

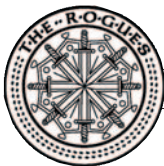


THE CRIMSON GOLD



VORONICA
WHITNEY-ROBINSON





PROLOGUE

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Adnama Stoneblood slipped farther into the inky darkness. He ran one callused hand along the wall to his left and let his heavily corded arm rest against the rockwork. He closed his eyes and let his senses spread through the stone, feeling every crevice and weakness. Nothing, he thought to himself. He opened his eyes, replaced his gauntlet, and turned to another of his senses. His darkvision revealed the sharp turn the tunnel made directly ahead and he once again mouthed a brief prayer of gratitude to Deep Duerra for her gifts. Not many of his kind thanked their gods that often, but Adnama realized how difficult this search was, and he would not risk angering anyone or anything at this point. The duergar knew, even though he called the cavernous depths his home, that

he was a fish out of water here in this accursed place. And yet, he pushed forward.

He moved along soundlessly, even though he wore chainmail over his thin shirt and trousers, and gauntlets covered his hands and thick forearms. His family was well-known amongst the gray dwarves for their metal craft, and his sister, dead nearly two years now, had been renowned for her oils and rendered fats. She could make anyone's equipment, no matter what its age or condition, as silent as a breeze.

Lucky for Adnama, she'd grudgingly passed along her secrets to her brothers just before she died of the wounds she had received in a skirmish with a band of marauding drow. Adnama carried a small pot of the arcane grease in his sack, no matter where he traveled. Silence was his ally and only friend. He recognized his lot in life, though that did not mean he didn't want to change it. And that desire had brought him here.

Turning to the right, Adnama spied an opening in the tunnel. With his right hand, he freed the war axe he had slung along his back and moved up alongside the wall. Slowly sliding against it, Adnama peered into the opening. He almost could not believe his coal-colored eyes.

The chamber, like one other he had come across in his search, was lit with a diffuse light. Adnama couldn't see the source, but he suspected it was of sorcerous origin, considering where he was. While the chamber, really no more than a large cavity in the rock's natural wall, was devoid of anything resembling furniture, it was nonetheless frequented by something.

Adnama's keen eyes could detect the evidence of pick and hammer on the walls. The site had been worked recently and for obvious reasons. Every few feet, a clear light twinkled out like a star on a winter night. Adnama, certain that he was alone, re-slung his axe and moved closer to the clear, teardrop shaped glimmering objects.

"Kings' Tears," he whispered in awe.

He leaned one shoulder against the wall as he removed his gauntlet once again. He rubbed a grubby forefinger over one of the hard, smooth stones. The walls were littered with them. He turned and leaned back against that same wall, stroking his braided beard thoughtfully. Adnama realized that there were probably enough gems in this niche alone to keep him in wine and comfort several lifetimes over. In his mind's eye, he could see the envy on his brother's face while he dumped a sack full of the "lich weepings," as his people called them, on the tavern table. The thought made him smile, and he nearly unfastened his small chisel, caught up in the temptation. But he stopped himself and shook his head. Sadly, he caressed one of the tears before re-entering the main passageway.

The dwarf continued farther into the catacombs. Most of his explorations had proven uneventful, with the exception of the treasure trove he had just abandoned. He knew his luck could not last much longer, but he harbored a perverted hope that it might last long enough. Almost like a sign, the winding stretch of tunnel in front of him shimmered with a faint, green

glow. He moved cautiously forward, wiping a bit of perspiration from his bald pate.

Ormu, he thought to himself. This deep, the tunnels had become quite steamy. He was mildly surprised he hadn't come across the fluorescent moss sooner. However, he would not look the gift horse in the mouth lest he find it rotten, as his father was fond of saying. Better to accept it without question or disappointment. The mild, green glow made his gray flesh take on a sickly hue, not that Adnama ever looked very healthy. Like all of his duergar kind, he looked wasted when compared to other dwarves, with the exception of his broad shoulders and wiry muscles. Adnama was momentarily shocked by his own complexion in the fungal radiance.

"And if we hadn't been abandoned all those years ago," he whined to himself, "perhaps we wouldn't have suffered so. Perhaps we would look as hale and hearty as the others. And I wouldn't have to be here."

Still, the glow made it somewhat easier to maneuver, and he was able to use his senses for other purposes. Adnama could make out that the tunnel widened perceptibly, and he reached for his axe once more. The spot was ideal for an ambush, and he craned his head as far back as he could, studying the ceiling. His sister had met her end when she was lured into a similar spot and attacked by a group of drow that had hidden themselves by levitating near the cavern ceiling. He was always mindful to look upward after that. But his concern was misplaced this time, for nothing hovered above. He didn't relax, though; he couldn't afford to.

