



CHRONICLES

BY MARGARET WEIS & TRACY HICKMAN

A RUMOR OF DRAGONS

NIGHT OF THE DRAGONS

THE NIGHTMARE LANDS

(AVAILABLE OCTOBER 2003)

TO THE GATES OF PALANTHAS

(AVAILABLE DECEMBER 2003)

HOPE'S FLAME

(AVAILABLE JANUARY 2004)

A DAWN OF DRAGONS

(AVAILABLE MARCH 2004)



CHRONICLES

PART

1

A RUMOR OF DRAGONS

MARGARET WEIS & TRACY HICKMAN

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CANTICLE OF THE DRAGON

Hear the sage as his song descends
like heaven's rain or tears,
and washes the years, the dust of the many stories
from the High Tale of the Dragonlance.
For in ages deep, past memory and word,
in the first blush of the world
when the three moons rose from the lap of the forest,
dragons, terrible and great,
made war on this world of Krynn.

Yet out of the darkness of dragons,
out of our cries for light
in the blank face of the black moon soaring,
a banked light flared in Solamnia,
a knight of truth and of power,
who called down the gods themselves
and forged the mighty Dragonlance, piercing the soul
of dragonkind, driving the shade of their wings
from the brightening shores of Krynn.

Thus Huma, Knight of Solamnia,
Lightbringer; First Lancer;
followed his light to the foot of the Khalkist Mountains,
to the stone feet of the gods,
to the crouched silence of their temple.
He called down the Lancemakers, he took on
their unspeakable power to crush the unspeakable evil,
to thrust the coiling darkness
back down the tunnel of the dragon's throat.

Paladine, the Great God of Good,
shone at the side of Huma,
strengthening the lance of his strong right arm,
and Huma, ablaze in a thousand moons,
banished the Queen of Darkness,



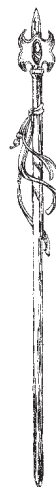
banished the swarm of her shrieking hosts
back to the senseless kingdom of death, where their curses
swooped upon nothing and nothing
deep below the brightening land.

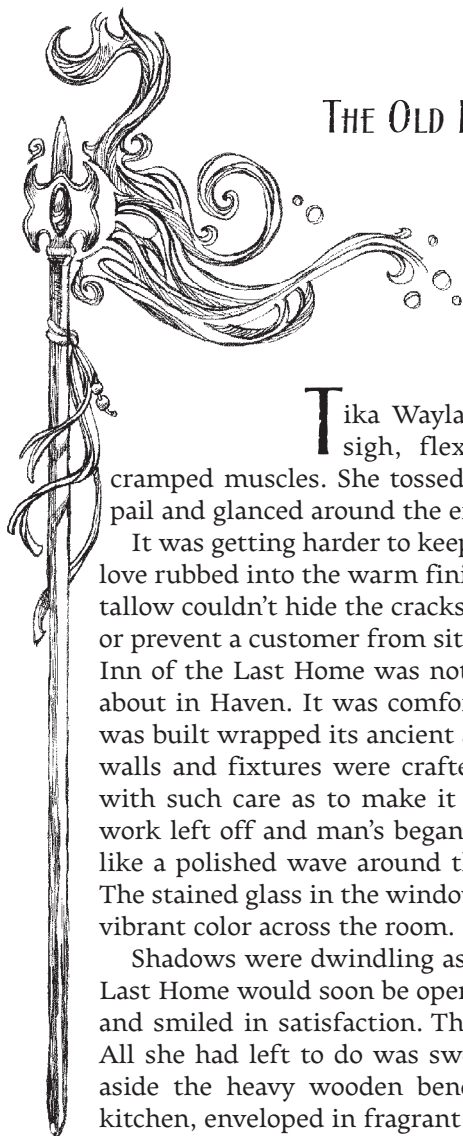
Thus ended in thunder the Age of Dreams
and began the Age of Might,
When Istar, kingdom of light and truth, arose in the east,
where minarets of white and gold
spired to the sun and to the sun's glory,
announcing the passing of evil,
and Istar, who mothered and cradled
the long summers of good,
shone like a meteor
in the white skies of the just.

Yet in the fullness of sunlight
the Kingpriest of Istar saw shadows:
At night he saw the trees as things with daggers, the streams
blackened and thickened under the silent moon.
He searched books for the paths of Huma,
for scrolls, signs, and spells
so that he, too, might summon the gods, might find
their aid in his holy aims,
might purge the world of sin.

