



HE'S LOOKING FOR A FEW GOOD DRACONIANS.

KANG'S COMMAND

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The big bozak draconian had traveled far that day. The sun had set long ago. The two moons, one red and one silver, had played a game of tag with the clouds in the night sky. Now the game was over and the clouds had won. The bozak could see in the darkness, see the warmth that living things radiated, but rocks aren't warm and he'd just stubbed his big toe on a large one. Most landmarks—such as mountains—aren't warm either, and he could no longer tell whether he was headed in the right direction. He began to look for a place to rest his sore feet and weary body.

Having figured that the best he could possibly find would be some moldy old cave, he was pleased beyond measure to stumble across a structure with four walls and a roof. No lights shone from the windows. No smoke rose from the chimney. No dog came dashing out, barking frantically. The yard was overgrown with weeds. The bozak—his name was Kang—concluded that the house was abandoned.

The time was early summer. The War of the Lance would begin later that year in the autumn months, but for now the world was at peace, or so it was thought. Kang knew better. The armies of the Dark Queen had been formed and were now moving slowly and stealthily into position, to be ready to strike when Her Dark Majesty gave the order. Draconians were as yet unknown to most of the world's inhabitants and they had orders to keep it that way. Any human, elf, dwarf, or kender who stumbled upon them was immediately and permanently silenced.

No one needed his throat cut this night. Kang found the house abandoned, as he had expected. A couple of rotting human corpses lay across the door stoop, each body with enough goblin arrows sticking out the back that they might have been mistaken for porcupines. Kang kicked the bodies away from the door and entered the house.

The place stank of goblin. Snout wrinkling in disgust—the draconian had little use for his allies—Kang crept through an outer room littered with broken furniture and goblin refuse. In a back room, he found what he was searching for—a bed. He counted himself fortunate that the fool gobbos hadn't decided to break the frame up for kindling.

Kang stretched himself out. The bed was short for his immense height. His feet and most of his lower legs hung over the end, but it beat sleeping on the ground. And it really beat wondering whether his slumbers would be interrupted by a cave's original dweller, as had happened to him two nights earlier when an irate bugbear had taken exception to Kang's presence in her lair.

Ordinarily Kang would have prayed to the Dark Queen before he slept, asked her to grant him the magic that was her gift to bozak draconians. But tonight he was just too damn tired. Muttering an apology to Her Dark Majesty, he removed the battleaxe from its harness and placed it on the floor near his hand. He closed his eyes, sneezed, cursed goblins for being filthy little bastards, and was fast asleep.

"DAMN, SLITH! This place stinks to the Abyss and back!"

"Quit belly-aching, Gloth. You, too, Fulkth. We're not going to set up housekeeping in this dump."

"Then why are we here?"

"Yeah, Slith, what's going on? I was on watch last night. I want to get some sleep."

"Just shut up, the lot of you. I know for a fact you slept on watch, Dremon, so stop whining. I needed someplace we could talk without interruption from some busybody officer."

"Something up, Slith?"

"Yeah, what's up, Slith?"

"If you'll shut your snouts for a minute, I'll tell you!"

Kang was dreaming of the hatching room. The dreams were not pleasant ones. Draconians were bred from the eggs of metallic dragons, eggs that had been stolen, the young inside destroyed by evil magic, changed into the likes of Kang. When the baby draconians were hatched, hundreds from a single egg, they had been placed in a cavernous room with others of their kind, forced to fight over hunks of raw meat, forced to fight to survive. Kang had fought. He'd fought well, and he'd been rewarded. He was alive.

Kang opened one eye. He realized now that his dream of being locked inside a room with other draconians had been more reality than dream. The draconians he was hearing weren't with him back in that blood-slimed hatching room. They were only a few yards from where he lay. When he figured that out, he remembered where he was—in an abandoned house, a house that was apparently not as abandoned as he'd previously thought.

Kang held perfectly still. The memories of the hatching room were vivid. Those were fellow draconians out there, but that didn't mean that they would be overjoyed to see a brother. He cursed himself for having neglected his prayers. He should have known his vengeful Queen wouldn't let him get away with dereliction of duty. He continued to listen, all the while slowly moving his hand to grasp the handle of the battleaxe.

"First things first, though," the draconian called Slith was saying. "We break out the jug." A pause, then, in a tone of exasperation, "All right, Gloth, what's the matter? You brought the damn jug, didn't you?"

"Yeah, Slith, it's right here."

"Slith," Kang repeated the name. He was now wide awake. *Slith, is it? I was on my way to meet a draconian called Slith. Looks like I found him sooner than I expected.*

"You numbskull!" Slith was saying. "It's empty! What happened? You forget to put the cork in?"

"No, Slith, I remembered the cork this time. It's just ... it was a long walk and I was thirsty. I only took a taste. Or, at least, that's all I meant to ..."

"You drank my dwarf spirits," said Slith accusingly. "All my dwarf spirits! That was the last of the batch!"

"I'm sorry, Slith, I—"

The sentence ended in a yelp and the sound of a crockery jug being smashed to bits, presumably over someone's head.

Kang found it hard to blame Slith. Kang's own mouth watered at the very mention of the dwarven drink. A strong liquor made from fermented mushrooms, dwarf spirits came by their name because dwarves are the only race who know the secret to the distillation process. Draconians were addicted to the intoxicating brew and would go to great lengths to obtain it.

After some further muttering, Slith carried on. "All right, boys, here's the deal. You remember that miserable dwarf we captured the other day? The day poor Captain James met with his unfortunate accident?"

There were sounds of snickers and grunting chuckles.

"They're still trying to figure out how he took an arrow in the back when he was facing the enemy," said one.

"That was a nice shot, Fulkth. Right through his skull."

"Too high. I was aiming for his heart."

"Hey, Slith, I hear they're sending out a new commander to take charge of our company. Some real tough bastard."

