



R.A. SALVATORE

GAUNT LG RYM

NEVERWINTER
BOOK
I

COVER ART
TODD LOCKWOOD



The Neverwinter Trilogy, Book I
GAUNTLGRYM

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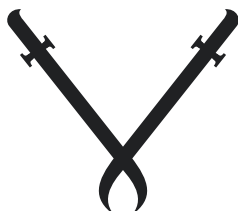
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PROLOGUE

The Year of True Omens
(1409 DR)

A LOT COULD BE SAID OF KING BRUENOR BATTLEHAMMER OF MITHRAL Hall, and many titles could be rightfully bestowed upon him: warrior, diplomat, adventurer, and leader among dwarves, men, and even elves. Bruenor had been instrumental in reshaping the Silver Marches into one of the most peaceful and prosperous regions in all Faerûn. Add “visionary” to his title, fittingly, for what other dwarf might have forged a truce with King Obould of the orc kingdom of Many-Arrows? And that truce had held through the death of Obould and the succession to his son, Urlgen, Obould II.

It was truly a remarkable feat, and one that had secured Bruenor’s place in dwarven legend, though many of the dwarves in Mithral Hall still grumbled about dealing with orcs in any way other than war. In truth, Bruenor was often heard second-guessing himself on the matter, year in and year out. However, in the end, the simple fact remained that not only had King Bruenor reclaimed Mithral Hall for his stout clan, but through his wisdom, he had changed the face of the North.

But of all the titles Bruenor Battlehammer could claim as earned, the ones that had always sat most comfortably on his strong shoulders were those of father and friend. Of the latter, Bruenor knew no peer, and all who called him friend knew without doubt that the dwarf king would gladly throw himself in front of a volley of arrows or a charging umber hulk, without hesitation, without regret, in the service of friendship. But of the former. . . .

Bruenor had never wed, never sired children of his own, but had come to claim two humans as his adoptive children.

Two children since lost to him.

“I tried me best,” the dwarf said to Drizzt Do’Urden, the unlikely drow advisor to the throne of Mithral Hall—on those increasingly rare occasions when Drizzt

was actually present in Mithral Hall. "I teached them as me father teached me."

"No one could ever say different," Drizzt assured him.

The drow rested back in a comfortable chair near the hearth in a small side room of Bruenor's chambers, and took a long look at his oldest friend. Bruenor's great beard was less red, even less orange, as more gray wound among the fiery locks, and his shaggy scalp had receded just a bit. On most days, though, the fire in his gray eyes sparkled as intensely as it had those decades before on the slopes of Kelvin's Cairn in Icewind Dale.

But not that day, and understandably so.

The melancholy so plain in his eyes was not reflected in the dwarf's movements, though. He moved swiftly and surely, rocking in his chair and hopping to his feet to grab another log, which he pitched perfectly onto the fire. It crackled and smoldered in protest and failed to erupt in flames.

"Damn wet wood," the dwarf grumbled. He stomped on the foot-bellows he had built into the hearth, sending a long, steady stream of air rushing across the coals and low-burning logs. He worked diligently at the fire for a long while, adjusting the logs, pumping the bellows, and Drizzt thought the display fitting for Bruenor. For that was how the dwarf did everything, from holding strong the tentative peace with Many-Arrows to keeping his clan operating in efficient harmony. Everything just right, and so too was the fire, at last, and Bruenor settled back in his chair and picked up his great mug of mead.

The king shook his head, his face a mask of regret. "Should o' killed that smelly orc."

Drizzt was all too familiar with the lament that had plagued Bruenor since the day he'd signed the Treaty of Garumn's Gorge.

"No," the drow replied, less than convincing.

Bruenor scoffed at him, somewhat viciously. "Yerself vowed to kill 'im, elf, and ye let him die o' old age, didn't ye?"

"Take care, Bruenor."

"Ah, but he cleaved yer elf friend in half, now, didn't he? And his spearmen bringed down yer dear elf lass, and the winged horse she rode."

Drizzt's stare reflected both pain and simmering anger, a warning to Bruenor that he was crossing the line here.

"But ye let him live!" Bruenor shouted, and he slammed his fist down on the arm of his chair.

“Aye, and you signed the treaty,” Drizzt said, his face and voice calm. He knew he didn’t need to shout those words for them to have a devastating effect.

Bruenor sighed and dropped his face into his palm.

Drizzt let him stew there for a few moments, but finally could take it no longer. “You’re hardly the only one angered by the fact that Obould lived out his years in comfort,” he said. “No one wanted to kill him more than I.”

“But we didn’t.”

“And we did the right thing.”

“Did we, elf?” Bruenor asked in all seriousness. “Now he’s gone and they’re wantin’ to keep on, but are they really? When’s it goin’ to break? When’re the orcs goin’ to be orcs and start another war?”

Drizzt shrugged, for what answer could he give?

“And there ye go, elf!” Bruenor replied to that shrug. “Ye can’t be knowing and I can’t be knowing, and ye telled me to sign the damned treaty, and I signed the damned treaty . . . and we can’t be knowin’!”

“But we are ‘knowing’ that many humans and elves and yes, Bruenor, dwarves, got to live out their lives in peace and prosperity because you had the courage to sign that damned treaty. Because you chose not to fight that next war.”

