



# R.A. SALVATORE

## CHARON'S CLAW

THE **NEVERWINTER**™ SAGA  
BOOK  
III

COVER ART  
TODD LOCKWOOD



The Neverwinter Saga, Book III  
**CHARON'S CLAW**

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CHAPTER  
1  
THE WAR WOAD

**D**RIZZT WASN'T ALARMED WHEN HE AWOKE AT DAWN TO FIND THAT DAHLIA was not lying beside him in their small camp. He knew where she would be. He paused just long enough to strap on his scimitar belt and scoop Taulmaril over his shoulder, then trotted down the narrow forest paths and up the steep incline, grabbing tree to tree and pulling himself along. Near the top of that small hill, he spotted her, calmly staring in the distance with her back to him.

Despite the cold—and this morning was the coldest of the season by far, Dahlia wore only her blanket, loosely wrapped around her, drooping from one naked shoulder. Drizzt hardly noted her dress, or undress, remarkable as it was, for his gaze was caught by Dahlia's hair. The previous night, she had worn it in her stylish and soft shoulder cut, but now she had returned to the single thick black and red braid, rising up and curling deliciously around her delicate neck. It seemed as if Dahlia could become a different person with the pass of a magical comb.

He started toward her slowly, a dry branch cracking under his step, the slight sound turning Dahlia's head just a bit to regard him.

Drizzt stopped short, staring at the patterns of blue spots, the warrior elf's woad pattern. That, too, had been absent from her appearance the previous night, as if she had softened herself for Drizzt's bed, as if Dahlia was using the hair and woad as a reflection of her mood, or. . . .

Drizzt narrowed his gaze. Not as a reflection of her mood, he realized, but as an enticement to, a manipulation of, her drow lover.

They had argued the previous evening, and fiery Dahlia, braid and woad intact, had staked out her position, her intention to go after Alegni, forcefully.

But then she had come to Drizzt more gently in reconciliation, her hair softer, her pretty face clear of the warrior pattern. They had not discussed Alegni then, but neither had they gone to sleep angry at each other.

Drizzt walked over to join Dahlia, taking in the sight from the western edge of the hillock. He looked down across the miles to Neverwinter, shrouded in a low ground fog as the colder air drew forth the wet warmth from the great river.

"The mist hides much of the scarring," Drizzt said, his arms going around the woman, who didn't react to his touch. "It was once a beautiful city, and will be again if the Thayans are truly defeated."

"With the Shadovar haunting the streets and alleyways?" Dahlia replied, her tone harsh.

Drizzt didn't quite know how to reply, so he just hugged her a bit closer.

"They are in the city, among the settlers, so said Barrabus—the man you call Artemis Entreri," Dahlia replied.

"A foothold likely gained only because of the greater threat of Sylora Salm. If that threat is diminished, I expect that the Shadovar—"

"When their leader is dead, the threat of the Shadovar will diminish," Dahlia interrupted bluntly and coldly. "And their leader will soon be dead."

Drizzt tried to hug her closer, but she pulled away from him. She took a couple of steps closer to the edge of the bluff and rearranged her blanket around her.

"Time is not his ally, it is ours," Drizzt said.

Dahlia turned on him sharply, her gaze stern—and intensified by the threatening patterns of her war woad.

"He will know the truth," Drizzt insisted. "He will learn from Entreri of what transpired with Sylora Salm, and will know that we will come for him—Entreri admitted as much to us when he told us that he was enslaved and that he could not join us in your vendetta."

"Then the foul Netherese warlord should be very afraid right now," Dahlia replied.

"And so he will be very alert right now, with his forces pulled in tightly. Now is not the time—"

Again, Dahlia cut him short. "It is not your choice."

"As the Thayan threat diminishes, so too will our opponent's guard, and so too will his standing within the city," Drizzt pressed on against her anger. "I have met these settlers and they are goodly folk—they'll not suffer the Netherese for long. This is not the time to go after him."

Dahlia's blue eyes flashed with anger, and for a moment, Drizzt thought she might lash out at him. Even knowing her designs and determination to get Alegni, the drow ranger could hardly believe the level of intensity in that rage! He could not imagine her angrier if he had admitted to her some heinous crime he had committed against her family. He was glad that she did not have her weapon available to her at that moment.

Drizzt let a long silence pass between them before daring to continue. "You will kill Alegni."