"Yeah, Slith, I heard the same thing—"

"What of it?" Slith grunted. "He gives us any grief, we'll settle him the same as the others. Now shut up and pay attention. We don't have much time. We have to be back before the end of watch or we'll be missed. Now, as I was saying, I had a little talk with that dwarf prisoner."

"So did half the officers in camp. What good's that gonna do us, Slith?"

"If you'd quit flapping your fangs for half a second, maybe you'll find out!" Slith retorted irritably. "As for the officers, all they want is information about the enemy. What in the Abyss do we care about that? I sneaked into the prison one night, and me and the dwarf had a nice friendly chat. I promised the little creep I'd spring him if he told me something worth the price of his life. And none of that 'how many dwarves in the Thorbardin army' junk. Here's what he said ..."

Kang heard scraping of clawed feet and tails on the floor, as though the group of draconians were all bunching in together. Slith lowered his voice. Kang had to strain to hear.

"There's this old dwarven stronghold not far from our position. Dates back to the Cataclysm. According to this dwarf, it's filled from floor to ceiling with treasure."

There came gloating laughter and sounds of scales clicking as if the draconians were all nudging each other.

"Who's guarding this treasure?" asked one.

"Dwarves," said Slith.

"Dwarves? How many dwarves?"

"Relax, will you?" Slith was disgusted. "Not *live* dwarves. The guardians are all dead."

"Dead dwarves guarding the treasure?" Gloth gulped.

"How do you kill a dead dwarf? They're already dead."

"Obviously," Slith said dryly.

"Well, how do you then?"

"There are ways," Slith said, but he didn't go into detail.

"Look, don't start worrying about dead dwarves. We'll be lucky if we make it that far. There's a bigger problem. The stronghold's surrounded by a moat. Not just any ordinary moat, either. It's sixty feet across and the Dark Queen only knows how deep. I know. I went to take a look at it."

"You found it? You found the stronghold?"

"I found it. Right where the dwarf said it was, too. There used to be a bridge across the moat, with a drawbridge at

the end. The bridge is gone now, rotted away. All that's left of it are some posts sticking up out of the water."

"Interesting," Kang murmured to himself.

"We could swim." That suggestion came from Gloth.

"And what do we do with the treasure, you numbskull? Carry it in our teeth on the way back?"

"Oh. I didn't think about that."

Kang could almost hear Slith rolling his eyes.

"Gloth, you're an idiot."

"I know," Gloth sounded contrite.

"Not to mention the fact that the water is black and slimy, and there are things living in it."

"What sort of things?" Fulkth demanded.

"I dunno," Slith returned. "All I know is that when I tossed a hunk of meat into the water, the water started to boil, and the meat was gone like *that!*"

Slith snapped his teeth together. The sound was impressive. Even Kang jumped.

"Well, this is just great," Dremon grumbled. "You've found us a treasure we can't get close to. Good work, Slith."

"We'll get the treasure," Slith said. "I just haven't figured out how yet. I was thinking maybe a boat—"

"Not a boat," Kang said in a loud voice from the back room. "Boats take a long time to build, and they can tip over or sink. Plus those fish you described are fang-fish, and they can jump into a boat and strip the flesh from your bones in no time. What you need is a—"

The draconians were on him before he finished his last sentence. A large baaz brandishing a curved bladed sword burst through the doorway, followed by a sivak and two more baaz.

Kang sat calmly on the bed, his arms resting on his knees, his hands empty. He could grab the battleaxe in one swift move, but he hoped it wouldn't be necessary. He looked up mildly at the draconians who stood glaring down at him.

"Who in the Abyss are you?" the sivak demanded.

Kang recognized the voice. This was the one called Slith. He wore the rank of file leader.

"Someone who can get you across that moat," Kang replied.

Slith grunted.

"He's a damn spy. He looks like an officer to me. Let's off him," said a draconian. Kang recognized Gloth's voice.

"You kill me," Kang said, "and you can kiss that treasure goodbye. I know about those fang-fish. The dwarves raise 'em in that nasty Thorbardin hole of theirs. These fish are trained to strip flesh from bone in less time than it takes to scream. They work so fast that you're still alive after they've finished. When you look down at yourself you see nothing but bones and bloody water. 'Course, you don't live very long after that. You wouldn't really want to."

"Not if I had to go around in nothing but my bones," said Gloth, shocked. "It wouldn't be decent."

"Gloth," said Slith. "You're an idiot."

"Yes, sir," said Gloth humbly.

"So shut up."

"Yes, sir."

"How do you know so much?" Slith asked, glowering at Kang. "You been to this dwarf stronghold?"

"Nope. Never seen it or heard of it before tonight. I'm trained to know about such things," Kang replied. "About moats and how to cross them, and how to cross lakes and rivers and chasms and gorges. I'm trained in building bridges and siege weapons. But my specialty is bridge-building."

"I think your specialty is lying," said one. "The Dragon Highlords train humans to do that sort of work. They don't train the likes of us."

"I think you're right, Fulkth," said Slith, eyeing Kang. "I think you're stringing us along so we don't cut your throat. Why should we believe you?"

"You might have a more difficult time cutting my throat than you imagine," Kang said with a smile. "I'm pretty good with this axe, but I'm better with my magic."

The draconians exchanged sidelong glances. Neither baaz nor sivaks have the ability to use magic. Bozaks did, and Kang was counting on the fact that most draconians had a healthy respect for bozak magic. What these draconians didn't know was that Kang was bluffing. He hadn't prayed to his Queen, so she had not granted him his magic.

"As to believing me," Kang continued. "I'll tell you my story, and then you decide. I've been serving in Sanction under Lord Ariakas. One night during a drinking bout, he made the claim that his draconians were smarter than human soldiers. Another officer said we weren't, called us a bunch of dumb lizards. Ariakas bet this officer that we could learn anything humans could learn. The officer picked one of us at random: me. They sent me to a place where they teach soldiers how to build bridges and siege engines and such like."

