



Baldur's Gate II

THRONE of Bhaal

Drew Karpysyn



Prologue

Marpenoth, 1368 DR

“Hush, Ravia,” Gerdon warned his wife. “You’ll wake the child. You’ll scare him.”

“He should be scared, Gerdon. I’m scared,” Ravia replied, her voice on the verge of a sob. “You know what people are saying. Executions, public burnings . . .”

“No, Ravia!” Gerdon slammed his fist down hard on the heavy table in the middle of the small room his family used as their kitchen. He had crafted the table with his own two hands, just as he had made the chairs around it, just as he had made the bed in the next room. Gerdon had even built the wooden walls around them and the thatch roof overhead. “I will not be driven from my land—my home—by this madness!”

Ravia shook her head, and her voice was soft as she addressed her husband. “Would you rather die, Gerdon? You and your son? The tainted blood runs in Terrel’s veins, too.”

Gerdon didn’t answer right away, but paced the floor of their tiny home. He was sick of having this argument with his wife night after night. He was angry—with Ravia, with the world, even with himself. But more than that, he was afraid. Afraid she might be right. Part of him, however, refused to give in to her desire to flee.

“Those stories come from the north, from Amn. They are barbarians there! The Amnish would kill their neighbors for a handful of coins. They are just looking for any excuse.”

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Rising from where she sat at the table, Ravia crossed the room and blocked the path of her husband's frantic pacing, forcing him to acknowledge her, forcing him to carefully weigh her words, rather than dismiss them out of hand.

"Each week we hear more tales, husband. Each week we hear rumors from towns and villages that grow ever closer to our own land. Not just Amn anymore. You know it is happening in Tethyr and Calimshan now, too. You cannot ignore this, Gerdon!"

"This town is not like that," Gerdon protested, reaching out and pulling his wife close to give her a reassuring hug—though who he was trying to reassure Gerdon could not truly say. "They are simple farmers, like ourselves. Our neighbors would never harm us. We know them."

Ravia made no reply. Uncomfortable with the oppressive silence, Gerdon continued to try and ease the fears of his wife. "Anyway, they would never believe it if anyone told them. Nobody knows but us. Even Terrel does not know."

In a soft whisper Ravia replied, "Maybe he should."

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Run. No questions, no answers. No hesitation, no explanation. Run. Just run.

His father had drilled the lesson into Terrel's head every night for the past month. Terrel was only ten. He did not fully understand many of the words his father used—persecution, lynching, genocide, legacy, Bhaal-spawn. Terrel *was* old enough to understand what was most important in his father's words.

"If you see strangers at the farm, Terrel, you run. As fast and as far as you can. Just run."

Coming back from his chores in the field, Terrel heard them long before he saw them. Angry shouts of many voices carried far on the evening wind. The mob was

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marching straight through the fields, heedlessly trampling the crops of Terrel's father under foot. Their torches blazed in the darkening gloom of evening twilight, bathing the crowd in an orange glow. They didn't seem to have noticed Terrel yet. Their attention was focused on the tiny farmhouse in the distance, not on the small figure barely visible in the darkness on the far side of the fields.

But Terrel could see them, illuminated by the flames they held aloft. Even at this distance the young boy recognized many of the men who periodically came to the farm to do business with his father. Only when he saw the unfamiliar uniforms of soldiers amidst the throng did Terrel heed his father's instructions. He ran.

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The small house was surrounded. The wall of soldiers and mercenaries encircling the tiny farm slowly closed ranks, drawing the noose ever tighter around the neck of the foul Child of Bhaal. An eager crowd of townsfolk hovered just outside the edges of the circle—anxious to see, but fearful of being seen. The leader of the soldiers, hidden by dark shadows and a heavy hooded cloak, oversaw the entire scene from a safe distance.

The house was quiet as the armored men approached, but a light from within shone through small cracks in the walls. The soldiers stopped, and from the crowd of civilians behind them the mayor was reluctantly pushed to the fore.

Shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other, the mayor looked around, seeking some comfort or reassurance in the faces of the people he represented. The townsfolk hung back beyond the circle of soldiers, staring at the ground. Their downcast faces were blurred by flickering torchlight and shadows, their true feelings inscrutable.

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The mayor could clearly see the expression on the faces of the nearby soldiers. Or rather, he could see that their faces held no expression at all. Each of the armored men surrounding the small farmhouse returned the mayor's searching gaze with a look of apathy, devoid of all thought or compassion. They were highly trained not to feel anything but a fanatical obedience to duty and to the will of their cowled leader, almost completely hidden in the shadows.

The mayor cleared his throat, and when he spoke his voice projected clear and loud, despite his reservations—the voice of a man used to making public speeches.

“Gerdon, for the safety of the community you are to be taken into custody, lest your unholy taint bring destruction down on us all! If you surrender without bloodshed, you will be arrested and given a fair trial!”

There was no reply from within the house. The only sound was the occasional crackle or sputter from one of the burning torches. The mayor waited a suitable length of time before speaking again.

“Ravia, your wife, will be allowed to go free if you surrender to us. If you resist, I cannot guarantee her safety.”

Again, the only reply was silence. The mayor continued.

“Your son, Terrel, must also be surrendered to us of course. The foul blood of Bhaal runs in his veins as well.”