“Bah!” the dwarf snorted, throwing up his hands. “Been stickin’ in me craw since that day. Damned smell o’ orc. And now they’re tradin’ with Silverymoon and Sundabar, and them damned cowards o’ Nesmé! Should o’ killed them all to death in battle, by Clangeddin.”

Drizzt nodded. He didn’t disagree. How much easier his life would be if life in the North became a never-ending fight! In his heart, Drizzt surely agreed.

But in his head, he knew better. With Obould offering peace, Mithral Hall’s intransigence would have pitted Bruenor’s clan alone against Obould’s tens of thousands, a fight they could never have won. But if Obould’s successor decided to break the treaty, the resulting war would pit all the goodly kingdoms of the Silver Marches against Many-Arrows alone.

A cruel grin widened on the drow’s face, but it fast became a grimace as he considered the many orcs who had become, at least somewhat, friends of his over the last . . . had it been nearly four decades?

“You did the right thing, Bruenor,” he said. “Because you dared to sign that parchment, ten, twenty, fifty thousand lived out their lives that would have been shortened in a bloody war.”

"I cannot do it again," Bruenor replied, shaking his head. "I got no more, elf. Done all I could be doin' here, and not to be doin' it again."

He dipped his mug in the open cask between the chairs and took a great swallow.

"Ye think he's still out there?" Bruenor asked through a foamy beard. "In the cold and snows?"

"If he is," Drizzt replied, "then know that Wulfgar is where he wants to be."

"Aye, but I'm bettin' his old bones're arguing that stubborn head o' his every step!" Bruenor replied, adding a bit of levity that both needed this day.

Drizzt smiled as the dwarf chortled, but one word of Bruenor's quip played a different note: old. He considered the year, and while he, being a long-lived drow, had barely aged, physically, if Wulfgar was indeed alive out there on the tundra of Icewind Dale, the barbarian would be greeting his seventieth year.

The reality of that struck Drizzt profoundly.

"Would ye still love her, elf?" Bruenor asked, referring to his other lost child.

Drizzt looked at him as if he'd been slapped, an all-too-familiar flash of anger crossing his once serene features. "I do still love her."

"If me girl was still with us, I mean," said Bruenor. "She'd be old now, same as Wulfgar, and many'd say she'd be ugly."

"Many say that about you, and said it even when you were young," the drow quipped, deflecting the absurd conversation. It was true enough that Catti-brie would be turning seventy as well, had she not been taken in the Spellplague those twenty-four years before. She would be old for a human, old like Wulfgar, but ugly? Drizzt could never think such a thing of his beloved Catti-brie, for never in his hundred and twelve years of life had the drow seen anyone or anything more beautiful than his wife. The reflection of her in Drizzt's lavender eyes could hold no imperfection, no matter the ravages of time on her human face, no matter the scars of battle, no matter the color of her hair. Catti-brie would forever look to Drizzt as she had when he first came to know he loved her, on a long-ago journey to the far southern city of Calimport when they had gone to rescue Regis.

Regis. Drizzt winced at the memory of the halfling, another dear friend lost in that time of chaos, when the Ghost King had come to Spirit Soaring, laying low one of the most wondrous structures in the world, the portend of a great darkness that had spread across the breadth of Toril.

The drow had once been advised to live his long life in a series of shorter time spans, to dwell in the immediacy of the humans that surrounded him,

then to move on, to find that life, that lust, that love, again. It was good advice, he knew in his heart, but in the quarter of a century since he'd lost Catti-brie, he had come to understand that sometimes advice was easier to hear than it was to embrace.

"She's still with us," Bruenor corrected himself a short while later. He drained his mug and threw it into the hearth, where it shattered into a thousand shards. "Just that damn Jarlaxle thinking like a drow and taking his time, as if the years mean nothing to him."

Drizt started to answer, reflexively moving to calm his friend, but he bit back the response and just stared into the flames. Both he and Bruenor had taxed, had begged Jarlaxle, that most worldly of dark elves, to find Catti-brie and Regis—to find their spirits, at least, for they had watched the spirits of their lost loved ones ride a ghostly unicorn through the stone walls of Mithral Hall on that fateful morning. The goddess Mielikki had taken the pair, Drizt believed, but surely she could not be so cruel as to keep them. But perhaps even Mielikki could not rob Kelemvor, Lord of the Dead, of his hard-won prize.

Drizt thought back to that terrible morning, as if it had been only the day before. He had awakened to Bruenor's shouts, after a sweet night of lovemaking with his wife, who had seemed returned to him from the depths of her confusing affliction.

And there, that terrible morning, she lay beside him, cold to his touch.

"Break the truce," Drizt muttered, thinking of the new king of Many-Arrows, an orc not nearly as intelligent and far-seeing as his father.

Drizt's hand reflexively went to his hip, though he wasn't wearing his scimitars. He wanted to feel the weight of those deadly blades in his grip once more. The thought of battle, of the stench of death, even of his own death, didn't trouble him. Not that morning. Not with images of Catti-brie and Regis floating all around him, taunting him in his helplessness.



"I don't like coming here," the orc woman remarked as she handed over the herb bag. She wasn't tall for an orc, but still she towered over her diminutive counterpart.