"You learned all that?" Slith was still skeptical.

"You bet I did," said Kang. "I was good at it. Really good. Too good, in fact. I made the humans look stupid."

"What happened? Why aren't you still there?"

"I kept getting into fights with the humans. The last fight, I killed one. It was self-defense, but humans don't see it that way when our kind is involved. I figured it was only a matter of time before they arrested me for murder, so I left."

"In other words, you're a deserter," Slith said.

Kang shrugged. "Let's just say I didn't tell anyone I was leaving."

"Uh, huh. All right, smart boy—"

"Name's Kang."

"All right, smart boy, how do we get across this moat in one night? Just us—our company. We don't want the whole damn army involved."

"You got rope?" Kang asked.

"Yeah."

"Lots of rope?"

"We can get it."

"Good."

"What else? Wood? Nails? Hammers?"

"Just rope. That's all you need," Kang said.

"So what do we do with the rope?" Fulkth asked.

"Tie it around your tail and hang yourself upside down from the nearest tree," Kang growled.

"That does it!" Fulkth said angrily. He raised his sword, made a jump at Kang.

Kang leapt from the bed. He stiff-armed Fulkth with his left hand, catching him in the throat, and elbowed Gloth in the gut with his right. Whipping his tail, Kang swept the other draconian's feet out from under him. Snatching up his battleaxe, Kang faced Slith.

"You want in on this, too?" Kang demanded, glowering.

"Not now," Slith said, raising his hands. "Maybe later. I'll leave my options open. Can you really build a bridge across this moat with nothing but rope?"

"I can," said Kang. "But I'll be damned if I explain it to you now. What's to stop you from killing me and trying it

yourselves? I'll build you that bridge for a one-fifth share of the treasure."

"Hah!" Slith chuckled. "Let's say you'll build a bridge for a one-fifth share of us not telling the humans where to find a deserter. We'll give you one-twentieth a share."

Kang snarled and grumbled and argued for as long as he figured looked good. When it became apparent that Slith was starting to grow seriously annoyed, Kang gave in.

"I'll do it," he muttered with no very good grace. "But I'm in command when it comes to the bridge. What I say goes. If not"—he added, seeing Slith scowl—"you'll end up fish food."

Slith saw that on this point Kang wasn't going to budge. The sivak shrugged. "Just while we're building the bridge. I'm back in command after that."

"It's a deal. When do we start?" Kang asked.

"Tomorrow," said Slith.

Kang was surprised. "You sure you can get away? Don't you have watch to stand? Go on patrol? Don't you have assigned duties?"

Slith waved a clawed hand. "Yeah, but who's going to make us do our 'duties,' and what are they going to do with us if we don't? We're the 'dracos,' the 'lizard-boys.' The humans don't give a damn what we do in camp. All they care about is that we're in the front ranks when the fighting starts."

"I understand," Kang said quietly.

"Glad you do." Slith shrugged. "We better be heading back to camp. It's almost dawn. Fulkth, you're in charge of finding rope. Lots of rope."

"By the way," Kang asked curiously, as the others turned to leave. "What happened to the dwarf? Did you save his life like you promised?"

"Are you kidding?" Slith said with a grin and a snap of his teeth. "You can't trust dwarves. He might tell someone else. I gutted the hairy little bastard."

SLITH PROVIDED KANG with a crude map—very crude—of the location of the dwarven stronghold. Fortunately, the sivak provided verbal instructions as well. If Kang had followed Slith's map, he might well have ended up in Mt. Nevermind. As it was, he floundered about in a dark and nasty swamp populated by enormous iron-claw trees for the better part of the morning. At length, just when he thought he was going to spend the rest of the war in the swamp and was wondering if the wily Slith had tricked him, Kang heard raucous laughter echoing across the dank and dismal water. He'd found the draconian company.

He headed their direction, moving stealthily. The draconians were making so much noise that he could have done a spring reel and they would have never heard him. Gliding up to stand behind a thick-boled iron claw tree, Kang watched the troop flap and flounder and curse their way through the swamp. They were supposed to be in some sort of line, but they were constantly breaking ranks, wandering off in pursuit of some wretched animal, stopping to try to catch fish, or shoving each other into the murky water.

The officers were as unruly as the men, although Kang noted that Slith kept trying to maintain some sort of discipline. He did this by roaming up and down the line, shouting and yelling commands that couldn't be heard over the tumult, enforcing those commands with thwacks to the heads of the offenders.

Kang crept along after them, watching the spectacle, not yet revealing himself. He had no fear that he would be spotted. No one was bothering to keep watch. The swamp grew deeper and darker. The thick foliage formed a canopy that shut out the sun. The air grew cooler, the dark water deeper, and the swamp creatures swimming in the water larger. The march soon lost its novelty. The laughter changed to grumbles and complaints, the shoving matches turned ugly. Two baaz threw down their lengths of coiled rope and began a slug-fest. Their companions joined in, and a brawl broke out in the middle of the swamp. Slith and Fulkth waded into the fray and ended the fight, but not before one draconian was missing a snoutful of teeth, the other had a bent wing, and two coils of rope were lost in the muck.

Kang crept up behind Gloth, who was engrossed in watching the brawl.

"Hullo," said Kang and rested his hand on the baaz's shoulder.

Gloth let out a shriek.

"A dead dwarf! A dead dwarf's after me!" He shouted and ran leaping through the swamp without once looking back.

Kang stared after him in head-scratching amazement.

Their quarrel forgotten, the other draconians turned to face this new foe. They surrounded Kang, brandishing their weapons and shouting threats, ready to cut his throat on the spot. Slith punched and elbowed his way through the crowd. He commanded everyone to put their weapons away, and a few actually obeyed.