Slowly going downward, Adnama's vision was slightly obscured by the increasingly dense steam hanging in the air. He could feel beads of sweat start to roll down between his shoulder blades, and he scratched at himself savagely. He was caught up in his own discomfort for a brief moment—a moment that was one second too long.

A volley of longspear whistled through the thick air. Adnama was caught off guard. One spear snapped on impact against his adamantine chainmail, and the other two bounced harmlessly off of the wall to his right. Adnama drew his stonereaver's war axe and scanned the passage from one side to the other, unwilling to give his attackers another opening. From the opposite side of the tunnel, he finally spotted two troglodytes melt away from the wall. Standing five and a half feet tall, they were not much bigger than Adnama. The upright, lizardlike creatures' ability to change the color of their skin had provided an excellent disguise, blending in against the stones. The random pockets of warmth emanating from the tunnels had also masked their own heat signatures from Adnama's vision, rendering them invisible to the duergar. No longer flush against the natural wall, though, the trogs' skin rapidly changed color to a dullish yellow. Adnama could even make out the single frill along their scalp that ended just behind the nape of their necks. Both were frayed, and the duergar suspected that these two troglodytes had not eaten well in quite a while. The scales along their bodies were also a dull white; another indications

of poor health. Realizing they had lost the element of surprise, the two creatures charged forward.

Only one of the two had on any armor at all, ragtag as it was, and it was worn by the one who led the attack. It drew its own axe, a bit of hewn stone lashed haphazardly to a piece of wood, and swung it menacingly in the dwarf's direction. Adnama easily blocked the swing with the handle of his own axe and thrust the chisel-pointed pick opposite the blade back at the trog. The lizardlike creature fell back a bit and tripped up its fast-approaching companion. That proved to be its undoing. Adnama pressed his assault, slashing back and forth with his stonereaver axe. His next swing cut through the trog's makeshift breastplate, and once that bit of vulnerable flesh was unprotected and exposed, he drove the pick into the trog's heart. Blood oozed from the wound, and the creature fell back shrieking and clutching at its chest.

Adnama regarded the other trog. As it watched its partner die, the surviving creature began to secrete a foul-smelling musk. The odor filled the tunnel, and Adnama stumbled back from the stench, nearly overcome with nausea. He leaned against the side of the tunnel and spread his hands flat against the wall. Even through his intense queasiness, Adnama could feel the fault in the composition of the stones behind him. He resisted the urge to vomit and called out to the remaining trog.

"Come on," he taunted. "Don't just stand there staring at your dead friend! Come on then!"

The unarmed troglodyte hesitated for a moment.

Adnama could see it glance from him to another of the tunnels, possibly an escape route the dwarf wagered, and back to him again, torn by indecision. Adnama shouted once more.

“Come on, stink-meat! Let’s see what makes you smell so rotten!”

The troglodyte grabbed his fallen comrade’s remaining long spear and charged for the dwarf, mindless of all else. Adnama held his ground until the last possible moment. When the trog was upon him, he dived to the right and rolled a few feet away from where he had been standing. The trog was not able to stop its bull-rush attack, and it plowed directly into the wall. As Adnama had expected, the creature struck the focal point of the wall’s fault, and the force of its collision caused that section of the wall to crumble. Several large chunks of stone crashed down on the hapless lizard and buried it from waist to head. Adnama heard the sick crunch of the trog’s skull shattering under the weight of the boulders. In death, the creature released the last of its natural musk, and Adnama gagged on the odor. The dwarf drew himself up to his knees and leaned to the side to retch.

When he had rid his stomach of its meager contents, Adnama scrubbed at his mouth and stood up. He eyed the creature suspiciously as its legs still twitched spasmodically. Adnama knew it was dead but also knew that one could never be too careful. He walked warily over to the first one he had killed. Adnama rummaged through the sack it carried and discovered nothing useful. He shoved at the body in

disappointment and regarded the creature's armor. Like an appraiser examining a work of art, he moved various pieces this way and that under his scrutiny, but let them fall to the ground. A moue of distaste crossed Adnama's lips, and he wiped his hands on his trousers as though they were fouled. He looked at both creatures and scratched at his head.

"Why did you stay," he wondered, "when it would have made more sense to run away? That's usually what your kind does, unless you hopelessly outnumber the enemy. What are you hiding here that is so important? You certainly don't have it on you."