Then came the time of dark and death
as the gods turned from the world.
A mountain of fire crashed like a comet through Istar,
the city split like a skull in the flames,
mountains burst from once-fertile valleys,
seas poured into the graves of mountains,
the deserts sighed on abandoned floors of the seas,
the highways of Krynn erupted
and became the paths of the dead.

Thus began the Age of Despair.
The roads were tangled.
The winds and the sandstorms dwelt in the husks of cities.
The plains and mountains became our home.
As the old gods lost their power,
we called to the blank sky
into the cold, dividing gray to the ears of new gods.
The sky is calm, silent, unmoving.
We have yet to hear their answer.





THE OLD MAN

Tika Waylan straightened her back with a sigh, flexing her shoulders to ease her cramped muscles. She tossed the soapy bar rag into the water pail and glanced around the empty room.

It was getting harder to keep up the old inn. There was a lot of love rubbed into the warm finish of the wood, but even love and tallow couldn't hide the cracks and splits in the well-used tables or prevent a customer from sitting on an occasional splinter. The Inn of the Last Home was not fancy, not like some she'd heard about in Haven. It was comfortable. The living tree in which it was built wrapped its ancient arms around it lovingly, while the walls and fixtures were crafted around the boughs of the tree with such care as to make it impossible to tell where nature's work left off and man's began. The bar seemed to ebb and flow like a polished wave around the living wood that supported it. The stained glass in the window panes cast welcoming flashes of vibrant color across the room.

Shadows were dwindling as noon approached. The Inn of the Last Home would soon be open for business. Tika looked around and smiled in satisfaction. The tables were clean and polished. All she had left to do was sweep the floor. She began to shove aside the heavy wooden benches, as Otik emerged from the kitchen, enveloped in fragrant steam.

"Should be another brisk day—for both the weather and business," he said, squeezing his stout body behind the bar. He began to set out mugs, whistling cheerfully.

"I'd like the business cooler and the weather warmer," said Tika, tugging at a bench. "I walked my feet off yesterday and got little thanks and less tips! Such a gloomy crowd! Everybody nervous, jumping at every sound. I dropped a mug last night and—I swear—Retark drew his sword!"

"Pah!" Otik snorted. "Retark's a Solace Seeker Guard. They're always nervous. You would be too if you had to work for Hederick, that faint—"

"Watch it," Tika warned.

Otik shrugged. "Unless the High Theocrat can fly now, he won't be listening to us. I'd hear his boots on the stairs before he could hear me." But Tika noticed he lowered his voice as he continued. "The residents of Solace won't put up with much more, mark my words. People disappearing, being dragged off to who knows where. It's a sad time." He shook his head. Then he brightened. "But it's good for business."

"Until he closes us down," Tika said gloomily. She grabbed the broom and began sweeping briskly.

"Even theocrats need to fill their bellies and wash the fire and brimstone from their throats." Otik chuckled. "It must be thirsty work, haranguing people about the New Gods day in and day out—he's in here every night."

Tika stopped her sweeping and leaned against the bar.

"Otik," she said seriously, her voice subdued. "There's other talk, too—talk of war. Armies massing in the north. And there are these strange, hooded men in town, hanging around with the High Theocrat, asking questions."

Otik looked at the nineteen-year-old girl fondly, reached out, and patted her cheek. He'd been father to her, ever since her own had vanished so mysteriously. He tweaked her red curls.

"War. Pooh." He sniffed. "There's been talk of war ever since the Cataclysm. It's just talk, girl. Maybe the Theocrat makes it up just to keep people in line."

"I don't know," Tika frowned. "I—"





The door opened.

Both Tika and Otik started in alarm and turned to the door. They had not heard footsteps on the stairs, and that was uncanny! The Inn of the Last Home was built high in the branches of a mighty vallenwood tree, as was every other building in Solace, with the exception of the blacksmith shop. The townspeople had decided to take to the trees during the terror and chaos following the Cataclysm. And thus Solace became a tree town, one of the few truly beautiful wonders left on Krynn. Sturdy wooden bridge-walks connected the houses and businesses perched high above the ground where five hundred people went about their daily lives. The Inn of the Last Home was the largest building in Solace and stood forty feet off the ground. Stairs ran around the ancient vallenwood's gnarled trunk. As Otik had said, any visitor to the Inn would be heard approaching long before he was seen.

