculations.

The aide returned with a mug of cold ale. The Knight drank deeply and, by that time, Targonne had managed to compose himself to listen with every appearance of outward calm. Inside, he was seething.

"Tell me everything," Targonne instructed.

The Knight complied.

"My lord, the young Knight officer known as Mina was able, as we reported to you earlier, to penetrate the magical shield that had been raised around Silvanesti—"

"But not lower the shield," Targonne interrupted, seeking clarification.

"No, my lord. In fact, she used the shield to fend off pursuing ogres, who were unable to break the enchantment. Mina led her small force of Knights and foot soldiers into Silvanesti with the apparent design of attacking the capital, Silvanost."

Targonne sniffed in derision.

"They were intercepted by a large force of elves and were handily defeated. Mina was captured during the battle and made prisoner. The elves planned to execute her the following morning. However, just prior to her execution, Mina attacked the green dragon Cyan Bloodbane, who had, as you were no doubt aware, my lord, been masquerading as an elf."

Targonne had not known that, nor did he see how he should have known it, since not even he could have seen through the cursed magical shield the elves had raised over their land. He made no comment, however. He never minded appearing omniscient.

"Her attack forced Cyan to reveal to the elves the fact that he was a dragon. The elves were terrified. Cyan would have slaughtered thousands of them, but this Mina roused the elven army and ordered them to attack the green dragon."

“Help me understand the situation,” said Targonne, who was starting to feel an aching behind his right temple. “One of our own officers rallied the army of our most bitter enemy, who in turn slew one of the mightiest of our green dragons?”

“Yes, my lord,” said the Knight. “You see, my lord, as it turned out, it was the dragon Cyan Bloodbane who had raised the magical shield that had been keeping our armies out of Silvanesti. The shield, as it turns out, was killing the elves.”

“Ah,” said Targonne and rubbed his temple with a forefinger. He hadn’t known that either. But he might have been able to deduce it, had he given it much thought. The green dragon Cyan Bloodbane, terrified of Malystrixx, vengeful toward the elves, built a shield that protected him from one enemy and helped destroy another. Ingenious. Flawed, but ingenious. “Proceed.”

The Knight hesitated. “What happened after that is rather confused, my lord. General Dogah had received your orders to halt his march to Sanction and proceed instead to Silvanesti.”

Targonne had given no such orders, but he had already observed Dogah’s march from the Knight’s mental processes and let this comment pass unremarked. He would deal with that later.

“General Dogah arrived to find the shield prohibited him from entering. He was furious, thinking he’d been sent on a kender’s errand. The land around the shield is a terrible place, my lord, filled with dead trees and animal corpses. The air is fetid and foul to breathe. The men were upset, claiming the place was haunted and that we ourselves would die from being so near it, when, suddenly, with the rising of the sun, the shield shattered. I was with General Dogah, and I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Describe it,” Targonne ordered, eyeing the man intently.

“I have been thinking about how to do so, my lord. Once when I was a child, I stepped on an ice-covered pond. The ice beneath my feet began to crack. The cracks spread across the ice with a snapping sound, then the ice gave way, and I plunged into the black water. This was much the same. I saw the shield shimmering like ice in the sunshine, and then it seemed to me that I saw a million, million infinitesimal cracks, as thin as the strands of a cobweb, spread across the shield with lightning speed. There was a shivering, tinkling sound as of a thousand glass goblets crashing onto a stone floor, and the shield was gone.

“We could not believe our senses. At first, General Dogah

dared not enter the shield, fearing a cunning elven trap. Perhaps, he said, we shall march across and the shield will crash down behind us, and we will end up facing an army of ten thousand elves, yet have nowhere to go. Suddenly there appeared among us, as if by magic, one of Mina's Knights. Through the power of the One God, he came to tell us that the shield had indeed fallen, brought down by the elven king himself, Silvanoshei, son of Alhana—"

"Yes, yes," said Targonne impatiently. "I know the whelp's pedigree. Dogah believed this chit, and he and his troops crossed the border."

"Yes, my lord. General Dogah ordered me to take my blue dragon and fly back to report to you that he is now marching on Silvanost, the capital."

"What of the ten-thousand-man elven army?" Targonne asked dryly.

"As to the army, my lord, they have not attacked us. According to Mina, the king, Silvanoshei, has told them that Mina has come to save the Silvanesti nation in the name of the One God. I must say, my lord, that the elves are in pitiable condition. When our advance troops entered an elven fishing village near the shield, we observed that most of the elves were sick or dying from the cursed magic of the shield. We thought to slay the wretches, but Mina forbade it. She performed miracles of healing on the dying elves and restored them to life. When we left, the elves were singing her praises and blessing the One God and vowing to worship this god in Mina's name.