“Do not speak his name!” Dahlia insisted, and she spat upon the ground, as if even hearing the name had brought bile into her mouth.

Drizzt patted his hands in the air, trying to calm her.

Gradually, the angry fires in her eyes were replaced with a profound sadness.

“What is it?” he whispered, daring to move closer.

Dahlia turned around but did not refuse him as he put his arms around her once more. Together, they looked down at Neverwinter.

“I’m going to kill him,” she whispered, and it seemed to Drizzt as if she was speaking to herself more than to him. “No delay. No wait. I will kill him.”

“As you killed Sylora Salm?”

“Had I known she named him as her enemy, I would have helped her. Had I known the identity of the Shadovar leader, I never would have left Neverwinter for Luskan or Gauntlgrym. I never would have departed the region until he was dead *by my hand*.”

She said those last three words with such clarity, such intensity, such venom, that Drizzt knew he would get nowhere in reasoning with Dahlia at this time.

So he just held her.



In the skeleton of a dead tree, peering through a crack in the rotting wood, Effron the Twisted watched the couple with great interest. The misshapen warlock heard every word of their conversation and wasn’t surprised by any of it. He knew of Dahlia, knew more of her than anyone else alive, likely, and he understood the demons that guided her.

Of course she would try to kill Herzgo Alegni. She would be happier if she died trying to kill him than if they both remained alive.

Effron understood her.

The warlock couldn’t deny his own emotions in looking at this elf warrior woman. Part of him wanted to leap out from the tree and destroy the couple then and there. Good sense overruled that impulse, though, for he had heard enough of the reputation of this Drizzt Do’Urden creature to realize that he ought to play this game cautiously.

Besides, he wasn’t sure he wanted Dahlia killed—not immediately, at least. There were some things he wanted to know, needed to know, and only she could provide the answers.

The Shadovar warlock shade-shifted away from the spot, but did not immediately return to Herzgo Alegni’s side to report his findings. Effron was nobody’s slave, after all, and was not without his own resources.

He went instead to a forest region of dells and rocky ridges outside of Neverwinter. The sky was still very dark, with low clouds, and a light snow had

begun to fall, but Effron knew this area well and moved unerringly to an encampment set in a shallow cave.

Sitting nearby were a handful of Shadovar—Netherese soldiers who had come through from the Shadowfell soon after Effron, at Effron's secret bidding, but who had not yet pledged their allegiance to Alegni.

When the twisted warlock shambled into their midst, they all stood up, not quite at attention but still with some modicum of respect.

"You have the globes?" the warlock asked one shade, a tall human male named Ratsis.

In response, Ratsis flashed a crooked-toothed smile and reached under the open collar of his shirt to produce a silver chain necklace set with two shadow-filled translucent globes, each the size of a child's fist. In the swirling shadowmists within each globe crawled a spider, small and furry, like a tiny tarantula. Ratsis grinned.

"For the elf woman," Effron reminded him.

"And what of her companion?" Ratsis asked.

"Kill him," Effron replied without hesitation. "He is too dangerous to capture, or to allow to escape. Kill him."

"We are seven," insisted Jermander, another of the group, a fierce tiefling warrior who wore both his pride and his unrelenting anger openly. "They are but two!"

"Eight," Ratsis the spider-keeper quietly corrected. He paused for just a moment, smiling as he rolled the globes of his necklace around, eyes glowing as he viewed his pets, and reconsidered. "Ten."

Jermander's expression showed that he did not appreciate those particular allies, which only drew a laugh from Ratsis.

"Do not underestimate these two enemies, my fighting friend," Ratsis warned.

"Do not underestimate us," Jermander retorted. "We are not fodder, pulled from the Shadowfell for the pleasure of Effron the Twisted, or even Lord Alegni."

Effron matched the warrior's stare, but he did not disagree. These particular shades were not Netherese nobles, perhaps, but neither could they be considered commoners. They were mercenaries of great reputation, the famed Bounty Hirelings of Cavus Dun, and they came at a high price indeed.

"My apologies, Jermander," Effron said with an awkward, twisted bow.

"Capture the elf woman," Ratsis said with great emphasis. "Sheathe your blades." He rolled the spider globes around his fingers again and smiled victoriously. "Be lethal with the drow, gentle with the elf."

The exchange of looks between Jermander and Ratsis revealed more than a little competition between the two, and no shortage of animosity either. Neither of those truths was lost on Effron.