But neither Tika nor Otik had heard the old man.

He stood in the doorway, leaning on a worn oak staff, and peered around the Inn. The tattered hood of his plain, gray robe was drawn over his head, its shadow obscuring the features of his face except for his hawkish, shining eyes.

"Can I help you, Old One?" Tika asked the stranger, exchanging worried glances with Otik. Was this old man a Seeker spy?

"Eh?" The old man blinked. "You open?"

"Well . . ." Tika hesitated.

"Certainly," Otik said, smiling broadly. "Come in, Gray-beard. Tika, find our guest a chair. He must be tired after that long climb."

"Climb?" Scratching his head, the old man glanced around the porch, then looked down to the ground below. "Oh, yes. Climb. A great many stairs . . ." He hobbled inside, then made a playful swipe at Tika with his staff. "Get along with your work, girl. I'm capable of finding my own chair."

Tika shrugged, reached for her broom, and began sweeping, keeping her eyes on the old man.

He stood in the center of the Inn, peering around as though confirming the location and position of each table and chair in

the room. The common room was large and bean-shaped, wrapping around the trunk of the vallenwood. The tree's smaller limbs supported the floor and ceiling. He looked with particular interest at the fireplace, which stood about three-quarters of the way back into the room. The only stonework in the Inn, it was obviously crafted by dwarven hands to appear to be part of the tree, winding naturally through the branches above. A bin next to the side of the firepit was stacked high with cordwood and pine logs brought down from the high mountains. No resident of Solace would consider burning the wood of their own great trees. There was a back route out the kitchen; it was a forty-foot drop, but a few of Otik's customers found this setup very convenient. So did the old man.

He muttered satisfied comments to himself as his eyes went from one area to another. Then, to Tika's astonishment, he suddenly dropped his staff, hitched up the sleeves of his robes, and began rearranging the furniture!

Tika stopped sweeping and leaned on her broom. "What are you doing? That table's always been there!"

A long, narrow table stood in the center of the common room. The old man dragged it across the floor and shoved it up against the trunk of the huge vallenwood, right across from the firepit, then stepped back to admire his work.

"There," he grunted. "S'posed to be closer to the firepit. Now bring over two more chairs. Need six around here."

Tika turned to Otik. He seemed about to protest, but, at that moment, there was a flaring light from the kitchen. A scream from the cook indicated that the grease had caught fire again. Otik hurried toward the swinging kitchen doors.

"He's harmless," he puffed as he passed Tika. "Let him do what he wants—within reason. Maybe he's throwing a party."

Tika sighed and took two chairs over to the old man as requested. She set them where he indicated.

"Now," the old man said, glancing around sharply. "Bring two more chairs—comfortable ones, mind you—over here. Put them next to the firepit, in this shadowy corner."

"'Tisn't shadowy," Tika protested. "It's sitting in full sunlight!"





"Ah"—the old man's eyes narrowed—"but it will be shadowy tonight, won't it? When the fire's lit . . ."

"I—I suppose so . . ." Tika faltered.

"Bring the chairs. That's a good girl. And I want one, right here." The old man gestured at a spot in front of the firepit. "For me."