"Yet not all elves trust her. Mina warned us that we might be attacked by those who call themselves 'the kirath.' But, according to her, their numbers are few, and they are disorganized. Alhana Starbreeze has forces on the border, but Mina does not fear them. She does not appear to fear anything," the Knight added with an admiration he could not conceal.

The One God! Ha! Targonne thought to himself, seeing far more in the messenger's mind than he was saying. Sorcery. This Mina is a witch. She has everyone ensorcelled—the elves, Dogah, and my Knights included. They are as smitten with this upstart chippy as the elves. What is she after?

The answer was obvious to Targonne.

She is after my position, of course. She is subverting the loyalty

of my officers and winning the admiration of my troops. She plots against me. A dangerous game for such a little girl.

He mused, forgetting the weary messenger. Outside the room came the thud of booted feet and a loud voice demanding to see the Lord of the Night.

“My lord!” His aide hastened into the room, interrupting Targonne’s dark thoughts. “Another messenger has arrived.”

A second messenger entered the room, glanced askance at the first.

“Yes, what is *your* news?” Targonne demanded of the second.

“I have been contacted by Feur the Red, our agent in the service of the great green dragon overlord Beryl. The red reports that she and a host of dragons bearing draconian soldiers have been ordered to undertake an assault on the Citadel of Light.”

“The citadel?” Targonne struck his fist on the desk, causing a neatly stacked pile of steel coins to topple. “Is that green bitch of a dragon insane? What does she mean, attacking the citadel?”

“According to the red, Beryl has sent a messenger to tell you and her cousin Malystrix that this is a private quarrel and that there is no need for Malys to get involved. Beryl seeks a sorcerer who sneaked into her lands and stole a valuable magical artifact. She learned that the sorcerer fled for safety to the citadel, and she has gone to fetch him. Once she has him and the artifact, she will withdraw.”

“Magic!” Targonne swore viciously. “Beryl is obsessed with magic. She thinks of nothing else. I have gray-robed wizards who spend all their time hunting for some blamed magical Tower just to placate that bloated lizard. Assaulting the citadel! What of the pact of the dragons? ‘Cousin Malystrix’ will most certainly see this as a threat from Beryl. This could mean all-out war, and that would wreck the economy.”

Targonne rose to his feet. He was about to give an order to have messengers standing by, ready to carry this news to Malys, who must certainly hear of this from him, when he heard more shouting in the hallway.

“Urgent message for the Lord of the Night.”

Targonne’s aide, looking slightly frazzled, entered the room.

“What is it now?” Targonne growled.

“A messenger brings word from Marshal Medan in Qualinost that Beryl’s forces have crossed the border into Qualinesti, pillaging

and looting as they march. Medan urgently requests orders. He believes that Beryl intends to destroy Qualinesti, burn the forests to the ground, tear down the cities, and exterminate the elves.”

“Dead elves pay me no tribute!” Targonne exclaimed, cursing Beryl with all his heart and soul. He began to pace behind his desk. “I cannot cut timber in a burned-out forest. Beryl attacks Qualinesti *and* the citadel. She is lying to me and to Malys. Beryl intends to break the pact. She plans war against Malys and against the Knighthood. I must find some way to stop her. Leave me! All of you,” he ordered peremptorily. “I have work to do.”

The first messenger bowed and left to eat and take what rest he could before the return flight. The second left to await orders. The aide departed to dispatch runners to wake other messengers and alert the blue dragons who would carry them.

After the aide and the messengers had gone, Targonne continued to pace the room. He was angry, infuriated, frustrated. Only a few moments before, he had been working on his accounts, content in the knowledge that the world was going as it should, that he had everything under control. True, the dragon overlords imagined that they were the ones in charge, but Targonne knew better. Bloated, enormous, they were—or had been—content to slumber in their lairs, allowing the Dark Knights of Neraka to rule in their names. The Dark Knights controlled Palanthas and Qualinost, two of the wealthiest cities on the continent. They would soon break the siege of Sanction and seize that seaport city, giving them access to New Sea. They had taken Haven, and he was even now drawing up plans to attack the prosperous crossroads town of Solace.

Now, he watched his plans topple in a heap like the stack of steel coins. Returning to his desk, Targonne laid out several sheets of foolscap. He dipped his pen into the ink and, after several more moments of profound thought, began to write.

General Dogah

Congratulations on your victory over the Silvanesti elves. These people have defied us for many years. However, I must warn you, do not trust them. I have no need to tell you that we do not have the manpower to hold Silvanesti if the elves decide to rise up in a body and rebel against us. I understand that they are sick and weakened, their population decimated, but they are tricky. Especially this king of theirs—Silvanoshei.

He is the son of a cunning, treacherous mother and an outlawed father. He is undoubtedly in league with them. I want you to bring to me for interrogation any elves you believe might be able to provide me with information regarding any subversive plots of the elves. Be discreet in this, Dogah. I do not want to rouse the elves' suspicions.