"I see you didn't have any trouble finding us," Slith added, introducing Kang.

"A deaf gully dwarf wouldn't have any trouble finding you," Kang remarked. "And neither would the enemy."

"What of it?" Slith snarled. He was obviously in an ill-humor. "We can take care of ourselves. Right, men?"

The draconians gave a cheer, but it was half-hearted and sullen. They were sick of this swamp. They eyed Kang suspiciously and scowled when Slith explained that he was going to instruct them in the fine art of bridge-building.

Reminding them that there was a fortune to be won, Slith cajoled and pummeled the draconians into a ragged line. Fulkth was sent off to retrieve Gloth, who could still be heard howling in the distance. Kang fell in at the end of the line, and the draconians began to slog through the swamp.

They reached the dwarven stronghold by noon. The building was plain and serviceable, built in the shape of a square with four squat, thick towers at the corners. Arrow-slits—set at dwarf height—ringed the walls. There was one way in and one way out of the stronghold, and that was a large wooden double door that had long since rotted away. What was left lay on the ground in front of the entryway.

All that remained of the drawbridge were two sets of stanchions, set at one-third intervals across the moat. Not much use. Kang drew as near as he could get without actually setting foot in the murky water, which was boiling and bubbling in an ominous manner. The fang-fish smelled dinner. Glancing back at the troop, he sighed and shook his head.

Having reached the end of their journey, the draconians appeared to think they had done their work for the day. They plopped down on the bank. Some took naps. Others began to play at kender-teeth, a gambling game guaranteed to start another row.

"I'd like to talk to the men," Kang said.

"Go ahead," Slith said, waving his hand at the troops.

"Order them to form into ranks," Kang said.

Slith stared. "What for? You want to talk to them, talk?"

Kang suppressed a sigh. "Men!" he began and after shouting a few more times, he managed to draw their attention. "There's a treasure waiting for us over there." Kang pointed to the stronghold. "That treasure's going to be ours, but first we have to cross this moat. I know it looks hopeless"—the draconians were muttering and shaking their heads—"but it can be done. You have to follow my directions and do exactly what I tell you. Is that understood?"

The draconians yawned and scratched at mites that had crawled under their scales. A few nodded. Most went back to their game.

"Very good," said Kang, thinking to himself that it was really very bad. "Now, divide into sections."

He repeated this several times. No one moved. Slith waded in and began kicking and smacking. Eventually the draconians shoved and fumbled their way into three groups of eight.

"At least they know what a section is," Kang commented, glad to find something positive.

Slith grunted, but said nothing. He probably thought Kang was being sarcastic.

At Kang's command, the draconians tossed the coils of rope they'd been carrying onto the soggy ground. No piece was the same length or even made of the same material as any other. He looked them over and chose the lightest, a long cord about as thick as his forefinger. Taking a three-pronged hook from his belt, Kang tied the hook to the end of the rope.

"Who has the strongest arms in this company?" Kang asked.

Slith pointed to a huge siva, who stood nearly a full head above Kang, and Kang was a big draco.

"Granak there killed a Solamnic by bashing in his helmet and pinching off the human's head. Strong enough for you?"

Kang motioned for the big siva to come forward.

"See that wall of the fortress, Granak? You're going to take this grapple and throw it so that the hook lands over the wall. I'll keep hold of this end of the rope."

Granak studied the wall for a moment, gauging the distance. When he threw, he heaved the hook so far that when the rope paid out, it almost took Kang's arm with it. The hook's arc made a nose-dive over the wall. Tugging gingerly, Kang slowly pulled on the rope until the hook caught on the wall. The hook held the rope tight.

"So that's your bridge, smart boy?" Slith asked. "Looks a little flimsy."

Kang shook his head. "It's only the beginning. We've got a lot more work to do. Gloth! Front and center."

Gloth looked startled. He glanced around, then pointed to himself.

"Yes, you," said Kang. "I have a job for you, Gloth."

"For me?" Gloth asked, amazed.

"For him?" Slith sneered. "Why Gloth?"

"This job requires someone with courage and brains," Kang said.

"Yeah, so why Gloth?" Slith repeated, winking at the other draconians, who laughed raucously.

Gloth grinned. He was used to their contempt and had even come to like the attention, probably because it was the only attention anyone ever paid to him.

Kang ignored the others. He fixed his eyes on Gloth.

"Soldier, I need someone on the opposite side of this moat. You see this rope? You're going to grab onto it with your hands and feet, then you're going to shinny along this rope until you reach the other side. Like this." Kang went through the motions as best he could. "Understand?"

Gloth looked at the rope. He looked at Kang, then back at the rope, and then he looked at the moat. Occasionally, a fang-fish would leap out of the water, teeth snapping at insects or birds. As they watched, one of the fang-fish actually brought down a low-flying crow. Gloth gulped.

"You can do it, Gloth," Kang said. "I have confidence in you."

Gloth's buddies were still laughing and snickering. Gloth cast them a defiant glance and straightened his shoulders.

"I'll go. But what do I do when I get to the other side?" Gloth asked. "There's dead dwarves over there."

"The only thing you have to worry about now is falling into the moat. Keep away from the fishies, and you'll be fine. As for dead dwarves, you don't see any, do you?"

Gloth peered across the moat. He could see nothing dead or alive. Reassured, he reached for the rope.

"Woah!" Kang cried. "Not so fast! You dracos there. Come over here and give him a hand."

The rest of the draconians in Gloth's section came over. Kang handed the end of the rope to Fulkth.

"It's your job to make sure the rope is taut enough to keep your buddy from hitting water. When Gloth gets across to the other side, lower him to the base of the curtain wall."

Kang turned his attention to the other sections. "Dremon, I need your group to cut stakes from that treeline over there. We'll need eight long spears, at least six inches in diameter."

The draconians stared at him.

"Get moving!" Slith ordered.