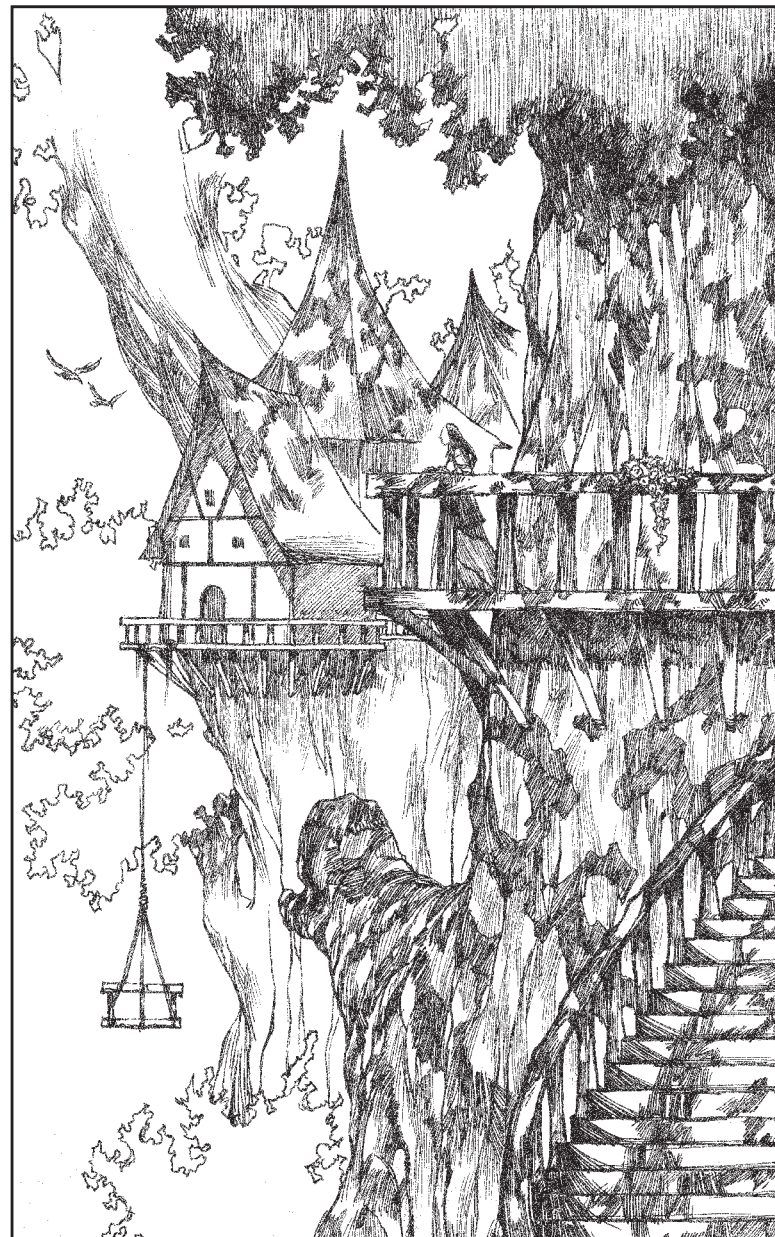
"Are you giving a party, Old One?" Tika asked as she carried over the most comfortable, well-worn chair in the Inn.

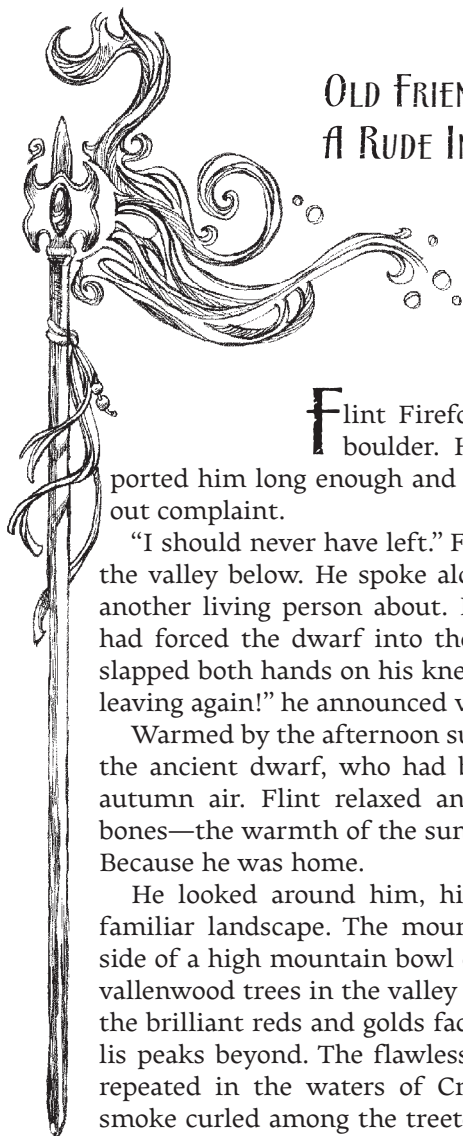
"A party?" The thought seemed to strike the old man as funny. He chuckled. "Yes, girl. It will be a party such as the world of Krynn has not seen since before the Cataclysm! Be ready, Tika Waylan. Be ready!"

He patted her shoulder, tousled her hair, then turned and lowered himself, bones creaking, into the chair.

"A mug of ale," he ordered.