Adnama moved toward the direction the two had appeared from and held up his axe as his vision revealed a crack in the tunnel. He was fairly sure that if there had been more troglodytes, they would have attacked already. But caution was his watchword. He realized that he was going to have to wedge himself in sideways, if he was going to pass through the opening, and leave himself somewhat vulnerable. But he was curious. Slightly smaller than the trogs, Adnama was still broader in the shoulders, and he had to force himself through sideways to squeeze through the fissure in the wall. He popped out the other side into a small, moist cavern.

Like the other niche, this one held a treasure as well. However, it was not a treasure that the duergar valued at all. In fact, it was a cache only another troglodyte would cherish. The dank grotto was littered with trog spawn.

Adnama was overcome with disgust at the clutch

of speckled eggs. He swung his axe from side to side and smashed most of them, heedless of the noise he created. The few he didn't crush with his axe he ground under his worn boots. He smiled at the sound of the developing trogs splintering and squishing under his heels.

"That's a few less stink-meats cluttering up the world," he said to himself with a small measure of satisfaction. Seeing that there was nothing left in the grotto to destroy, he squeezed back out into the main tunnel. He looked once more at the dead trogs. Satisfied that they would no longer trouble him, Adnama continued deeper into the catacombs.

The heat continued to climb the farther Adnama moved down. He listened more closely to the slight hiss of steam, wary of any sudden burst of moisture. He had been scalded only once as a child by a concentrated jet of steam, but he still wore the scar on his shoulder, a constant reminder of the cost of carelessness.

More than once he had to ignore the glints and gleams along the walls. He was certain he was passing rich veins of ore along the way, and the glitter tugged at his heart. Still, he continued on.

Coming to a split in the path, he paused for a brief moment to scan both passageways. To his sharp eyes, both corridors initially continued deeper. But Adnama wasn't sure for how long, and he didn't want to waste the time of backtracking if he chose one that eventually started to snake upward again. He picked up two stones of similar size and tossed one down the channel

on his left. He listened closely to the sounds the rock made on its course. Then he duplicated the procedure with the path on the right. The second stone made a different sound. That sound meant the second tunnel curved upward after a few hundred feet. He smiled grimly and went left.

Along with the rise in temperature, the tunnel also began to narrow. Adnama came to one area where he was forced to his knees to clear the low overhang and eventually had to slide along his belly to pass through to a larger cavern. None of the close quarters disturbed him overly much—wherever there was rockwork, there was home for him. And he was counting on the fact that it was home to more than just him.

As he rose to his feet, he examined the cavern for traps. A cursory glance revealed very little as the cave was studded with multiple pools of lava, though each one was no larger than a few feet. They bubbled cheerfully, and Adnama carefully maneuvered around them, knowing full well his armor would not protect him from this liquid fire. He watched his footing as he stepped from one solid patch to another until he was nearly free of the lava field. Just as he was clearing the last pool, the ground he thought was solid cracked under his weight. He tumbled backward toward the puddle of molten earth. Adnama only had a moment to act.

Without conscious thought, he used the momentum of his fall to launch himself backward and tuck himself into a ball. His face brushed so close to the

pool mid-flip that a few of the braids of his beard caught fire. Despite the close call, Adnama successfully cleared the magma and landed on the opposite side of the pool. Coming down full force, the dwarf breathed a sigh of relief when the ground beneath his feet held firm. He batted at the ends of his beard to smother the burning hair and made his way around the other side of the pool without incident.

The cavern narrowed to another tunnel, and Adnama entered without hesitation. He had to rely on his darkvision again as the area was now too warm for ormu to thrive in any significant amount any longer. The ratty cotton shirt he wore under his mail was completely drenched with perspiration and the dwarf was tempted to peel it off. He knew if he did, though, the chainmail he wore would chafe and eventually blister his skin. It was wiser to leave the sopping fabric on as a bit of padding. He paused for a moment and pulled out his water flask, wrinkling his nose at the scent of his own burnt hair. Adnama was careful to ration out his supplies and only drank enough water to moisten his mouth and parched throat before replacing the stopper. He stored the flask, but before he could move on, a faint rumbling froze him in his tracks. He leaned against a naturally formed archway and braced himself for the impending quake. The trembling was not, however, what he expected.