Dremon and the others continued to stand in place for a moment. Then, grouching about missing all the fun of seeing Gloth fall into the moat, they slogged off in the direction of the treeline, some hundred yards away. Kang thought wistfully of the soldiers of his former unit who would have dashed off the moment he gave the order. Kang came to the realization he didn't hear any action behind him. Turning, he found Gloth and the rest of his section staring at him.

"What do we do now?" Gloth asked. "Should I go?"

Kang began to grow angry. He was not angry at the draconians. He was angry at the human officers who treated them like dumb animals and were then contemptuous of them for behaving like dumb animals.

"I told you he was an idiot," Slith stated, casting Gloth and his cohorts a scathing glance. "They're all idiots."

"You keep telling them that long enough, and they'll believe it," Kang said.

Slith glared at Kang, who met and held the siva's gaze until it was Slith who first lowered his eyes. Slith turned on his heel, tromped over to Gloth, and thrust his snout into Gloth's face.

"What in the lowest depths of the Abyss are you waiting for?" Slith yelled.

Kang sighed. "You men know what to do?"

They thought this over, then nodded.

"Very well," he said. "I trust you to carry on."

The draconians appeared startled, but they set to work. Fulkth pulled on the rope until it was taut. With a final gulping look at the snapping fish, Gloth took hold of the rope in his hands, swung up his feet so that they clamped over the rope and began to slither across. Kang could hear sounds of axes

chopping wood in another part of the forest. Granak and his section were carrying out their orders.

Kang selected the three thickest ropes and laid them out side-by-side. Keeping one eye on Gloth's progress, he began to braid the three together into one large rope.

Gloth was inching his way across the moat, his eyes on the fish-teeming water below. The fang-fish had caught sight of him and were leaping frantically, snapping at his twitching tail. The rope began to sag. Gloth dipped down.

"Hey, fellas!" he cried. One of the fish had very nearly caught hold of him. "Up! Up!"

"Pull, damn you!" Slith shouted.

Gloth's seven companions hauled back on the rope, straining to keep it above the level of the water. Gloth reached the two-thirds point, but now the rope arced up to the top of the curtain wall, which meant that Gloth was no longer going straight. He was having to propel himself up an incline that was growing ever steeper. The rope and the draconians both groaned under the strain.

Then came the terrible sound of metal grinding on rock. The hook came loose from the wall. The rope went slack. The hook slid down six inches then, at the last moment, caught on a rock ledge. Gloth lost his grip. His feet swung down from the rope, but he managed to hang on with his hands, but his tail flopped into the water. Several fang-fish jumped for it, sinking their teeth into the draconian's flesh. Gloth let out a yelp and lashed his tail about, trying to shake the fish loose. All of them lost their hold except a single, stubborn fang-fish, who clung to the tail relentlessly.

Gloth craned his neck, saw the fish flapping about on the end of his tail. "Ow! It's eating me alive! Help! Get it off me!"

"Hold him steady, men," Kang ordered. He ventured perilously close to the water's edge to yell at the panic-stricken draconian. "Gloth! Climb hand-over-hand up the rope!"

Gloth managed to do as he was told. Then his hand slipped. He clung to the rope with the other, dangling precariously. The seven holding the rope strained every muscle to keep Gloth out of the water.

Kang took a long look. Satisfied, he picked up the end of the rope, tied the end into a loop, and wrapped it around his wrist.

"All right, men. Let go of the rope," he ordered.

Slith strode up. "What the hell do you mean, 'drop the rope'? You want to dump him in the drink?"

"He'll be all right. Just drop the rope."

No one moved.

Gloth was clinging to the rope for dear life. "Help!" He moaned. "Help me, Slith!"

"Shut the hell up!" Slith yelled back. "We're working on it!" He glared at Kang. "You got him into this. If the fish get him, they get you next."

"The fish aren't going to get anyone," Kang said sternly. "I know what I'm doing. Drop the rope!"

He was never certain afterward if the draconians finally trusted that he did know what he was doing or if they simply couldn't hold on any longer. The front draconian let go his hold, and the others followed. Gloth dropped like a rock. Instinct saved him. The baaz's stubby wings beat frantically, and he managed to lurch sideways to make a safe landing on the far bank. Most of the rope lay in the water, but one end remained attached to the hook on the wall. Kang held the other end fast.

Gloth stood up and shook himself. Lifting the end of his tail, he pounded it into the ground until the fish let go, then kicked the fish back into the moat.

He shook his fist at the group on the bank. "You bastards dropped me!"

As one voice, they all yelled back, "Shut up!"

"You made it alive, didn't you?" Slith added.

Gloth looked surprised, then pleased with himself. "I did. I made it!"

Slith turned an accusing gaze on Kang. "You knew he'd flap his way over to the other side."

Kang nodded. "Baaz have crappy little wings, but they get the job done."

"Why didn't you just tell them that?" Slith demanded.

"The boys would have dropped the damn rope then."

"When an officer gives an order, he expects it to be obeyed instantly," Kang explained. "He can't have his men stopping to demand to know why he's doing what he's doing."

Slith gave Kang a strange look.

Kang smiled innocently. "Let's build this bridge," he said.

Gloth entered the fortress, hopping over the rotted wooden doors. A minute later, he appeared on the curtain wall, holding the rope end with the hook, grinning and waving.

Kang grabbed another length of rope, tied one end of that rope to the end of the three ropes he'd braided, and then tied those to the rope that stretched across the moat.

"Pull the rope across!" Kang ordered.

Gloth pulled on the first rope that now had the second rope attached to it. That was the easy part. Kang added the braided rope. Heavy to begin with, the braided rope sagged into the water and grew heavier after it was wet. Gloth strained and heaved, but he kept at it. The rest of the draconians held onto their end. By mid afternoon, the braided rope stretched across the water. At Kang's instructions, Gloth tied the end to one of the crenellations on the curtain wall.