Tika went to pour the ale. It wasn't until she had brought the old man his drink and gone back to her sweeping that she stopped, wondering how he knew her name.





OLD FRIENDS MEET. A RUDE INTERRUPTION.

1

Flint Fireforge collapsed on a moss-covered boulder. His old dwarven bones had supported him long enough and were unwilling to continue without complaint.

"I should never have left." Flint grumbled, looking down into the valley below. He spoke aloud, though there was no sign of another living person about. Long years of solitary wandering had forced the dwarf into the habit of talking to himself. He slapped both hands on his knees. "And I'll be hanged if I'm ever leaving again!" he announced vehemently.

Warmed by the afternoon sun, the boulder felt comfortable to the ancient dwarf, who had been walking all day in the chill autumn air. Flint relaxed and let the warmth seep into his bones—the warmth of the sun and the warmth of his thoughts. Because he was home.

He looked around him, his eyes lingering fondly over the familiar landscape. The mountainside below him formed one side of a high mountain bowl carpeted in autumn splendor. The vallenwood trees in the valley were ablaze in the season's colors, the brilliant reds and golds fading into the purple of the Kharolis peaks beyond. The flawless, azure sky among the trees was repeated in the waters of Crystalmir Lake. Thin columns of smoke curled among the treetops, the only sign of the presence

of Solace. A soft, spreading haze blanketed the vale with the sweet aroma of home fires burning.

As Flint sat and rested, he pulled a block of wood and a gleaming dagger from his pack, his hands moving without conscious thought. Since time uncounted, his people had always had the need to shape the shapeless to their liking. He himself had been a metalsmith of some renown before his retirement some years earlier. He put the knife to the wood, then, his attention caught, Flint's hands remained idle as he watched the smoke drift up from the hidden chimneys below.

"My own home fire's gone out," Flint said softly. He shook himself, angry at feeling sentimental, and began slicing at the wood with a vengeance. He grumbled loudly, "My house has been sitting empty. Roof probably leaked, ruined the furniture. Stupid quest. Silliest thing I ever did. After one hundred and forty-eight years, I ought to have learned!"

"You'll never learn, dwarf," a distant voice answered him. "Not if you live to be two hundred and forty-eight!"

Dropping the wood, the dwarf's hand moved with calm assurance from the dagger to the handle of his axe as he peered down the path. The voice sounded familiar, the first familiar voice he'd heard in a long time. But he couldn't place it.

Flint squinted into the setting sun. He thought he saw the figure of a man striding up the path. Standing, Flint drew back into the shadow of a tall pine to see better. The man's walk was marked by an easy grace—an elvish grace, Flint would have said; yet the man's body had the thickness and tight muscles of a human, while the facial hair was definitely humankind's. All the dwarf could see of the man's face beneath a green hood was tan skin and a brownish-red beard. A longbow was slung over one shoulder and a sword hung at his left side. He was dressed in soft leather, carefully tooled in the intricate designs the elves loved. But no elf in the world of Krynne could grow a beard . . . no elf, but . . .

"Tanis?" said Flint hesitantly as the man neared.

"The same." The newcomer's bearded face split in a wide grin. He held open his arms and, before the dwarf could stop





him, engulfed Flint in a hug that lifted him off the ground. The dwarf clasped his old friend close for a brief instant, then, remembering his dignity, squirmed and freed himself from the half-elf's embrace.

"Well, you've learned no manners in five years," the dwarf grumbled. "Still no respect for my age or my station. Hoisting me around like a sack of potatoes." Flint peered down the road. "I hope no one who knows us saw us."

"I doubt there are many who'd remember us," Tanis said, his eyes studying his stocky friend fondly. "Time doesn't pass for you and me, old dwarf, as it does for humans. Five years is a long time for them, a few moments for us." Then he smiled. "You haven't changed."

"The same can't be said of others." Flint sat back down on the stone and began to carve once more. He scowled up at Tanis. "Why the beard? You were ugly enough."

Tanis scratched his chin. "I have been in lands that were not friendly to those of elven blood. The beard—a gift from my human father," he said with bitter irony, "did much to hide my heritage."

Flint grunted. He knew that wasn't the complete truth. Although the half-elf abhorred killing, Tanis would not be one to hide from a fight behind a beard. Wood chips flew.