"Do not fail me in killing the drow," the warlock, who also carried the weight of a Netherese noble, warned. "Fail me in capturing Dahlia alive, and you will beg for your death for eternity."

"A threat?" Jermander asked, seeming amused.

"Draygo Quick," Effron reminded him. The warrior lost his bluster at the mention of that truly powerful Shadovar. "A promise."

Effron ended with a hard stare, shifting his gaze from one mercenary to the other, then slowly walked away.

"Get the Shifter," Ratsis said as soon as Effron was gone. The Shifter had been the reason he had corrected Jermander's count when he had insisted that they were eight and not seven.

Jermander stared at him doubtfully.

"The drow's blades will pose challenges and dangers to our capture of Dahlia," Ratsis said. "I don't wish to explain Dahlia's untimely death to the likes of Draygo Quick!"

"I can move him," insisted another shade, a wiry and muscular tiefling wearing few clothes and carrying a short spear.

"As can I," declared another, one of human heritage and Shadovar skin, who was similarly armed and armored only in a fine cloth suit. He stepped up beside the tiefling and both puffed out their slender, but quite muscular, chests, seemingly in practiced unison. On this human, more than on the tiefling, such a pose seemed a jester's parody. With a mop of curly blond hair and cherubic cheeks, he appeared almost childlike, despite his honed muscles.

Ratsis wanted to laugh at these two Brothers of the Gray Mists, an order of monks that had gained some notoriety of late among the Netherese. He wanted to laugh, but he knew better than to do so. For Brothers Parbid and Afafrenfere were particularly zealous and undeniably reckless.

"I had expected that you two would be primary in killing the drow," Ratsis said to appease them, and indeed, the monks both showed the edges of a smile at his compliment. "With your quick movements and deadly fists, I would expect even one of Drizzt Do'Urden's reputation to be overwhelmed."

"We are disciples of the Pointed Step," Parbid, the tiefling, replied, and stamped his spear. "We will do both: move him and then kill him."

Ratsis glanced at Jermander, who was obviously equally amused. Jermander's look showed that their little spat had been left behind, suppressed by the almost-comical puffery of Parbid and Afafrenfere.

"I am the catcher. You are the killer," Ratsis said to Jermander. "What is your choice?"

"An eighth would suit us well," Jermander replied, to the disappointment—and apparent deflation—of the two monks. "I would take no risks here. Not at this time."

"The Shifter will demand three shares!" said Ambergris, another of the band, a dwarf convert to the Shadowfell, part shade but not quite wholly one as of yet. Her real name was Amber Gristle O'Maul, but Ambergris seemed a better fit, for

she surely looked and smelled the part, with long black hair, parts braided, parts not, and a thick and crooked nose. She didn't quite look the part of a Shadovar yet, appearing more like the offspring of a duergar and a Delzoun. She'd only been in the Shadowfell for a little more than a year. But her prowess with her exceptional mace and her divine spellcasting had not gone unnoticed. Despite her lack of credentials among the Shadovar, the Bounty Hunters of Cavus Dun had taken her in and had promised to sponsor her for full admission into the empire—extraordinarily rare for a nonhuman—if she proved herself.

She seemed to understand that as she sat among this group, eagerly rolling her weapon, which she had lovingly named Skullbreaker, in her strong hands. The mace reached nearly four feet in length, its core polished hardwood, handle wrapped in black leather, its weighted end intermittently wrapped with thick rings of black metal. She could deftly wield it with one hand, or could take it up in both and bat the skull from a skeleton out of sight. She carried a small buckler, easily maneuverable so it wouldn't hinder her frequent shifts from one hand to two on the weapon.

"Perhaps you would do well to remain silent," Ratsis answered sternly. Ambergris took it with a shrug; had she supported his position here, no doubt Jermander would have turned on her with equal discipline.

"True enough," the tiefling monk Parbid remarked. "Ambergris thinks herself special because she's one of a thousand among us due to her heritage, and one of ten thousand when you add in her gender. One would think that by now she would have come to understand that her specialness is a matter of curiosity and nothing more."

"Unfair, brother," said the other monk, Afafrenfere. "She fights well and her healing prowess has helped us greatly."

"Won't be helpin' yer devil-blooded partner anytime soon," Ambergris muttered under her breath, but loud enough for all to hear.