After an hour's work, Granak's group had pounded the stakes they'd cut into the bank, forming a solid piling. Kang had them attach the ropes to the pilings, instructing them on the proper technique. He was pleased to see that, once motivated, the draconians were quick learners and skilled with their hands. When the ropes were set, he took the last remaining long rope and sliced it into pieces, then tied the pieces together to form a harness.

"Gloth! Throw back the rope attached to the hook. Throw the hook across to me!" Kang ordered.

Gloth took the hook from the top of the ramparts, gave a heave. The weighted hook landed in the mud near Kang.

"Now, here's how we're going to cross," Kang explained to the draconians. "Climb into this harness, and Gloth will haul you across. When you get to the other side, we'll haul the harness back and do it again."

"That gets us across," Slith said, "but what about the treasure?"

"It might help if I knew what the treasure was," Kang said. "And how much there was. Are we talking about steel coins packed in iron strongboxes? Jewels in casks? What?"

Slith's eyes narrowed. "Nevermind that, smart boy. We didn't take you on to ask questions. Just finish your bridge."

Kang shrugged. "Have it your way. At least tell me whether the treasure will fit into that harness."

Slith studied the harness and gave a surly nod.

"Then that's how we get it across. That's why the rope's higher at the far end than it is here. The treasure will slide down the incline. As for the bridge, it's built."

Slith didn't appear impressed. "Maybe it will, and maybe it won't. We'll see when the time comes. The bridge is finished, and I'm taking charge again. You cross first."

Kang had expected as much. Climbing into the harness, he showed them how to slide their way along the ropes. Slith came along second to keep an eye on Kang.

"Good job, Gloth," Kang said, mounting the curtain wall.

"Thank you, sir," Gloth returned proudly.

Slith watched this, then latched hold of Kang's arm.

"Come over here a minute, smart boy," Slith ordered, dragging Kang off into a corner. "Answer me one question. Why'd you choose Gloth for this part of the job? He's the stupidest draco ever hatched."

"Does he look stupid now?" Kang asked.

Slith glanced over at Gloth. The baaz was performing well, handling his assigned task with skill and resolution.

"Well, you got lucky," Slith muttered, rubbing his snout.

"If the others start to respect Gloth, he'll have more respect for himself, and you'll have a better soldier. Plus," Kang added, "he was so frightened of the fish, you'll notice he's forgotten all about having to face undead dwarves."

"He'll remember soon enough," Slith stated ominously. "We all will. You included, smart boy."

In less than an hour, the draconian company was safely across the moat and inside the fortress.

"DAMN DWARVES," muttered Gloth. "Why aren't they taller?"

"Because then they wouldn't be dwarves," Dremon pointed out.

"What would they be?" Gloth wondered.

"Stupid, like you!" Slith hissed. "Keep quiet!"

The old stronghold had been built to accommodate dwarves, not humans or any other creature over five feet in height. Consequently, the draconians were forced to tromp through the corridors with their heads bowed and their backs hunched. The stronghold was well-built, typical of dwarves, so while they had to worry about hitting their heads on the low ceilings, they didn't have to worry about the stone ceilings coming down on their heads.

The dwarf prisoner had not been able to provide Slith with directions to the treasure room, but Slith deemed it logical that it would be in the most secure part of the building, below ground level.

Slith ordered his command to proceed silently, with the result that the draconians lowered their voices to a dull roar. When Dremon maintained that undead dwarves were nothing to worry about—they worshipped the Queen of Darkness, same as the draconians—Fulkth said that no, undead dwarves worshipped Reorx, who wasn't on anyone's side but his own, a fight broke out. Slith was as bad as any of his men. His constant shouted commands to "Shut up!" echoed throughout the stronghold. Kang figured gloomily that they no longer had to worry about dead dwarves. Every corpse in the place must be wide awake and ready for action.

Kang had to bite his tongue to keep from intervening. He made a mild suggestion to Slith that they split their forces, post a patrol at the entrance as a rear guard, and send out patrols to search for the dungeons with orders to report back to the main body. Slith snorted at the suggestion. He was going to keep everyone where he could see them.

Kang said nothing more. Slith was in command.

They tromped through the stronghold, searching for a way down to the dungeon level, bumping into dead-end corridors, taking wrong turns, clanking and clattering, quarreling and complaining. At length, by accident, they discovered the stairs that led down into the lower part of the stronghold. After a shoving match to see who was going first, they sorted themselves out—Slith thwacked a few heads—and trooped single-file down the narrow spiral stairs. About halfway down, someone remembered that they ought to light some torches, which occasioned a halt to argue about who had been supposed to bring torches.

Eventually they came up with three torches, one of which was wet. By the feeble light of the remaining two, they continued to wind their way down the dark staircase.

Kang had finagled his way to the front of the line. He had begged forgiveness of Takhis and asked for his spells, and his Dark Queen had been unusually gracious. While he was not certain how much good his magic would be against the undead, he thought he should at least be in the front where he might do some good. He was descending the stairs, trying to keep from stepping on Slith's tail and trying to keep his own tail out from under the feet of Fulkth, who was behind him, when Slith sucked in his breath and came to a halt so suddenly that Kang had to perform all sorts of gyrations to stop before he plowed into the sivak.

"Damnation," said Slith.

Kang, being taller, was able to see over the sivak's head. Damnation was right.

The narrow winding stairs led to a long, wide corridor carved out of the bedrock. Filling the corridor was an army of dwarves. Dead dwarves. Dwarves who had been dead so long that their flesh had rotted away. The draconians faced an army of skeletons, still wearing the armor in which they had died. The armor and weapons were rusted, but the swords were still sharp.

Kang had fought skeletal warriors before, and he had not enjoyed it. It was not dangerous but frustrating. If you managed to bash one of the skeletons until it broke apart, it would cease fighting only long enough to collect its various parts, put itself back together, and start the battle all over.