"I have been in lands that were not friendly to anyone of any kind of blood." Flint turned the wood in his hand, examining it. "But we're home now. All that's behind us."

"Not from what I've heard," Tanis said, drawing his hood up over his face again to keep the sun out of his eyes. "The High-seekers in Haven appointed a man named Hederick to govern as High Theocrat in Solace, and he's turned the town into a hotbed of fanaticism with his new religion."

Tanis and the dwarf both turned and looked down into the quiet valley. Lights began to wink on, making the homes in the trees visible among the vallenwood. The night air was still and calm and sweet, tinged with the smell of wood smoke from the home fires. Now and again they could hear the faint sound of a mother calling her children to dinner.

"I've heard of no evil in Solace," Flint said quietly.

"Religious persecution . . . inquisitions . . ." Tanis's voice sounded ominous coming from the depths of his hood. It was deeper, more somber than Flint remembered. The dwarf frowned. His friend had changed in five years. And elves never change! But then Tanis was only half-elven, a child of violence, his mother having been raped by a human warrior during one of the many wars that had divided the different races of Krynn in the chaotic years following the Cataclysm.

"Inquisitions! That's only for those who defy the new High Theocrat, according to rumor." Flint snorted. "I don't believe in the Seeker gods—never did—but I don't parade my beliefs in the street. Keep quiet and they'll let you alone, that's my motto. The Highseekers in Haven are still wise and virtuous men. It's just this one rotten apple in Solace that's spoiling the whole barrel. By the way, did you find what you sought?"

"Some sign of the ancient, true gods?" Tanis asked. "Or peace of mind? I went seeking both. Which did you mean?"

"Well, I assume one would go with the other," Flint growled. He turned the piece of wood in his hands, still not satisfied with its proportions. "Are we going to stand here all night, smelling the cooking fires? Or are we going to go into town and get some dinner?"

"Go." Tanis waved. The two started down the path together, Tanis's long strides forcing the dwarf to take two steps to his one. Though it had been many years since they had journeyed together, Tanis unconsciously slowed his pace, while Flint unconsciously quickened his.

"So you found nothing?" Flint pursued.

"Nothing," Tanis replied. "As we discovered long ago, the only clerics and priests in this world serve false gods. I heard tales of healing, but it was all trickery and magic. Fortunately, our friend Raistlin taught me what to watch—"

"Raistlin!" Flint puffed. "That pasty-faced, skinny magician. He's more than half charlatan himself. Always sniveling and whining and poking his nose where it doesn't belong. If it weren't for his twin brother looking after him, someone would've put an end to his magic long ago."





Tanis was glad his beard hid his smile. "I think the young man was a better magician than you give him credit for," he said. "And, you must admit, he worked long and tirelessly to help those who were taken in by the fake clerics—as I did." He sighed.

"For which you got little thanks, no doubt," the dwarf muttered.

"Very little," Tanis said. "People want to believe in something—even if, deep inside, they know it is false. But what of you? How was your journey to your homelands?"

Flint stumped along without answering, his face grim. Finally he muttered, "I should never have gone," and glanced up at Tanis, his eyes, barely visible through the thick, over-hanging, white eyebrows—informing the half-elf that this turn of the conversation was not welcome. Tanis saw the look but asked his questions anyhow.

"What of the dwarven clerics? The stories we heard?"

"Not true. The clerics vanished three hundred years ago during the Cataclysm. So say the elders."

"Much like the elves," Tanis mused.

"I saw—"

"Hsst!" Tanis held out a warning hand.

Flint came to a dead stop. "What?" he whispered.

Tanis motioned. "Over in that grove."

Flint peered toward the trees, at the same time reaching for the battle-axe that was strapped behind his back.

The red rays of the setting sun glistened briefly on a piece of metal flashing among the trees. Tanis saw it once, lost it, then saw it again. At that moment, though, the sun sank, leaving the sky glowing a rich violet, and causing night's shadows to creep through the forest trees.

Flint squinted into the gloom. "I don't see anything."

"I did," Tanis said. He kept staring at the place where he'd seen the metal, and gradually his elvensight began to detect the warm red aura cast by all living beings but visible only to the elves. "Who goes there?" Tanis called.

The only answer for long moments was an eerie sound that made the hair rise on the half-elf's neck. It was a hollow, whirring sound that started out low, then grew higher and higher

and eventually attained a high-pitched, screaming whine. Soaring with it, came a voice.