"We are at peace, Jessa," Nanfoodle the gnome replied. He pulled open the bag and produced one of the roots, bringing it up under his long nose and

taking a deep inhale of it. “Ah, the sweet mandragora,” he said. “Just enough can take your pain.”

“And your painful thoughts,” the orc said. “And make of you a fool . . . like a dwarf swimming in a pool of mead, thinking to drink himself to dry ground.”

“Only five?” Nanfoodle asked, sifting through the large pouch.

“The other plants are full in bloom,” Jessa replied. “Only five, you say! I expected to find none, or one . . . *hoped* to find two, and said a prayer to Gruumsh for a third.”

Nanfoodle looked up from the pouch, but not at the orc, his absent gaze drifted off into the distance, and his mind whirled behind it. “Five?” he mused and glanced at his beakers and coils. He tapped a bony finger to his small, pointy white beard, and after a few moments of screwing up his tiny round face this way and that, he decided, “Five will finish the task.”

“Finish?” Jessa echoed. “Then you will dare to do it?”

Nanfoodle looked at her as if she were being ridiculous. “Well along the way,” he assured her.

A wicked little grin curled Jessa’s lips up so high they seemed to catch the twisting strands of yellow hair, a single bouncing curl to either side, that framed her flat, round face and piggish nose. Her light brown eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Do you have to enjoy it so?” the gnome scolded.

But Jessa twirled aside with a laugh, immune to his words. “I enjoy excitement,” the young priestess explained. “Life is so boring, after all.” She spun to a stop and pointed to the herb pouch, still held by Nanfoodle. “And so do you, obviously.”

The gnome looked down at the potentially poisonous roots. “I have no choice in the matter.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Should I be?”

“I am,” Jessa said, though her blunt tone made it seem more a welcomed declaration than an admission. She nodded somberly in deference to the gnome. “Long live the king,” she said as she curtsied. Then she departed, taking care to pick her way back to the embassy of the Kingdom of Many-Arrows without drawing any more than the usual attention afforded an orc walking the corridors of Mithral Hall.

Nanfoodle took up the roots and moved to his jars and coils, set on a wide bench at the side of his laboratory. He took note of himself in the mirror that

hung on the wall behind the bench, and even struck a pose, thinking that he looked quite distinguished in his middle age—which of course meant that he was well past middle age! Most of his hair was gone, except for thick white clumps above his large ears, but he took care to keep those neatly trimmed, like his pointy beard and thin mustache, and to keep the rest of his large noggin cleanly shaved. Well, except for his eyebrows, he thought with a chuckle as he noted that some of the hairs there had grown so long that their curl could be clearly noted.

Nanfoodle took up a pair of spectacles and pinched them onto his nose as he finally pulled himself from the mirror. He tilted his head back to get a better viewing angle through the small round magnifiers as he carefully adjusted the height of the oiled wick.

The heat had to be just right, he reminded himself, for him to extract the right amount of crystal poison.

He had to be precise, but in looking at the hourglass at the end of the bench, he realized that he had to be quick, as well.

King Bruenor's mug awaited.



Thibbledorf Pwent wasn't wearing his ridged, creased, and spiked armor, one of the few occasions that anyone had ever seen the dwarf without it. But he wasn't wearing it for exactly that reason: He didn't want anyone to recognize him, or more specifically, to hear him.

He skulked in the shadows at the far end of a rough corridor, behind a pile of kegs, with Nanfoodle's door in sight.

The battlerager gnashed his teeth to hold back the stream of curses he wanted to mutter when Jessa Dribble-Obould entered that chamber, first glancing up and down the corridor to make sure no one was watching her.

"Orcs in Mithral Hall," Pwent mouthed quietly, and he shook his dirty, hairy head and spat on the floor. How Pwent had screeched in protest when the decision had been made to grant the Kingdom of Many-Arrows an embassy in the dwarven halls! Oh, it was a limited embassy, of course—no more than four orcs were allowed into Mithral Hall at any given time, and those four were not allowed unfettered access. A host of dwarf guards, often Pwent's own battleragers, were always available to escort their "guests."

But this slippery little priestess had gotten around that rule, so it seemed, and Pwent had expected as much.

He thought about going over and kicking in the door, catching the rat orc openly that he might have her expelled from Mithral Hall once and for all, but even as he started to rise up, some rare insight told him to exercise patience. Despite himself and his bubbling outrage, Thibbledorf Pwent remained silent, and within a few moments Jessa reappeared in the corridor, looked both ways, and scampered off the way she had come.

“What’s that about, gnome?” Pwent whispered, for none of it made any sense.

Nanfoodle was no enemy of Mithral Hall, of course, and had proven himself a steadfast ally since the earliest days of his arrival some forty years before. Battlehammer dwarves still talked about Nanfoodle’s “Moment of Elminster,” when the gnome had used some ingenious piping to fill caverns with explosive gas that had then blown a mountain ridge, and the enemy giants atop it, to rubble.

But then why was this friend of the hall cavorting with an orc priestess in such secrecy? Nanfoodle could have called for Jessa through the proper channels, through Pwent himself, and had her escorted to his door in short order.