"Perhaps she will be of use in interrogating any of her filthy kin we catch along our trails," Parbid answered Afafrenfere.

"The dwarf's point is well taken," Jermander interjected to get things back to the point. "The Shifter will demand three full shares, though her work will be no more grueling, and surely less dangerous, given her ability to escape anyone's grasp, than our own."

"We'll offer her two shares, then," Ratsis calmly replied, and Jermander nodded. "Are we all agreed?" Ratsis asked.

Ambergris stamped her foot, crossed her arms over her chest, and stubbornly shook her head, though of course, she did not have a full vote as she was not fully of the Shadovar. When Ratsis's skeptical expression conveyed exactly that, the dwarf retreated a bit and began fiddling with the string of black pearls she wore around her neck, cursing under her breath.

## CHARON'S CLAW

The two monks stood resolutely and shook their heads with a unified “nay,” countering Ratsis and Jermander, who both voted “aye.”

All eyes turned to the back of the camp, where a broad-shouldered woman and a fat tiefling male sat on stones. The woman sharpened her sword. The tiefling man wrapped new strands of red leather around the handle of his great flail. With every twist of leather, the weapon jerked and the heavy spiked ball, the size of a large man’s head, bobbed at the end of its four-foot chain.

“Ye do what ye need doin’,” the tiefling, who was called simply Bol, replied.

“Two and a half to two, then,” Ambergris said with grin.

But the sword-woman quite unexpectedly chimed in with “Get the Shifter,” as soon as the dwarf had made the claim. All eyes fell on her. It was the first time any of them had heard her speak, and she had been with this hunting band for tendays. They didn’t even know her name, and to a one had referred to her as Horrible, or “Whore-o-Bol” as Ambergris had tagged it, a nickname that hadn’t seemed to bother her, and one that had merely amused the slobbering Bol.

Or maybe it had bothered her, Ratsis mused as he looked from the woman to the dwarf, to recognize some true animosity between them. And that animosity had likely elicited the response.

“Three to two and a half, then,” Jermander said, pulling Ratsis back into the conversation.

“Call it four, then!” Bol added. “If me Horrible’s wanting it, then so be it.”

“So what was to be a seventh-split will be a ninth,” Parbid grumbled.

“Shouldn’t you and your brother be out scouting for Dahlia and the drow, as we agreed?” Ratsis replied. “And if you happen upon them, do feel free to take them, and in that event, you two may split Effron’s gold evenly between you.”

Parbid and Afafrenfere exchanged looks, their expressions both doubtful and intrigued, as if they might just call Ratsis on his bluff.

Jermander, meanwhile, cast a less-than-enthusiastic gaze Ratsis’s way and held the look as the two monks trotted off.

“Let them try,” Ratsis explained. “Then we’ll be back to seventh shares, even considering the expensive services of the Shifter.”

Jermander snorted and didn’t seem overly bothered by that possibility.



Drizt crouched a few steps away from the trunk of the large pine tree, beneath the bending thick branches that had served as his and Dahlia’s shelter for the night. He saw the coating of white between the pine needles, and he stood straighter, pulling apart a pair of the branches. The first snow had indeed fallen that night, coating the ground in glistening white under the rays of the morning sun.

With the light peeking into their natural bedroom, the drow glanced over his shoulder at the sleeping Dahlia. A single ray touched her cheek, but no war woad shimmered there. Dahlia had worn her softer look again that night, after a long and uncomfortable silence had trailed the couple throughout the day on the heels of their earlier argument. Her hair was back in the soft shoulder bob, her face clear and smooth.

It was the look Drizzt far preferred, and Dahlia knew that.

Dahlia knew that.

Was she manipulating him? he wondered yet again. He knew that Dahlia was a calculating woman, a clever warrior, a strategic opponent. But was it possible that she was also *his* opponent? Did she see him as a companion and a friend, or as merely a plaything and a tool for her greater designs?

Drizzt tried to shake such dark thoughts away, but he could not. Standing there at the boughs of the tree, looking back at the beautiful elf, he could not help but be drawn to her. At the same time, though, Drizzt was reminded that he did not really know Dahlia, and that what he did know of her was not so innocent a lifestyle.

Dahlia, after all, had lured Jarlaxle and Athrogate to Gauntlgrym with the intent of freeing the primordial. Even though she had changed from that malignant course in the critical moment, she still had to bear more than a little responsibility for the cataclysm that had devastated the region and buried the city of Neverwinter.