"Elven wanderer, turn from your course and leave the dwarf behind. We are the spirits of those poor souls Flint Fireforge left on the barroom floor. Did we die in combat?"

The spirit voice soared to new heights, as did the whining, whirring sound accompanying it.

"No! We died of shame, cursed by the ghost of the grape for not being able to outdrink a hill dwarf."

Flint's beard was quivering with rage, and Tanis, bursting out laughing, was forced to grab the angry dwarf's shoulder to keep him from charging headlong into the brush.

"Curse the eyes of the elves!" The spectral voice turned merry. "And blast the beards of the dwarves!"

"Wouldn't you know it?" Flint groaned. "Tasslehoff Burrfoot!"

There was a faint rustle in the underbrush, then a small figure stood on the path. It was a kender, one of a race of people considered by many on Krynn to be as much a nuisance as mosquitoes. Small-boned, the kender rarely grew over four feet tall. This particular kender was about Flint's height, but his slight build and perpetually childlike face made him seem smaller. He wore bright blue leggings that stood out in sharp contrast to his furred vest and plain, home-spun tunic. His brown eyes glinted with mischief and fun; his smile seemed to reach to the tips of his pointed ears. He dipped his head in a mock bow, allowing a long tassel of brown hair—his pride and joy—to flip forward over his nose. Then he straightened up, laughing. The metallic gleam Tanis's quick eyes had spotted came from the buckle of one of the numerous packs strapped around his shoulders and waist.

Tas grinned up at them, leaning on his hoopak staff. It was this staff that had created the eerie noise. Tanis should have recognized it at once, having seen the kender scare off many would-be attackers by whirling his staff in the air, producing that screaming whine. A kender invention, the hoopak's bottom end was copper-clad and sharply pointed; the top end was forked and held a leather sling. The staff itself was made out of a single piece of supple willow wood. Although scorned





by every other race on Krynn, the hoopak was more than a useful tool or weapon to a kender—it was his symbol. “New roads demand a hoopak,” was a popular saying among kenderkind. It was always followed immediately by another of their sayings: “No road is ever old.”

Tasslehoff suddenly ran forward, his arms open wide.

“Flint!” The kender threw his arms around the dwarf and hugged him. Flint, embarrassed, returned the embrace reluctantly, then quickly stepped back. Tasslehoff grinned, then looked up at the half-elf.

“Who’s this?” He gasped. “Tanis! I didn’t recognize you with a beard!” He held out his short arms.

“No, thanks,” said Tanis, grinning. He waved the kender away. “I want to keep my money pouch.”

With a sudden look of alarm, Flint felt under his tunic. “You rascal!” He roared and leaped at the kender, who was doubled over, laughing. The two went down in the dust.

Tanis, chuckling, started to pull Flint off the kender. Then he stopped and turned in alarm. Too late, he heard the silvery jingle of harness and bridle and the whinny of a horse. The half-elf put his hand on the hilt of his sword, but he had already lost any advantage he might have gained through alertness.

Swearing under his breath, Tanis could do nothing but stand and stare at the figure emerging from the shadows. It was seated on a small, furry-legged pony that walked with its head down as if it were ashamed of its rider. Gray, mottled skin sagged into folds about the rider’s face. Two pig-pink eyes stared out at them from beneath a military-looking helmet. Its fat, flabby body leaked out between pieces of flashy, pretentious armor.

A peculiar odor hit Tanis, and he wrinkled his nose in disgust. “Hobgoblin!” his brain registered. He loosened his sword and kicked at Flint, but at that moment the dwarf gave a tremendous sneeze and sat up on the kender.

“Horse!” said Flint, sneezing again.

“Behind you,” Tanis replied quietly.

Flint, hearing the warning note in his friend’s voice, scrambled to his feet. Tasslehoff quickly did the same.

The hobgoblin sat astride the pony, watching them with a sneering, supercilious look on his flat face. His pink eyes reflected the last lingering traces of sunlight.

“You see, boys,” the hobgoblin stated, speaking the Common tongue with a thick accent, “what fools we are dealing with here in Solace.”

There was gritty laughter from the trees behind the hobgoblin. Five goblin guards, dressed in crude uniforms, came out on foot. They took up positions on either side of their leader’s horse.