Not five feet in front of him, the ground erupted in a spray of rocks and gravel, and the force blew the dwarf off his feet. He landed hard, the breath momentarily knocked from him. He rolled to one side and

watched as a blood-red dragon's head appeared from the newly formed crater. Adnama crawled backward like a crab, still unable to catch his breath, as the creature pulled itself completely free of its burrow and rose to full height.

Standing almost nine feet tall, the creature carried a shield the same color as its body. Adnama could see he had initially been mistaken in his assessment of the threat. While the creature had the head of a dragon, the rest of its body was mostly humanoid. And, in the glow from the lava pools behind him, the dwarf could see light winking and shimmering off the creature's gemstone surface.

"Golem," he wheezed and pushed himself up on one elbow.

The ruby golem, seeing that Adnama was unarmed, dropped its shield and plodded forward, wasting no time with the intruder. Adnama knew that the monster outweighed him by a few thousand pounds and could easily crush him into the ground. Still short of breath, the dwarf dived between the legs of the approaching beast—but the golem was faster.

The duergar screamed in pain as the monster caught him by one of his ankles. The golem's grip was so tight that Adnama feared that his bone might snap. He was dragged face first along the cave floor back between the construct's legs. Rocks tore at his face and scalp, but that was the least of Adnama's worries. The golem slammed him into the tunnel wall. It turned to one side, and Adnama could barely see the creature was searching for something to bludgeon him with,

as though it didn't want to sully its ruby fists on dwarf flesh. Adnama had one chance left.

With blood stinging his eyes, the dwarf groped for his leather sack. He knew he possessed no shield capable of defending himself against the golem's near-impervious body. The dwarf's only defense was an attack. He rummaged about frantically. Panic momentarily froze his heart when his fingers did not brush against what he was searching for. One maddening heartbeat later, however, Adnama's hand closed around it. As he pulled the small, fist-sized object from his pouch, the golem lifted up a boulder nearly as large as the dwarf.

As the creature towered over him, Adnama threw the thunderstone at the monster's chest and buried his head under his arms. The sound the weapon made when it struck the gem creature was nearly deafening, and the dwarf could feel the blast resonate within his own ribcage. Adnama winced as bits of the cavern ceiling rained down, and he momentarily wondered if his defiant act would bring the whole structure down around his ears. But the roof held, and everything eventually grew quiet around the dwarf. Blinking dust and debris and blood from his eyes, he finally cracked them open to peak at his attacker.

A mountain of maroon dust was heaped up in a great pile where the golem had stood. Adnama rose on wobbly legs and tried to calm his pounding heart. He knew he had narrowly escaped death. If he hadn't thought to pack a few thunderstones, he would have been ground to dust himself. Pulling a rag from his pouch, he wiped

his eyes clear and daubed at the wound on his scalp that was still seeping blood. When he had collected himself somewhat, Adnama moved over to the pile of dark dust. Nestled in the center of the powder was a perfect ruby. Adnama let the bloodstained rag slip from his fingers and lifted the gem to inspect it.

Even in the poor light, he could see the gem was of the highest caliber. It was a shade of maroon so dark that it was nearly black. He hefted the gem in his hand and estimated that it weighed at least a pound or so and would fetch quite a few coins in the right market. Then his dark eyes spotted a mark on one side that he initially mistook for an inclusion. Moving closer to the nearest pool of lava for better light, his fear of the magma overcome by his greed, Adnama sucked in his breath with a whistle. Absently, he realized that sound meant he had cracked at least one of his remaining teeth. But that was of no matter at the moment. He could see the mark on the gem was actually a design etched on one of the ruby's facets. It was the image of two hands, one living and one skeletal, gripped together.

"Szass Tam," the dwarf breathed almost reverently. The signature of the most powerful of Thay's Red Wizards alone increased the value of the gem as well as the danger to the dwarf.

"It figures this one would belong to you," he continued, "but I never thought I would hold something of yours in my grip, even for a moment." Adnama passed the jewel back and forth between his hands as he contemplated what to do next.

I'm not here for this kind of treasure, his mind raced, but how can I pass this up, this prize within my reach?

He knew the risks of trying to smuggle something like this out of Thay. Yet, if he ultimately succeeded, his conscious argued with him, he would have no difficulty at all leaving with such a treasure. And it was a small trophy, compared to what he planned to accomplish. Without deliberately coming to a decision, Adnama slipped the heavy stone into his sack and moved from the glow of the lava fields deeper into the bowels of the catacombs. Adnama didn't notice the fell thing that slithered from the shadows and sniffed interestedly at the bloody rag he had discarded.