*Lord of the Night,
Targonne*

He read over this letter, dusted the wet ink with sand to hasten the drying process, and set it aside. After a moment's thought, he set about composing the next.

To Dragon Overlord Malystryx, Your Most Exalted Majesty etc., etc.

It is with great pleasure that I make known to Your Most Illustrious Majesty that the elven people of Silvanesti, who have long defied us, have been utterly vanquished by the armies of the Dark Knights of Neraka. Tribute from these rich lands will soon be flowing into your coffers. The Knights of Neraka will, as usual, handle all the financial dealings to relieve you of such a mundane burden.

During the battle, the green dragon, Cyan Bloodbane, was discovered to have been hiding in Silvanesti. Fearing your wrath, he sided with the elves. Indeed, it was he who raised the magical shield that has so long kept us out of that land. He was slain during the battle. If possible, I will have his head found and delivered to Your Grace.

You may hear certain wild rumors that your cousin, Beryllintranox, has broken the pact of the dragons by attacking the Citadel of Light and marching her armies into Qualinesti. I hasten to assure Your Grace that such is not the case. Beryllintranox is acting under my orders. We have evidence that the Mystics of the Citadel of Light have been causing our own Mystics to fail in their magic. I deemed these Mystics a threat, and Beryllintranox graciously offered to destroy them for me. As to Qualinesti, Beryllintranox's armies are marching in order to join up with the forces of Marshal Medan. His orders are to destroy the rebels under the leadership of an elf known as the Lioness, who has harassed our troops and disrupted the flow of tribute.

As you see, I have everything under control. You need have no cause for alarm.

*Lord of the Night,
Morham Targonne*

He dusted sand on that letter and immediately launched into the next, which was easier to write due to the fact that there was some truth to this one.

To Khellendros the Blue Dragon, Most Esteemed, etc., etc.

You have undoubtedly heard that the great green dragon Beryllintranox has launched an attack against the Citadel of Light. Fearing that you may misunderstand this incursion into lands so close to your territory, I hasten to reassure your lordship that Beryllintranox is acting under my orders in this. The Mystics of the Citadel of Light have been discovered to be the cause of the failure of our Mystics in their magic. I would have made the request of you, Magnificent Khellendros, but I know that you must be keeping a close eye on the gathering of accursed Solamnic Knights in the city of Solanthus. Not wanting to call you away at this critical time, I requested that Beryllintranox deal with the problem.

*Lord of the Night,
Morham Targonne*

Postscript: You are aware of the gathering of Solamnic Knights at Solanthus, are you not, Exalted One?

His last letter was easier still and took him very little thought.

Marshal Medan,

You are hereby ordered to hand over the capital city of Qualinost intact and undamaged to Her Grace, Beryllintranox. You will arrest all members of the elven royal family, including King Gilthas and the Queen Mother, Laurana. They are to be given alive to Beryllintranox, who may do with them what she pleases. In return for this, you will make clear to Beryllintranox that her forces are to immediately cease their wanton destruction of forests, farms, buildings, etc. You will impress upon Beryllintranox that although she, in her magnificence, does not need money, we poor unfortunate worms of mortals do. You have leave to make the following offer: Every human soldier in her army will be granted a gift of elven land, including all buildings and structures on the land. All high-ranking human officers in her armies will be given fine homes in Qualinost. This should curb the looting and destruction. Once matters have returned to normal, I will see to it

that human settlers are moved in to take over the remainder of elven lands.

*Lord of the Night,
Morham Targonne*

Postscript 1: This offer of land does not apply to goblins, hobgoblins, minotaurs, or draconians. Promise them the equivalent value in steel, to be paid at a later date. I trust you will see to it that these creatures are in the vanguard of the army and that they will take the heaviest casualties.

Postscript 2: As to the elven residents of Qualinesti, it is probable that they will refuse to give up their ownership of their lands and property. Since by so doing they defy a direct order of the Knights of Neraka, they have broken the law and are hereby sentenced to death. Your soldiers are ordered to carry out the sentence on the spot.

Once the ink had dried, Targonne affixed his seal to each letter and, summoning his aide, dispatched them. As dawn broke, four blue dragonriders took to the skies.

This done, Targonne considered going to his bed. He knew, however, that he would not be able to rest with the specter of that accounting mistake haunting his otherwise pleasant dreams of neat charts and columns. He sat down doggedly to work, and as often happens when one has left a task upon which one has concentrated, he found the error almost immediately. The twenty-seven steel, fourteen silver, and five coppers were accounted for at last. Targonne made the correction with a precise pen stroke.

Pleased, he closed the book, tidied his desk, and left for a brief nap, confident that all was once more well with the world.