She looked so young lying there in the morning light, and so innocent, almost childlike. Indeed she was young, Drizzt reminded himself. When he was Dahlia's age back in Menzoberranzan, had he even left House Do'Urden for the warrior school of Melee-Magthere?

Still, he knew, Dahlia was in many ways much older than he. She had served in the court of Szass Tam, the archlich of Thay. She had witnessed great battles and had known more lovers than he, surely. She was greatly traveled, and deeply experienced in life.

Drizzt knew better than to allow any condescension to slip into his thoughts as he considered Dahlia. Spirited and dangerous, it would not do for anyone associated with her, friend, lover, or enemy, to underestimate her, in any way. So was she manipulating him with this soft look of hers, the alluring and more innocent cut of her hair and her unblemished face?

The drow smiled as he considered the obvious answer in light of yesterday's events. The hardened Dahlia, braid and woad, had argued with him and even invited him to leave her side. She would take care of Herzgo Alegni herself, she had proclaimed. But that would be no easy task, obviously, for Alegni was within the city, and likely surrounded by powerful allies, including Artemis Entreri.

And as the day had worn on, and Drizzt had remained at her side, though still without committing to join her, Dahlia had morphed into this alluring and gentle creature, less warrior, more lover.

Drizzt looked out at the snowy forest and chuckled at himself. It didn't really matter if Dahlia was trying to manipulate him, he supposed. Wasn't that simply the truth of relationships? Hadn't Bruenor manipulated him and everyone else, facilitating his own "death" after the battle with Akar Kessel that they might abandon Icewind Dale and head out on the road in search of Mithral Hall? And hadn't Drizzt, in truth, manipulated Bruenor into signing the Treaty of Garumn's Gorge?

The drow couldn't help laughing as his memories spun back through the years. He recalled Bruenor's deathbed drama back in Icewind Dale, when the dwarf had played out his greatest desires, so apparently lost to the winds of time. Coughing and sputtering and wheezing and obviously failing, clever Bruenor had shrunk before Drizzt's eyes, as if entering the nether realm of death, until the moment Drizzt had pledged that they would head out and find Mithral Hall. Then Bruenor had hopped up, ready for the road.

Oh, what a fine play that had been . . . but also, of course, a deep manipulation.

That Dahlia was playing some games within the context of their relationship simply wasn't that important, Drizzt told himself. He knew the truth of it, and within that truth crouched the hard fact that he could only be manipulated if he let her. It wasn't simply lust, he knew, though surely Dahlia excited him. His intrigue with the elf went far beyond physical needs. He wanted to understand her. He felt that if he could learn about Dahlia, he would learn much of himself. Her way of looking at the world was foreign to him, a different perspective entirely, and that promised him an expansion of his own viewpoints. Perhaps he was drawn to Dahlia for the same reason he seemed forever drawn to Artemis Entreri—to consider the man, at least, if not to travel beside him. For both of them, Dahlia and Entreri, were possessed of a code of honor, albeit a stilted one in Drizzt's eyes. Neither woke up in the morning with visions of creating chaos and suffering. Dahlia had shown as much with her inability to follow her master's orders and release the primordial.

So, did he want to fix them? Drizzt wondered. Did he, somewhere in his heart, believe that he could redeem Artemis Entreri and guide Dahlia to a brighter light?

He glanced back at Dahlia again, just for a moment. He couldn't deny his hubris. Likely, his desire to bring people out of darkness was part of the equation that had put Artemis Entreri in Drizzt's thoughts so many times over the decades—nearly as often as he had wondered about Wulfgar.

It was much more complicated with Dahlia, he knew. For he was indeed drawn to her in ways he could never be drawn to Entreri or Wulfgar. He couldn't deny it. No matter how many times he might convince himself that he should not be with the dangerous elf, that conviction couldn't hold against the mere sight of her, particularly when she wore her hair and face softly.

He straightened up in surprise as he felt the elf's arm slide over his shoulder and wrap around his neck. Dahlia rested her chin on his other shoulder and kissed him on the ear. "A warm bed before a journey into the cold snow?"

Drizzt smiled. His expression only widened as Dahlia added, "And then we will go and kill him."

Indeed.

He thought of Bruenor on that deathbed in Icewind Dale again and reminded himself that his bond with the deceptive dwarf had lasted more than a hundred years.

Indeed.