As Adnama dropped deeper into the catacombs, he noticed more and more pools of lava. He could still catch a whiff of his own burnt hair and moved more and more carefully around their growing numbers. The molten slag bubbled and burped as he continued, with increasing difficulty, to navigate between them. The smell of sulfur grew stronger and, while he held one hand sealed against his mouth and nose, the dwarf cursed himself for leaving behind his face rag.

Balanced precariously between two pools, he barely managed to steady himself as a small tremor rattled the cavern. Adnama grabbed for a thunderstone and stood poised to fling it at any attacker, but none appeared. After a moment, he replaced the powerful weapon when he realized that the tremor was not the herald of a creature's attack, but an actual quake, albeit a minor one.

“Gettin’ jumpy,” he chided himself in a feeble attempt at humor. But Adnama was vaguely disturbed by the growing number of lava pools and now the tectonic activity. The indications were pointing to a chance of trouble on a grander scale. He had seen enough signs like this back home to realize the entire country could be in danger. If some large-scale eruption took place, Adnama had no idea how he might accomplish his goal, let alone save himself. He shook his head and slid over to a relatively stable section of the cave to consider his options.

He was once again faced with a fork in his path. Both choices proved to be descending tunnels. Realizing that there was no easy method to tell which way to go, Adnama pulled off his left gauntlet and pushed up his grubby shirt sleeve past his elbow.

Along the top of his forearm, his gray skin was covered by a series of black lines and symbols, but the pattern was not just an innocuous design of vanity or even a rank of station. Adnama had tattooed a rough map on himself, and he consulted it now. But even before his eyes fell upon the markings, he somehow knew—or dreaded—that the answer would not be there. The information he had was incomplete before he had left the Orsraun Mountains, and now he was truly at a crossroads. So he trusted his instincts and made a choice. But before he could move on, he needed to do one last thing.

Planting himself as securely as possible against a wall, he reached around his neck and pulled at a leather thong fastened there. From under his mail and

cotton shirt, Adnama pulled free an unworked piece of stone. He grasped the sending stone with his right hand and closed his eyes. He composed a mental image of his location and his decision in his mind's eye and sent that image off to the matching stone far from where he was. Satisfied he had left word of his location, Adnama replaced the stone under his armor and moved on.

The path sloped down at an even and gentle pace, and the dwarf was pleased that there were not nearly as many pools of magma here as there had been in the preceding chambers. The air even became marginally clearer the farther he went, and Adnama wondered if there might be some sort of vent or fissure that connected the depths ahead of him with the outside air above. He suspected it might be possible—even necessary if other, less inhuman creatures frequented these catacombs.

He could see that the walls were smoother here. This stone had been intentionally worked. A slow smile spread across his face. Ahead about fifty feet, the dwarf could make out the faint glimmering of light—not the chaotic shimmer of molten earth, but the familiar flicker of torchlight. He nearly broke into a run.

“By Deep Duerra,” he whispered, “I’ve found them. I’ve found them.”

At the bend in the tunnel, Adnama turned to the right with a look of absolute certainty fixed on his face. But as he rounded the corner, he slowed to a trot and covered only a few more feet before he stopped

entirely, like a clockwork toy that had wound down its spring.

“It can’t be,” he choked out. “It’s not possible...” his voice trailed away.

What little color Adnama possessed drained away immediately. A figure separated itself from the side of the catacomb, and the duergar recognized the bloody scrap in the thing’s claws—the face rag he had abandoned earlier. The shadow held the cloth up to its face and drew in one long, almost loving breath as though the cotton had been scented by the finest of perfumes. Then it slowly slid the rag down over its mouth, all the while licking at it hungrily. Adnama turned and tried to flee, only to realize with a dawning dread that the shadowy masses surrounded him, and he was cut off from any avenue of escape. He turned in a helpless circle.

They were everywhere.

His mind could not wrap itself around what his vision had revealed to him, and it started to shut down. The dwarf could not have moved at that moment even if the ground itself had tried to shake him loose. Black spots crowded across his line of sight. He was vaguely aware that his knees were buckling out from under him, but he was powerless to stop his fall. He hit the ground with a dull thud. As the last of his consciousness faded, Adnama could see the black shadows peel themselves from the darkness and start to swarm him. For the first and only time in his life, Adnama fainted from pure terror.



The rumblings of the ground rose and fell in waves. However, it was not loud enough to disguise the wet, slurping sounds drifting up from one of the many channels in the catacombs. Nor did the noise last long enough to cover the screams or the angry growls.

As it turned out, there was not enough gray meat to go around.