Pwent spent a long while mulling that over, so long, in fact, that Nanfoodle eventually appeared in the corridor and hustled away. Only then did the startled battlerager realize that it was time for the memorial celebration.

“By Moradin’s stony arse,” Pwent muttered, pulling himself up from behind the kegs.

He meant to go straightaway to Bruenor’s hall, but he paused at Nanfoodle’s door and glanced around, much as Jessa had done, then pushed his way in.

Nothing seemed amiss. Some white liquid in the beakers on one workbench bubbled from the residual heat of recently doused braziers, but everything else seemed perfectly out of place—exactly the way the scatter-brained Nanfoodle always kept it.

“Hmm,” Pwent mumbled and wandered about the chamber, trying to find some clues—maybe a cleared area where Nanfoodle and Jessa might have—

No, Pwent couldn’t even let his mind take that tack.

“Bah, ye’re a fool, Thibbledorf Pwent, and so’s yer brother, if ye had a brother!” the dwarf scolded himself.

He started to leave, suddenly feeling like quite the terrible friend for even spying on Nanfoodle in such a way, when he noted something under the gnome’s

desk: a bedroll. Pwent's mind went back to that dark place, conjuring a tryst between the gnome and the orc, but he shook that thought away as soon as he realized that the bedroll was tightly tied, and had been for some time. And behind it was a backpack with all manner of gear, from bandages to a climbing pick, tied around it.

"Plannin' a trip to Many-Arrows, little one?" Pwent asked aloud.

He stood up and shrugged, considering the likely options. Pwent hoped that Nanfoodle would be smart enough to take along some guards if that was the case. King Bruenor had handled the transition of power from Obould to his son with great tact and had kept the tensions low enough, but orcs were orcs, after all, and no one really knew how trustworthy this son of Obould might turn out to be, or even if he had the charisma and sheer power to keep his wild minions in line, as had his mighty father.

Pwent decided he would talk with Nanfoodle next time he had the gnome alone, friend to friend, but he had put all of it out of his mind by the time he slipped back out into the hallway. He was running late for a most important celebration, and knew that King Bruenor wouldn't be quick to forgive such tardiness.



"... twenty-five years," Bruenor was saying when Thibbledorf Pwent joined the gathering in the small audience chamber. Only a few select guests were in there: Drizzt, of course; Cordio, the First Priest of the Hall; Nanfoodle; and old Banak Brawnnavil in his wheeled chair, along with his son Connerad, who was growing into a fine young dwarf. Connerad had even been training with Pwent's Gutbusters, and had more than held his own against much more seasoned warriors. Several other dwarves gathered about the king.

"I miss ye, me girl, and me friend, Regis, and know that if I live another hunnerd years, I'll spend not a day not thinking of ye," the dwarf king said. He lifted his mug and drained it, and the others did the same. As he lowered the mug, Bruenor fixed his gaze on Pwent.

"Apologies, me king," the battlerager said. "Did I miss all the drink, then?"

"Just the first toast," Nanfoodle assured him, and the gnome hustled about, gathering up all the mugs before moving to the keg at the side of the room. "Help me," he bade Pwent.

Nanfoodle filled the mugs and Thibbledorf Pwent delivered them. Pwent thought it curious that the gnome didn't fill and hand over Bruenor's personal mug with the first group. Certainly no one could miss that mug among the others. It was a large flagon with the foaming-mug shield of Clan Battlehammer stamped on its side and a handle that sported horns at its top, into which the holder could settle his thumb. One of those horns, like Bruenor's own helmet, had been broken short. In a show of solidarity and promise of unending friendship to Mithral Hall, the mug had been a gift years before from the dwarves of Citadel Adbar to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Garumn's Gorge. No one would dare drink from that mug except for Bruenor himself, Pwent knew, and so he understood that Nanfoodle meant to deliver Bruenor's mead personally, and last. He didn't give it much thought, honestly, but it just struck him as curious that the gnome had pointedly not given that mug to Pwent to deliver.



Had he been paying close attention to the gnome, Pwent might have noted something else that would have surely raised his bushy eyebrows. The gnome filled his own mug first then turned his back more squarely to the gathered group, who were talking about old times with Catti-brie and Regis and paying him no heed anyway. From a secret pouch on his belt, the gnome produced a tiny vial. He eased the cork off so it wouldn't make a popping sound, glanced back to the group, and poured the crystal contents of the vial into Bruenor's decorated grail.

He gave it just a moment to settle, then nodded his approval and rejoined the celebration.

"May I offer a toast to my lady Shoudra?" the gnome asked, referring to the emissary of Mirabar whom he had accompanied to Mithral Hall those decades ago, and who had been killed by Obould himself in that terrible war. "Old wounds healed," the gnome said, lifting his mug in toast.

"Aye, to Shoudra and to all them what fell defending the halls of Clan Battlehammer," Bruenor agreed, and he took a deep draw on his honey mead.

Nanfoodle nodded and smiled, and hoped that Bruenor wouldn't taste the somewhat bitter poison.



“O woe to Mithral Hall, and let the calls go forth to all the lords, kings, and queens of the Silver Marches, that King Bruenor has fallen ill this night!” the criers yelled throughout the dwarven compound just a few hours after the memorial celebration.

