

Death of the Dragon

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Prologue

I hate having to guess so boldly," Alusair told the first clear hoof print she'd found in three days, "it's *not* good tracking!" She glanced over her shoulder, and murmured as she rose, "but these snortsouts aren't giving me much time to do it the proper way."

Something dark moved on the crest of the ridge behind her. Alusair snarled an oath she could barely remember her father uttering, years ago, and trotted into the nearest trees. Two days at least, now, the orcs had been following her—because it had been two nights now that she'd dared not sleep. She was talking to herself more to keep awake than to measure her weary thoughts.

Her bold guess as to which valley Rowen had chosen had been right again, but gods damn this, it *was* sloppy tracking. Rowen had ridden Cadimus here, or someone had. The marks of the hooves where the war-horse crossed soft mud were deep enough to tell the Steel Princess that Cadimus had carried a rider—as straight north as the land allowed.

Three days had passed since Alusair left her sister Tanalasta and the sage Alaphondar and set off to rescue—or

learn the fate of—her scout Rowen. Though a member of the disgraced and traitorous Cormaeril family, Rowen had served well as a Purple Dragon scout. Now, though the thought of it still made Alusair cringe, he was the father of Tanalasta's unborn child—a child who, since the wedding was lawful, would be the rightful heir to the throne of Cormyr.

"Gods above and below, but father will be furious," she murmured, ducking her way through a stand of young shadowtops. "I don't know which I'd rather *not* be—Tana or Rowen. . . ."

A wry smile plucked at the corners of her mouth—and then vanished in an instant as her eyes fell on the moss ahead. There was a break in the trees here, and Cadimus had passed through it, up a mossy slope and away from the open valley floor, where in wet weather a creek meandered and the rest of the time open turf made for swift and easy mounted travel. Why leave that open ground? To camp?

Alusair caught herself yawning again, and slapped her own thigh with the flat of the sword she was drawing to rouse herself to full wakefulness. Gods *damn* these persistent orcs. The Steel Princess threw back her head and drew in a deep breath. She was too tired to do this properly, she was—

Frozen in open-mouthed amazement. What by all the gods—?

The trail went around the man-high, rotten stump of a long-dead duskwood, and straight into nightmare.

From where she stood, as far as the eye could see, the trees—an entire stand of them, dozens and dozens—were steel gray; stunted, blighted, or twisted into things unwholesome. Alusair peered grimly up into bare, leafless branches and past bulbous trunks, seeking a living, lurking foe, but seeing nothing. The trees stood thickly enough that there could well be a beast larger than a man—or even a score of such—ahead, where she could not see. The Steel Princess cast a quick glance behind her, listening intently for sounds of orcs scabbling up the trail—her pursuers never bothered to strive for stealth in their gloating eagerness—but heard nothing.

After a moment, she shrugged and strode forward, sword tip tracing a ready circle at her feet, half expecting a root to leap up and try to ensnare her. There was something unhealthy about these trees.

Alusair stopped again and studied the nearest one, almost fancying that it had moved slightly, but no . . . her weary eyes were playing tricks on her.

It was a duskwood, but not like any duskwood she'd ever seen before. It was misshapen, as gray and as gnarled as the convulsed gauntlet of a buried giant, its bark scaled where there should be no scales. Here and there that bark was split, as if something unwholesome and vigorous inside had bulged and surged and forced its way out. No leaves clung to the bare claws of its branches—or to any branch of any of the trees ahead . . . yet no dead leaves lay underfoot.

Below the split areas, the bark was graven in a spiral of sinuous, somehow menacing glyphs, runes that seemed old and powerful and somehow evil. The roots of the tree were exposed in all their tangles by a crude and recently-dug burrow, the loose earth simply flung aside as if a huge dog or hunting cat had dug swift but clumsy paws into the soil, and torn at it. The hole was a ragged oval, just large enough for a man to crawl down. Alusair stepped back, then to one side, peering. They all bore runes, and a hole had been dug beneath every tree.