“Now . . .” The hobgoblin leaned over his saddle. Tanis watched with a kind of horrible fascination as the creature’s huge belly completely engulfed the pommel. “I am Fewmaster Toede, leader of the forces that are keeping Solace protected from undesirable elements. You have no right to be walking in the city limits after dark. You are under arrest.” Fewmaster Toede leaned down to speak to a goblin near him. “Bring me the blue crystal staff, if you find it on them,” he said in the croaking goblin tongue. Tanis, Flint, and Tasslehoff all looked at each other questioningly. Each of them could speak some goblin, Tas better than the others. Had they heard right? A blue crystal staff?

“If they resist,” added Fewmaster Toede, switching back to Common for grand effect, “kill them.”

With that, he yanked on the reins, flicked his mount with a riding crop, and galloped off down the path toward town.

“Goblins! In Solace! This new Theocrat has much to answer for!” Flint spat. Reaching up, he swung his battle-axe from its holder on his back and planted his feet firmly on the path, rocking back and forth until he felt himself balanced. “Very well,” he announced. “Come on.”

“I advise you to retreat,” Tanis said, throwing his cloak over one shoulder and drawing his sword. “We have had a long journey. We are hungry and tired and late for a meeting with friends we have not seen in a long time. We have no intention of being arrested.”

“Or of being killed,” added Tasslehoff. He had drawn no weapon but stood staring at the goblins with interest.

A bit taken aback, the goblins glanced at each other nervously. One cast a baleful look down the road where his leader had





vanished. The goblins were accustomed to bullying peddlers and farmers traveling to the small town, not to challenging armed and obviously skilled fighters. But their hatred of the other races of Krynn was long-standing. They drew their long, curved blades.

Flint strode forward, his hands getting a firm grip on the axe handle. "There's only one creature I hate worse than a gully dwarf," he muttered, "and that's a goblin!"

The goblin dove at Flint, hoping to knock him down. Flint swung his axe with deadly accuracy and timing. A goblin head rolled into the dust, the body crashing to the ground.

"What are you slime doing in Solace?" Tanis asked, meeting the clumsy stab of another goblin skillfully. Their swords crossed and held for a moment, then Tanis shoved the goblin backward. "Do you work for the High Theocrat?"

"Theocrat?" The goblin gurgled with laughter. Swinging its weapon wildly, it ran at Tanis. "That fool? Our Fewmaster works for the—ugh!" The creature impaled itself on Tanis's sword. It groaned, then slid off onto the ground.

Tanis stared at the dead goblin in frustration. "The clumsy idiot! I didn't want to kill it, just find out who hired it."

"You'll find out who hired us, sooner than you'd like!" snarled another goblin, rushing at the distracted half-elf. Tanis turned quickly and disarmed the creature. He kicked it in its stomach and the goblin crumpled over.

Another goblin sprang at Flint before the dwarf had time to recover from his lethal swing. He staggered backward, trying to regain his balance.

Then Tasslehoff's shrill voice rang out. "These scum will fight for anyone, Tanis. Throw them some dog meat once in a while and they're yours forev—"

"Dog meat!" The goblin croaked and turned from Flint in a rage. "How about kender meat, you little squeaker!" The goblin flapped toward the apparently unarmed kender, its purplish red hands grasping for his neck. Tas, without ever losing the innocent, childlike expression on his face, reached into his fleecy vest, whipped out a dagger, and threw it—all in one motion. The goblin

clutched his chest and fell with a groan. There was a sound of flapping feet as the remaining goblin fled. The battle was over.

Tanis sheathed his sword, grimacing in disgust at the stinking bodies; the smell reminded him of rotting fish. Flint wiped black goblin blood from his axe blade. Tas stared mournfully at the body of the goblin he killed. It had fallen facedown, his dagger buried underneath.

"I'll get it for you," Tanis offered, preparing to roll the body over.

"No." Tas made a face. "I don't want it back. You can never get rid of the smell, you know."

Tanis nodded. Flint fastened his axe in its carrier again, and the three continued on down the path.

The lights of Solace grew brighter as darkness deepened. The smell of the wood smoke on the chill night air brought thoughts of food and warmth—and safety. The companions hurried their steps. They did not speak for a long time, each hearing Flint's words echo in his mind: Goblins. In Solace.

Finally, however, the irrepressible kender giggled.

"Besides," he said, "that dagger was Flint's!"