Filled were the chapels of the hall, and of all the towns of the North when word arrived, for King Bruenor was much beloved, and his strong voice had supported so much of the good changes that had come to the Silver Marches. Worries of war with the Kingdom of Many-Arrows filled every conversation, of course, at the prospect of the loss of both the signatories of the Treaty of Garumn’s Gorge.

The vigil in Mithral Hall was solemn, but not morbid. Bruenor had lived a good, long life, after all, and had surrounded himself by dwarves of tremendous character. The clan was the thing, and the clan would survive, and thrive, long beyond the days of great King Bruenor.

But there were indeed many tears whenever one of Cordio’s priests announced that the king lay gravely ill, and Moradin had not answered their prayers.

“We cannot help him,” Cordio announced to Drizzt and a few others on the third night of Bruenor’s fretful sleep. “He has fallen beyond us.”

He flashed a quiet, disapproving smirk Drizzt’s way, but the drow remained steadfast and solid.

“Ah, me king,” Pwent moaned.

“Woe to Mithral Hall,” said Banak Brawnnavil.

“Not so,” Drizzt replied. “Bruenor has not been derelict in his responsibilities to the hall. His throne will be well filled.”

“Ye talk like he’s dead already, ye durned elf!” Pwent scolded.

Drizzt had no answer against that, so he merely nodded an apology to the battlerager.

They went in and sat by Bruenor’s bed. Drizzt held his friend’s hand, and just before dawn, King Bruenor breathed his last.

“The king is dead, long live the king,” Drizzt said, turning to Banak.

“So begins the reign of Banak Brawnnavil, Eleventh King of Mithral Hall,” said Cordio.

“I be humbled, priest,” old Banak replied, his gaze low, his heart heavy. Behind his chair, his son patted him on the shoulder. “If half the king as Bruenor I be, then all the world’ll know me reign as a goodly one—nay, a great one.”

Thibbledorf Pwent stumbled over and fell to one knee before Banak. “Me . . . me life for ye, me . . . me king,” he stammered and stuttered, hardly getting the words out.

“Blessed be me court,” Banak replied, patting Thibbledorf’s hairy head.

The tough battlerager threw his forearm across his eyes, turned back, and fell over Bruenor to hug him tightly, then he tumbled back with a great wail and stumbled from the room.

Bruenor’s tomb was built right beside those of Catti-brie and Regis, and it was the grandest mausoleum ever constructed in the ancient dwarven clanhold. One after another, the elders of the Clan Battlehammer came forth to give a long and rousing recounting of the many exploits of the long-lived and mighty King Bruenor, who had taken his people from the darkness of the ruined halls to a new home in Icewind Dale, and who had personally rediscovered their ancient home, and had then reclaimed it for the clan. In more tentative voices, they spoke of the diplomat Bruenor, who had so dramatically altered the landscape of the Silver Marches.

On and on it went, through the day and night, for three full days, one tribute after another, all of them ending with a sincere toast to a most worthy successor, the great Banak Brawnnavil, who now formally added Battlehammer to his name: King Banak Brawnnavil Battlehammer.

Emissaries came from every surrounding kingdom, and even the orcs of Many-Arrows had their say, the Priestess Jessa Dribble-Obould offering a lengthy eulogy that was nothing but complimentary to that most remarkable king, and expressing the hopes of her people that King Banak would be equally wise and well-tempered, and that Mithral Hall would prosper under his leadership. Truly there was nothing controversial, or anything but correct, in the young orc’s words, but still, more than a few of the thousands of dwarves listening to her grumbled and spat, a poignant reminder to Banak and all the other leaders that Bruenor’s work healing the orc-dwarf divide was far from completed.

Exhausted, worn out, drained emotionally and physically, Drizzt, Nanfoodle, Cordio, Pwent, and Connerad fell into chairs around the hearth that had been Bruenor’s favorite spot. They offered a few more toasts to their friend and launched into private discussions of the many good and heroic memories they had shared with the remarkable dwarf.

Pwent had the most stories to tell, all exaggerated, of course, but surprisingly, Drizzt Do’Urden said little.

“I must apologize to your father,” Nanfoodle said to Connerad.

“Apologize? Nay, gnome, he values your counsel as much as any other dwarf,” the young Prince of Mithral Hall replied.

“And so I must apologize to him,” said Nanfoodle, and all in the room were listening. “I came here with Lady Shoudra, never meaning to stay, and yet I find that decades have passed. I’m not a young one anymore—in a month I’ll be celebrating my sixty-fifth year.”

“Hear hear,” Cordio interrupted, never missing a chance to toast, and they all drank to Nanfoodle’s continuing health.

“Thank you all,” Nanfoodle said after the drink. “You’ve been as a family to me, to be sure, and my half-life here’s been no less a half than the years before. Or the years after, I am sure.”

“What are ye saying, little one?” asked Cordio.

“I’ve another family,” the gnome replied. “One I’ve seen only in short visits, lo these last thirty-some years. It’s time for me to go, I fear. I wish to spend my last years in my old home in Mirabar.”

Those words seemed to suck all the noise from the room, as all sat in stunned silence.

“Ye’ll owe me dad no apology, Nanfoodle of Mirabar,” Connerad eventually assured the gnome, and he lifted his mug in another toast. “Mithral Hall’ll ne’er forget the help of great Nanfoodle!”