This time the mayor allowed the silence to drag for many minutes before he resumed speaking. He had delivered the carefully composed speech as the hooded figure had instructed him to do. Now he was left with only his own words. When he spoke again, his voice no longer held the deep timbre of an official proclamation.

“Gerdon, please . . . be reasonable. This is unpleasant for us all. For the safety of our families, and yours, you must turn yourself and your son over to the auth—”

The arrow embedded itself in the mayor's chest, the metal point biting deep into the flesh, penetrating

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between the tough bone of the ribcage and puncturing a lung. The pleas of the mayor were lost in a choking froth of blood. The mayor clutched feebly at the shaft protruding from his torso and slowly collapsed to the ground, dead. Cries of alarm and horror rose up from the mob of townspeople still gathered tightly behind the wall of soldiers surrounding the farmhouse.

As one, the ring of armored men advanced on the building, their faces registering neither shock nor surprise, as if they had expected this result all along. A volley of arrows arced out from the small window of the cabin to thwart their approach, but the deadly projectiles bounced harmlessly off the large, heavy shields of the soldiers as they marched in perfect formation. They closed their ranks until they formed a tight circle less than a dozen feet from the walls of the townhouse.

A familiar voice came from the house. "A curse upon this traitorous town!" Gerdon screamed, "May your souls burn in the Abyss!"

The leader of the soldiers, responding to a sign from the barely visible figure of their cloaked leader in the distant gloom, raised his hand. In unison every second soldier encircling the cabin raised his torch and hurled it at the thatched roof. The flames caught quickly, and the violet night sky was smeared with a plume of thick black smoke.

Half the soldiers still held torches. The other half methodically drew their scimitars and waited. They all kept their shields up high to guard against another assault of arrows.

From within the cabin there was only defiant silence as the thatched roof caught flame, and the fire spread. Soon orange tongues licked their way down the walls, crawling from the roof of the tiny home to scorch the foundations and earth below. The smoke curled up before it was finally thinned and dispersed by the faint wind blowing across the fields.

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Gerdon screamed a wail of anguish and grief, an inhuman keening that made the townsfolk cover their ears in terror and shame.

The door to the cabin flew open, wrenched from its hinges as Gerdon burst forth. Armed only with the iron scythe he used to thresh grain, the heavy-set farmer recklessly charged the captain of the soldiers. The armored captain calmly stepped forward to meet the charge, his shield and scimitar prepared to meet the assault.

Wielding his makeshift weapon with the expertise of a master thresher, Gerdon brought the curved blade in low, at the unprotected legs of his opponent. The captain parried the scythe with his own blade and redirected the blow so that it struck harmlessly on the ground by his feet.

In one quick motion Gerdon reversed the direction of his attack, sliding his hands along the long shaft to change the center of balance while twisting his waist and wrenching his shoulders to reverse the momentum of the heavy implement. His opponent was caught off balance by the quick counterstrike, and barely managed to get his shield in the way to take the brunt of the blow.

Driven by the fury of madness and desperation, the force of Gerdon's attack dented the iron shield, knocking the captain back. The soldier lurched awkwardly, struggling to regain his balance even as Gerdon brought the scythe around for the final, fatal swing at the captain's now-exposed flank.

The tool slipped out of Gerdon's suddenly paralyzed hands and the farmer dropped to his knees, the victim of a single well placed slash of a scimitar across his unprotected back. Blinded by his grief and rage, Gerdon hadn't noticed the soldier who had calmly moved into position behind him during his battle with the captain.

Gerdon crumpled to the ground, his legs and arms twitching spastically from the wound that had all but severed his spine. He tried to call for help, a final appeal to his neighbors still standing just out of sight beyond the wall of

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armored soldiers. But a seizure gripped Gerdon's body, and only animal grunts and moans escaped his throat.

The captain sheathed his weapon and stepped over to kick the scythe out of reach of Gerdon's uncontrollably flailing hands. He jerked his head in the direction of his men, and four of them rushed up, each grabbing hold of one of Gerdon's thrashing limbs. They lifted the convulsing man from the ground, carried him over to the burning cabin in which his wife's smoldering corpse lay, and threw him on the inferno.

As Gerdon's body struck the blazing walls of his home, the fire-weakened framework gave way and collapsed, burying the paralyzed man beneath the flaming wreckage.

"Captain!" a stern voice called out from the crowd a second later. "I found this one running through the fields, trying to escape."

Half a dozen soldiers pushed their way through the mob of horrified civilians to join their fellows impassively watching the burning remains of the building. One of the new arrivals dragged a boy behind him, his fist firmly clenching a knot of the child's hair.

The captain followed their progress with a dispassionate gaze as the boy was forced into the center of the circle and his arms pinned behind his back by one of the soldiers. Bathed in the light from the mounting flames the boy was clearly visible to the entire assemblage.

"What is your name, boy?" the captain demanded.

The boy was silent.

The captain turned to the crowd. "What is this child's name?"

For several seconds there was silence, and then an anonymous voice called out, "Terrel. Gerdon's son."

With a single, fluid motion the captain drew his scimitar. Voices cried out in protest. One exclaimed, "But he's only a child!"

"A child of Bhaal," the captain clarified, drawing his blade across the helpless lad's exposed throat.