There were five hundred skeletons standing in ranks. To make matters worse, the draconian company, having been taken by surprise, was backed up in the spiral staircase. Already, the dracos at the end of the line were shouting questions, demanding to know why those in front had stopped.

At the sight of the draconians, the skeletal warriors began to advance, striking their swords on their shields. Kang looked into the empty eye sockets of one, saw the eternal darkness lit with a flame of the magical geas that compelled them to protect their treasure long after it would do them any good. Shuddering, Kang averted his gaze.

"I have a spell," he said quietly to Slith. "It will take out only a few of these creeps, but—"

"Bah! Don't bother," Slith said, with a smug glance at Kang. "I came prepared for something like this. Fulkth, front and center."

Fulkth shoved his way past Kang, who had his spell on his lips and his hand on his battleaxe. Kang watched dubiously as Slith removed a length of heavy iron chain he had wrapped around his torso. Handing one end of the chain to Fulkth, Slith took the other himself. Fulkth moved to the right-hand side of the corridor and Slith took the left.

"Go!" Slith shouted.

He and Fulkth stretched out the iron chain until it reached across the corridor, then they began to run, heading straight for the first rank of skeletons.

They misjudged the height of their opponents.

"Lower the damn chain!" Slith howled, when the chain whistled through thin air. "They're dwarves, you numbskull!"

"Right!" Fulkth gasped and lowered the chain.

Thowp, thowp, thowp. The iron chain cut through the ranks of undead, staving in ribcages, knocking off heads, cutting off legs, sending bones and teeth and bits of armor flying. Kang watched in profound admiration.

"Follow me, boys!" he yelled, forgetting he wasn't in command.

He dashed forward, swinging his battleaxe, bashing down those few the iron chain missed. The other draconians poured out of the staircase behind him. Together, they raced down the hall, stomping on bones, kicking them and stomping again on any that appeared to be trying to reform.

They reached the end of the corridor, ankle-deep in dwarf bones, breathing heavily from the exertion, but unharmed.

"Guess you're not the only one who's smart, smart boy," Slith said with a wide grin.

"I guess I'm not," Kang replied, adding sincerely, "That was brilliant."

"We better hurry," Slith said, brushing off the praise, though Kang could tell the sivak was pleased. "It'll take these bastards awhile to sort themselves out, but they'll do it eventually. Come on."

He led the way down the corridor. The presence of the skeletal guardians ensured that the draconians had found the treasure room. Sure enough, rounding a corner, they almost ran right into it.

Rotting wooden doors hung from rusted hinges. Slith shoved them open and called the torch bearers to come forward. By the flickering firelight, they could see an enormous room filled with treasure. Kang had never seen or imagined so much wealth. Coins spewed out of chests. Precious gems sparkled in the firelight. Weapons crusted with jewels hung on the walls. Kang could tell by the pricking of his thumbs that many of these objects were magical.

"This ... this is wonderful!" Kang breathed.

"Yeah, not bad," said Slith. With no more than a mildly curious glance, he waved his hand and continued down the corridor. "Come on, boys. This way!"

The other draconians circled around Kang, who stared after them.

"Where are you going?" Kang shouted and pointed frantically. "Here's the treasure!"

Gloth turned back and patted Kang on the shoulder.

"If you'll excuse my saying this, sir," said Gloth kindly. "You're not very bright, are you?"

"I'm not very bright?" Kang bristled. "You're leaving behind a fortune in there!"

"Let me explain, sir. Say we took all that treasure and worked our tails off hauling it back to camp. What do you think would happen to it? Would we get to keep it? Not on your life, sir. The human officers would take it. Every coin and jewel of it. And after they took it, they'd likely kill us, just to make sure we didn't cause trouble."

"We could leave, take it with us, go someplace no one would find us ..."

"That wouldn't work, sir," said Gloth. "First thing you know, someone would complain that he didn't get his fair share. We'd end up fighting, and we'd end up killing each other. Isn't that right, sir?"

"Yes," Kang admitted sadly. He should have known that himself. He'd seen it happen often enough. "But then why did we go to all this trouble?"

"For the *treasure*, sir," Gloth said. "The real treasure."

"Found it!" Slith hollered.

Kang continued down the corridor until he found the other draconians gathered together inside what appeared to be a cellar, gazing rapturously at a large stash of barrels. A pungent odor filled the air. Kang sniffed appreciably. He knew that smell. There was nothing like it on Krynn.

"Dwarf spirits!"

"Been aging for over a hundred years, I'd say," Slith said and licked his chops. "And there must be fifty barrels of the stuff down here. Now do you understand, smart boy?"

"Not quite," Kang said.

"We haul this lot back to camp and we sell it. There must be—how many dracos in our camp, Fulkth?"

"About five thousand," Fulkth replied.

"That's one steel per cup per draco," said Slith. "Add in the fact that no one ever drinks only one cup. The boys have been really thirsty lately—"

"Not to mention bored—" said Dremon.

"And that we just got paid—" said Fulkth.

Now Kang understood. "You'll be rich," he said.

"You bet we will," Slith gestured to the barrels. "All right, boys. Let's get this lot loaded up and out of here."

But before they could begin work, chunks of dirt and rock started to rain down on Kang. He looked up and was alarmed to see a pair of shining ivory mandibles digging through the ceiling. The mandibles were sharp, with serrated edges. A clawed hand poked down through the crack.

"Look out!" Kang yelled, and shoved Slith up against the wall, hurling himself after him just as the ceiling gave way.

A gigantic insect, some eight feet tall, dropped down amidst the rubble. It landed on two feet, then reared up to gaze at the draconians, who stared back.