They all shared in that toast, heartily so, but something struck Thibbledorf Pwent as curious then, though, in his exhausted and overwhelmed state, he couldn’t sort it out.

Not quite yet.



Huffing and puffing, the gnome wriggled and squirmed his way through a tumble of boulders, great smooth gray stones lying about as if piled by a catapult crew of titans. Nanfoodle knew the area well, though—indeed, he had set the place for the rendezvous—and so he was not surprised when he pushed through a tightly twisting path between a trio of stones to find Jessa sitting on a smaller stone in a clearing, her midday meal spread on a blanket before her.

“You need longer legs,” the orc greeted.

“I need to be thirty years younger,” Nanfoodle replied. He let his heavy pack slide off his shoulders and took a seat on a stone opposite Jessa, reaching for a bowl of stew she’d set out for him.

“It’s done? You’re certain?” Jessa asked.

“Three days of mourning for the dead king . . . three and no more—they haven’t the time. So Banak is king at long last, a title he’s long deserved.”

“He steps into the boots of a giant.”

Nanfoodle waved the thought away. “The best work of King Bruenor was to ensure the orderliness of Mithral Hall. Banak will not falter, and even if he did, there are many wise voices around him.” He paused and looked at the orc priestess more closely. Her gaze had drifted to the north, toward the still-young kingdom of her people. “King Banak will continue the work, as Obould II will honor the desires and vision of his predecessor,” Nanfoodle assured her.

Jessa looked at him curiously, even incredulously. “You’re so calm,” she said. “You spend too much of your life in your books and scrolls, and not nearly enough time looking into the faces of those around you.”

Nanfoodle looked at her with a curious expression.

“How can you be so calm?” Jessa asked. “Don’t you realize what you’ve just done?”

“I did only as I was ordered to do,” Nanfoodle protested, not catching on to the gravity in her voice.

Jessa started to scold him again, meaning to school him on the weight of feelings, to remind him that not all the world could be described by logical theorems, that other factors had to be considered, but a commotion to the side, the scraping of metal on stone, stole her words.

“What?” Nanfoodle, slurping his stew, asked as she rose to her feet.

“What was ye ordered to do?” came the gruff voice of Thibbledorf Pwent, and Nanfoodle spun around just as the battlerager, arrayed in full armor, squeezed out from between the boulders, metal ridges screeching against the stone. “Aye, and be sure that meself’s wonderin’ who it was what’s orderin’ ye!” He ended by punching one metal-gloved fist into the other. “And don’t be doubtin’ that I’m meanin’ to find out, ye little rat.”

He advanced and Nanfoodle retreated, dropping the bowl of stew to the ground.

“Ye got nowhere to run, neither of ye,” Pwent assured them as he continued his advance. “Me legs’re long enough to chase ye, and me anger’s more’n enough to catch ye!”

“What is this?” Jessa demanded, but Pwent fixed her with a hateful glare.

“Ye’re still alive only because ye might have something I need to hear,” the vicious dwarf explained. “And if ye’re not yapping words that make me smile, know that ye’ll be finding a seat.” As he finished, he pointed at the large spike protruding from the top of his helm. And Jessa knew full well that more than one orc had shuddered through its death throes impaled on that spike.

“Pwent, no!” Nanfoodle yelped, holding his hands up before him, motioning the dwarf to stop his steady approach. “You don’t understand.”

“Oh, I’m knowin’ more than ye think I’m knowin’,” the battlerager promised. “Been in yer workshop, gnome.”

Nanfoodle held up his hands. “I told King Banak that I would be leaving.”

“Ye was leaving afore King Bruenor died,” Pwent accused. “Ye had yer bag all packed for the road.”

“Well, yes, I have been considering it for a—”

“All packed up and tucked right under the bench of *poison* ye brewed for me king!” Pwent yelled, and he leaped forward at Nanfoodle, who was nimble enough to skitter around the side of another stone, just out of Pwent’s murderous grasp.

“Pwent, no!” Nanfoodle yelled.

Jessa moved to intervene, but Pwent turned on her, balling his fists, which brought forth the retractable hand spikes from their sheaths on the backs of his gloves. “How much did ye pay the rat, ye dog’s arse-end?” he demanded.

Jessa kept retreating, but when her back came against a stone, when she ran out of room, the orc’s demeanor changed immediately, and she snarled right back at Pwent as she drew forth a slender iron wand. “One more step. . . .” she warned, taking aim.

“Pwent, no! Jessa, no!” Nanfoodle yelped.

“Got a big burst o’ magic in that puny wand, do ye?” Pwent asked, unconcerned. “Good for ye, then. It’ll just make me angrier, which’ll make me hit ye all the harder!”

On he came, or started to. Jessa began her incantation, aiming her explosive wand at the dwarf’s dirty face, but then both paused and Nanfoodle’s next shout caught in his throat as the sound of sweet bells filled the air, joyously tinkling and ringing.

“Oh, but now ye’re goin’ to get yers,” Pwent said with a sly grin, for he knew those bells. Everyone in Mithral Hall knew the bells of Drizzt Do’Urden’s magical unicorn.