And now, at last, came the harsh breathing and scrapes of boots that meant orcs were ascending the mossy trail behind her. Alusair rolled her eyes and strode quickly forward, following the clear line of disturbance Cadimus had left for her.

The trail continued to climb, and the dark, recently-disturbed earth now began to display strange treasures for her inspection. there was a metal scepter of swirling, clearly elven design, yet dead and dark as no elf would have made it. Stones that should have been gleaming gems were dark and clouded, and the metal itself was as dull and gray as forge lead. Beyond the scepter was a sword, also of splendid shape, but it, too, seemed . . . drained.

There were more blades beyond, then a coffer and a quiver, then something that must have been a staff of great magical power or ornate ceremonial significance. Everything was gray, dull, and lifeless, as if power and beauty had both been stolen out of them.

The Steel Princess frowned down at them as she hurried on. Had this been an elven burial ground, or a treasure

cache? And what manner of creature would know where to find—or dare to despoil—either?

“Gods,” she whispered aloud to herself, “Cormyr was such a simple place when I was a child. When did it grow so many unfolding mysteries?”

As if in reply, and startling her with its suddenness, a voice sang out of the trees ahead. Haunting and mournful, the liquid but sometimes harsh song of an elf maiden who was neither friendly nor gentle shaped words Alusair could not understand.

If there'd been no orcs right behind her, the Steel Princess would have backed swiftly away from that sound. As it was, the iron taste of fear was suddenly in her mouth, and she could feel that eerie stirring of hair rising all over her body. Well, at least she was fully awake now.

The song swelled, and she made out a few of its words: the name *Iliphar*, the word *shessepra* which humans had mangled into “scepter,” and something that sounded like *haereunmn*, which was in several old elven ballads sung by master bards when they visited the court, and meant, more or less, “all things of elves.”

It was repeated. Something of a refrain, then, about *Iliphar*'s scepter giving him power over all things of elves. The voice was unearthly—achingly beautiful, yet as menacing as the hiss of a serpent. Alusair found herself shivering in time to its soaring.

Her hurrying feet brought her around a bend, and face to face with more than a hundred orcs. These were black, hulking snortsnouts of the most powerful sort, with battle-rings on their tusks and a cruel welcome glittering in their porcine eyes.

Their leader, a mighty orc almost twice as tall as the sort of tusker Alusair was used to slaying in the Stonelands, whose much-battered breastplate was studded in grinning human skulls, was leering at her as one of his large and grubby fingers rubbed along the glyphs of the largest tainted tree Alusair had seen yet. The song was coming from the runes he was touching, each one flickering ever so slightly at the orc's touch.

“Well met, Princess,” he hissed, as the scuffle of boots told Alusair that her pursuers were coming up behind her. “Or should I say: my next meal!”

The orc’s roar of laughter rose to join the eerie song as the Steel Princess snarled and sprang to one side, snatching at the magic she carried at her belt. Ghazneths or no ghazneths, she was going to die here, horribly, if she didn’t—

Almost lazily the orc chieftain moved one arm, dark muscles rippling, and a blade as long as Alusair stood tall flashed end-over-end across the space between them.

Alusair ducked away, but the blade seemed to follow, curving down—

A sudden, sharp, clear pain pierced her shoulder like fire. She’d taken an arrow in the shoulder once, and had managed to forget just how sickening it had felt. This was worse. She set her teeth and twisted away from the tree the orc’s foul blade had pinned her to, and staggered away, retching.

Behind her, the pierced tree was making horrible gurgling sounds, as if it was choking around the orc’s blade. Alusair stared at it, wondering what new horrors her next breath would bring.

“Come, Alusair Nacacia Obarskyr,” the orc crooned, matching the cadence of the song rising behind him. “Be my bride before you become my meal. I will do you that honor!”

His laughter rose like roaring thunder around her, and Alusair reeled, hoping she’d have enough strength left to run. Perhaps after she screamed.