The creature's four eyes caught and held Kang's. Every thought in his mind seemed suddenly to run about like a young draco chasing its own tail. The one thought that emerged from the chaos was: *Run!*

Kang acted on that thought immediately. He tumbled over another draconian who was staring intently at the wall. Two others were fighting each other. Kang shoved them out of his way and kept running. Glancing around, he saw Slith running beside him, fear in his eyes.

Kang and Slith dashed into the bone-strewn corridor, slowing when Kang heard a voice behind him shout, "Hey! What are you guys doing? It's just a big bug!"

Kang skidded to a stop. He blinked and looked at Slith. Slith blinked and looked at him. Both slowly turned around.

Gloth was the only draconian doing anything useful. While the others were hunched over sobbing or staring at the wall or konking each other over the head, Gloth aimed a blow at the creature with his sword.

With a savage blow of its clawed fist, the umber hulk sent Gloth flying across the corridor. The draconian crashed against the wall. He shook his head for a moment, then went back to the attack.

"Did you hear that? Why'd we run? Like Gloth said, it's just a bug," Slith said.

"I'll tell you why we ran!" Kang said. "That's an umber hulk. If you look into its eyes, it confuses the hell out of you! That's what happened to us."

"Then why didn't the confusion happen to Gloth?" Slith demanded. He answered his own question. "Oh, I get it. He's already so confused, he wouldn't know the difference."

He drew his sword, started back down the hall.

"He's right, men!" Slith was yelling. "It's just a big bug!"

"Don't look in its eyes!" Kang added as he sprinted back toward the dwarf spirits.

By the time they reached Gloth, the umber hulk had knocked him to the floor. The bug's mandibles were closing around Gloth's neck. Slith grabbed the mandibles. Putting his foot on one, he tried to pry them apart. Kang swung his battleaxe and staved in the back of the bug's head.

The umber hulk roared and let go of Gloth. Kang tried to dislodge his axe, but it was firmly imbedded in the chitinous shell. The hulk turned toward Kang, who lowered his head, trying desperately to keep from looking into the eyes.

"Damn! These things are hard to kill!" Kang gasped.

The hulk lunged at him with its snapping iron claws. Kang tripped, went sprawling, falling on his back. He looked squarely into the bug's eyes.

The confusion struck him full-force. Kang could not, for the life of him, figure out why all these other draconians were stabbing their swords into the armored hide of a big bug. Bug blood spurted everywhere, and just as suddenly as the confusion had gripped him, he could think again.

The umber hulk lay squished on the floor, smashed to pieces.

NOW THAT THEY HAD FOUND the true treasure and defeated the umber hulk, the draconians worked with a cooperation and discipline that Kang found impressive. A brief search turned up the route the dwarves had used to roll the barrels into the cellar. By this means, the draconians removed the barrels one by one from the stronghold, rolling them down to the moat. Loading each barrel into the harnesses, they hauled the barrels across the water. Once on the other side, the draconians hid them under a covering of tree branches and swamp grass.

"We'll come back for them with wagons." Slith gazed with satisfaction at the row of barrels.

"A good haul," said Kang.

"Yeah," said Slith, "I got to admit, we could have never done it without you, smart boy." He was silent a moment, then added, "You should join up with us. The humans'll never notice we've got one extra. They think we all look alike. What do you say? You'll get a share of the loot. And, who knows? Someday, a smart boy like you might even work your way up to being my second in command."

Kang laughed. "Thanks, but I better be on my way." He turned around, started to leave.

"Well, good luck." Slith held out his hand.

"Thank you," said Kang. Taking the siva's hand, Kang gave it a hearty shake.

THE NEXT DAY, the barrels were safely stored in a cave near the army camp. Slith was in his tent, counting steel pieces and handing them to Gloth, who was stowing them in a strongbox. They were interrupted by a knock on the tent post.

"Hide the box!" Slith ordered.

Gloth promptly shoved it under the bed.

"Come in," Slith bawled ungraciously, when the box was safely concealed.

Two baaz draconians wearing chain armor and breastplates entered the tent. Their sashes showed them to be an officer's bodyguard, but their helmets had the crest of the Provost-Martial corps. They cast quick, professional glances around the tent, while Slith and Gloth watched uneasily.

"Maybe they found out the truth about Captain James—" Gloth said in a loud whisper.

Slith kicked him.

One of the guards turned and spoke to someone outside the tent.

"The siva and a baaz, sir."

A bozak draconian entered the tent. He was wearing the harness and badges that marked him as a commander. The metal of his armor and his battleaxe had been polished so that they gleamed in the sunlight. It took a moment for Slith and Gloth to recognize him.

"Thank you, men." The bozak clapped one of the bodyguards on the back. "I'll take it from here. Dismissed."

The two baaz troopers saluted and left the tent.

Slith and Gloth stared.

"What are you doing here?" Slith demanded.

"Just thought I'd stop by for a visit," Kang answered.

Slith stared at Kang, hard, then he said, "You're not really a deserter, are you, Kang?"

"No, I'm not. I'm an officer. I'm on my way to take command of a unit of draconians."

Slith eyed him. "That story you told, all about how you left that bridge-building school because you kept getting into fights, that was a lie, too?"

"Some of it," Kang admitted. "Not all. I really did keep getting into fights. But I didn't leave. I graduated with distinction. Lord Ariakas won his bet. I've been sent here to take command of a crack unit. One of the best in the army."

"Oh," said Gloth, interested. "What unit's that?"

"This one," said Kang. "I'm your new commanding officer."

Slith eyed Kang, and his eye was not friendly. "You're going to have us out on parade every day, marching up and down mountains wearing hundred pound packs on our backs, waking us up at all sorts of ungodly hours, standing patrol, all that military crap, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Kang quietly. "And more. I'm going to teach you to be engineers. The finest damn engineers in this whole damn army. We're to form the First Dragonarmy Bridging Company. But first things first."

Kang fished three steel pieces out of his belt and tossed them on the table. "Would you boys happen to know where I can buy a round of dwarf spirits?"