Slender and graceful, but with lines of powerful muscles rippling along his shimmering white coat, ivory horn tipped with a golden point, blue eyes piercing the daylight as if mocking the sun itself, bell-covered barding announcing the arrival in joyous notes, Andahar trotted up to the edge of the boulder tumble and stomped the ground with his mighty hoof.

“Good ye come, elf!” Pwent yelled to Drizzt, who sat staring at him with his jaw hanging open. “Was just about to put me fist into—”

How Thibbledorf Pwent jumped back when he turned to regard Jessa and found himself confronted by six hundred pounds of snarling black panther!

And how he jumped again when he caught his balance, just in time to see Bruenor Battlehammer hop down from his seat on the unicorn just behind Drizzt.

“What in the Nine Hells?” Bruenor demanded, looking to Nanfoodle.

The little gnome could only shrug helplessly in reply.

“Me . . . king?” Pwent stammered. “Me king! Can it be me king? *Me king!*”

“Oh, by the pinch o’ Moradin’s bum,” Bruenor lamented. “What’re ye doing out here, ye durned fool? Ye’re supposed to be by King Banak’s side.”

“Not to be *King* Banak,” Pwent protested. “Not with King *Bruenor* alive and breathin’!”

Bruenor stormed up to the battlerager and put his nose right against Pwent’s. “Now ye hear me good, dwarf, and don’t ye never make that mistake again. King Bruenor ain’t no more. King Bruenor’s for the ages, and King Banak’s got Mithral Hall!”

“But . . . but . . . but me king,” Pwent replied. “But ye’re not dead!”

Bruenor sighed.

Behind him, Drizzt lifted his leg over the saddle and gracefully slid down to the ground. He patted Andahar’s strong neck, then lifted a unicorn-fashioned charm hanging on a silver chain around his neck and gently blew into the hollow horn, releasing the steed from his call.

Andahar rose up on his hind legs, front hoofs slashing the air, and whinnied loudly then thundered away. With each stride, the horse somehow seemed as if he had covered a tremendous amount of ground, for he became half his size with a single stride, and half again with the next, and so on, until he was seen no more, though the air in his wake rippled with waves of magical energy.

By that time, Pwent had composed himself somewhat, and he stood strong before Bruenor, hands on hips. “Ye was dead, me king,” he declared. “I *seen* ye dead, I *smelled* ye dead. Ye *was* dead.”

“I had to be dead,” Bruenor replied, and he, too, squared up and put his hands on his hips. Once more pressing his nose against Pwent’s, he added very slowly and deliberately, “So I could get meself gone.”

“Gone?” Pwent echoed, and he looked to Drizzt, who offered no hint, just a grin that showed he was enjoying the spectacle more than he should. Then Pwent looked to Nanfoodle, who merely shrugged. And he looked past the panther, Guenhwyvar, to Jessa, who laughed at him teasingly and waved her wand.

“Oh, but yer thick skull’s making Dumathoin’s task a bit easier, ain’t it?” Bruenor scolded, referring to the dwarf god known more commonly as the Keeper of Secrets under the Mountain.

Pwent scoffed, for the oft-heard remark was a rather impolite way of one dwarf calling another dwarf dumb.

“Ye was dead,” the battlerager said.

“Aye, and ’twas the little one there what killed me.”

“The poison,” Nanfoodle explained. “Deadly, yes, but not in correct doses. As I used it, it just made Bruenor look dead, quite dead, to all but the cleverest priests—and those priests knew what we were doing.”

“So ye could run away?” Pwent asked Bruenor as it started to come clear.

“So I could give Banak the throne proper, and not have him stand as just a steward, with all the clan waiting for me return. Because there won’t be a return. Been done many the time before, Pwent. Suren ’tis a secret among the dwarf kings, a way to find the road to finish yer days when ye’ve done all the ruling ye might do. Me great-great-great-grandfather did the same, and it’s been done in Adbar, too, by two kings I know tell of. And there’re more, don’t ye doubt, or I’m a bearded gnome.”

“Ye’ve run from the hall?”

“Just said as much.”

“Forevermore?”

“Ain’t so long a time for an old dwarf like meself.”

“Ye runned away. Ye runned away and ye didn’t tell me?” Pwent asked. He was trembling.

Bruenor glanced back at Drizzt. When he heard the crash of Pwent’s breastplate hitting the ground, he turned back.

“Ye telled a stinkin’ orc, but ye didn’t tell yer Gutbuster?” Pwent demanded. He pulled off one gauntlet and dropped it to the ground, then the other, then reached down and began unfastening his spiked greaves.

“Ye’d do that to them what loved ye? Ye’d make us all cry for ye? Ye’d break our hearts? Me king!”

Bruenor’s face grew tight, but he had no answer.

“All me life for me king,” Pwent muttered.

“I ain’t yer king no more,” said Bruenor.

“Aye, that’s what I be thinkin’,” said Pwent, and he put his fist into Bruenor’s eye. The orange-bearded dwarf staggered backward, his one-horned helm falling from his head, his many-notched axe dropping to the ground under the severe weight of the blow.

Pwent unbuckled his helmet and pulled it from his head. He had just started throwing it aside when Bruenor hit him with a flying tackle, driving him backward and to the ground, and over and over they rolled, flailing and punching.

“Been wanting to do this for a hunnerd years!” Pwent cried, his voice muffled at the end as Bruenor shoved his hand into his mouth.

“Aye, and I been wantin’ to give ye the chance!” Bruenor shouted back, his voice rising several octaves at the end of his claim, when Pwent bit down hard.

“Drizzt!” Nanfoodle yelled. “Stop them!”

“No, don’t!” Jessa cried, clapping in glee.

Drizzt’s expression told the gnome in no uncertain terms that he had no intention of jumping in between that pile of dwarven fury. He crossed his arms over his chest, leaned back against a tall stone, and truly seemed more amused than concerned.

Around and around went the flailing duo, a stream of curses coming from each, interrupted only by the occasional grunt as one or the other landed a heavy blow.

“Bah, but ye’re the son of an orc!” Bruenor yelled.

“Bah, but I ain’t yer smelly son, ye damned orc!” Pwent yelled back.

As it happened, they rolled around just then, coming apart just enough to look straight at Jessa, her arms crossed, glaring at them from on high.

“Err . . . goblin,” both corrected together as they came to their feet side by side. Both shrugged a half-hearted apology Jessa’s way, and they went right back into it, wrestling and punching with abandon. They stumbled out of the boulder tumble and across a small patch of grass to the top of a small bluff,

and there Bruenor gained a slight advantage, managing to pull Pwent's arm behind his back. The battlerager let out a shriek as he looked down the other side of the bluff.

"And I been wanting ye to take a bath all them hunnerd years!" Bruenor declared.

He bulled Pwent down the hill into a short run, then threw the dwarf and flew after him right into the midst of a cold, clear mountain stream.

Pwent hopped up, and anyone watching would have thought the poor frantic dwarf had landed face down in acid. He stood in the stream shaking wildly, trying to get the water off. But the ploy had worked at least. He had no more fight left in him.

"Why'd ye do that, me king?" a heartbroken Pwent all but whispered.

"Because ye smell, and I ain't yer king," Bruenor replied, splashing his way to the bank.

"Why?" Pwent asked, his voice so full of confusion and pain that Bruenor stopped short, even though he was still in the cold water, and turned back to regard his loyal battlerager.

"Why?" Thibbledorf Pwent asked again.

Bruenor looked up at the other three—four, counting Guenhwyvar—who had come to the top of the bluff to watch. With a great sigh, the dead King of Mithral Hall turned back to his loyal battlerager and held out his hand.

"Was the only way," Bruenor explained as he and Pwent started up the bluff. "Only fair way to Banak."

"Banak didn't need to be king," said Pwent.

"Aye, but I couldn't be king anymore. I'm done with it, me friend."

That last word gave them both pause, and as the implications of it truly settled on both their shoulders, they each draped an arm across the other's strong shoulders and walked together up the hill.

"Been too long with me bum in a throne," Bruenor explained as they made their way past the others and back toward the boulder tumble. "Not for knowing how many years I got left, but there's things I'm wanting to find, and I won't be finding 'em in Mithral Hall."

"Yer girl and the halfling runt?" Pwent reasoned.

"Ah, but don't ye make me cry," said Bruenor. "And Moradin willing, I'll be doing that one day, if not in this life, then in his great halls. But no, there's more."

"What more?"

Bruenor put his hands on his hips again and looked out across the wide lands to the west, bordered by the towering mountains in the north and the still-impressive foothills in the south.

“Gauntlgrym’s me hope,” said Bruenor. “But know that just the open road and the wind in me face’ll do.”

“So ye’re going? Ye’re going forever, not to return to the hall?”

“I am,” Bruenor declared. “Know that I am, and not to return. Ever. The hall’s Banak’s now, and I can’t be twisting that. As far as me kin—our kin—are forever to know, as far as all the kings o’ the Silver Marches are forever to know, King Bruenor Battlehammer died on the fifth day of the sixth month of the Year of True Omens. So it be.”

“And ye didn’t tell me,” said Pwent. “Ye telled th’elf, ye telled the gnome, ye telled a stinkin’ orc, but ye didn’t tell me.”

“I telled them that’s going with me,” Bruenor explained. “And none in the hall’re knowing, except Cordio, and I needed him so them priests didn’t figure it out. And he’s known to keep his trap shut, don’t ye doubt.”

“But ye didn’t trust yer Pwent.”

“Ye didn’t need to know. Better for yerself!”

“To see me king, me friend, put under the stones?”

Bruenor sighed and had no answer. “Well I’m trusting ye now, as ye gived me no choice. Ye serve Banak now, but know that telling him is doing no favor to any in the hall.”

Pwent resolutely shook his head through the last half of Bruenor’s words. “I served King Bruenor, me *friend* Bruenor,” he said. “All me life for me king and me friend.”

That caught Bruenor off his guard. He looked to Drizzt, who shrugged and smiled; then to Nanfoodle, who nodded eagerly; then to Jessa, who answered, “Only if ye promise to brawl with each other now and again. I do so love the sight of dwarves beating the beer-sweat out of each other!”

“Bah!” Bruenor snorted.

“Now where, me ki—me friend?” Pwent asked.

“To the west,” said Bruenor. “Far to the west. Forever to the west.”