

The Endless War

Tales of the FIFTH AGE™

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6 SC, SUMMER:

HALF A DECADE AFTER THE SECOND CATAclysm HAD LAID WASTE TO OUR LAND, THE GREAT DRAGONS FROM BEYOND THE SEA BEGAN TO WAR AMONG THEMSELVES. ACROSS KRYNN, MEN LEARNED TO LIVE WITH THE FACT THAT THIS WAR OF THE WYRMS COULD SPILL OVER INTO THEIR AFFAIRS AT ANY TIME. THE LIVES OF MEN WERE FOR THE TAKING, AND WE COULD ONLY HOPE THAT THE GREAT DRAGONS DID NOT NOTICE US IN THEIR BATTLE FOR SUPREMACY.

—FROM THE CHRONICLES OF NATHAL, COMPILED IN 31 SC

I still don't see her, rumbled Sirocco, Doral's blue dragon mount. She did her best to keep her voice low, the dragon equivalent of a whisper. It was still as loud as Doral's own shout would have been. Even the rush of the wind and the strokes of the beast's wings against the air did little to muffle it.

"Keep looking," hissed Doral, sweeping his gaze from left to right. "She must have come this way," he said, more to himself than the dragon. The Dark Knight lord fought the feeling of dread growing within him, chilling him despite his heavy flight jacket and armor. "I'm not returning without her."

But the General's orders—

"Takhisis take the General!" he roared. He had always had a quick temper. "I'm the one who sent Salina to talk alliance with that ogre clan. Since she never arrived, she must be here somewhere. I'm not going to leave her stranded!" Once again he scanned the ground, hoping for a sign.

Perhaps she was taken, offered Sirocco.

"Nonsense," Doral barked. "There hasn't been enemy activity anywhere near here." In his heart, however, he knew that Sirocco wasn't referring to their human

enemies. She referred to a new foe, a greater menace whose existence Doral refused to accept.

His opinion on the matter was about to change.

As Doral turned his head to the east, looking across the coast of the New Sea and toward the wilds of Blodhelm beyond, he realized with a sinking feeling that he had made a tragic mistake. It was the first mistake he was to make on this ill-fated day.

Suddenly, with no warning or apparent cause, the blazing noonday sun went out.

He heard Sirocco's exclamation of alarm and responded to the warning instantly, struggling to control the fury welling up inside him. The warrior lord pulled sharply on the reins of the powerful blue dragon and issued an order. Sirocco reacted in the space of a heartbeat. Her left wing dipped sharply and trailed back the slightest bit. At the same time, the beast sculled air with her right and angled her great blue tail to provide a rudder.

Doral felt the sudden shift of motion and pressed his muscled legs against the dragon's flank, thinking with smug satisfaction that the maneuver would have

thrown a less skillful rider from the saddle. This warrior, however, was no novice to the hardships of aerial combat. He and Salina had served under General Abrena for many years, and she had never accepted less than perfection from her officers.

Even as the thought of Salina brought to mind the image of the beautiful warrior's bright eyes and quick smile, Doral cursed himself. True, he was no raw recruit, but he had caught himself acting like one again. If he had not allowed himself to become so preoccupied with the search for Salina, he would have spotted the great winged form coming in from above and behind, diving out of the sun at him. Such an attack was the first thing that a young Knight learned to be wary of. Those who forgot this basic lesson seldom lived long enough to be reminded of their mistake.

"Name of the Abyss!" he spat.

The great black form was nearly upon him now. Doral leaned against Sirocco's rolling dive, waiting for the precise moment to strike. A second before the two reptilian flyers impacted, he spoke an order to his mount and reversed the pressure on the reins. Again, the dragon obeyed instantly. Her right wing collapsed

along the side of her blue-scaled body, and she gave a single mighty stroke with her left. Doral allowed his body to shift naturally with the dragon's powerful maneuvers, silently commending the effort of his longtime mount. Wind howled past the duo, filling Doral's ears with the sound of a gale.

It is Onysablet! she said, a slight hesitation in her echoing voice.

Ignoring the remark, Doral nudged his mount, perhaps too harshly, giving the signal for a maneuver they had practiced countless times. In a most unnatural fashion, the blue wyrm rolled before the great black form that had obscured the sun, exposing her belly—but bringing her talons and jaws into play.

Then his mount's words slowly sank in. Onysablet was the true name of the beast men called Sable! The thought flashed through Doral's mind as he clung to Sirocco's back. Man and dragon glimpsed their enemy clearly at the same moment. This black behemoth, easily thrice the size of Sirocco, filled the sky above them like the clouds of a looming storm. The obsidian black of her scales set off the ivory white of her teeth, each as long and sharp as a great sword. Her yellow-green eyes burned with all the hatred of her kind, and the sickly odor of swamps and decay filled the air around her. This was one of the Great Dragons from across the sea, and she was bearing down on them with the dizzying speed of a falling star.

Doral's thoughts raced as he recalled the stories tavern bards told of a new breed of dragon come to Ansalon in the years since the Second Cataclysm. Those idiotic Knights of Solamnia took the stories seriously, the Knights' spies had reported, and even the General never ventured too far east of their Nerakan headquarters, unwilling to risk the wrath of the so-called Red Marauder. But Doral had never swallowed the tales of terrible beasts that killed entire armies with a single fiery breath and hunted "lesser" dragons to absorb their life energy. A week ago, he had sent Salina's talon to make contact with an ogre clan—a mission that involved a flight from his wing's keep in the Khalkist Mountains directly over the purported lair of one such dragon. Doral had known that, but he had scoffed at his officer's concern.

Sirocco's warning still resounding in his head, Doral knew he had been a fool. This was Sable, the wyrm rumored to have claimed the eastern shores of the New Sea as her own. She was everything the bards' tales had promised—and then

some. Even Doral's nerve bent under the fury of the diving monster.

Bent, but didn't break.

Now, Doral! As ever, the beast was too eager to strike. Doral held back the permission that his mount so longed for.

Then, when it seemed certain he had waited too long, Doral kicked his spurs once, crying out the command into the wind. The sapphire beast opened her gaping maw, revealing teeth each as long and keen as the warrior's own broad sword, but not half the size of Sable's. When the diving black dragon was less than twenty yards away, Sirocco exhaled sharply.

Doral closed his eyes, but the brief, blazing image froze itself onto his lids nonetheless. A spider's web of blue-white lightning leapt from Sirocco to bridge the distance between the dragons. A great clap of thunder slapped against warrior and dragon, but the veteran rider had braced himself for the savage concussion.

The black dragon screamed in agony, filling the air with a tremendous shriek that smothered the last echoes of thunder. Traces of blue fire ran along her scorched belly. The smell of searing flesh and dragon's blood found the warrior's nostrils.

We have drawn first blood! Sirocco roared jubilantly. This time, she made no effort to control the volume of her voice.

"But this battle is far from over," Doral muttered in reply. Tightening his grip on the reins, he released his right hand and

grabbed for the gleaming lance secured to his saddle. The weapon came free cleanly and he quickly swung it around.

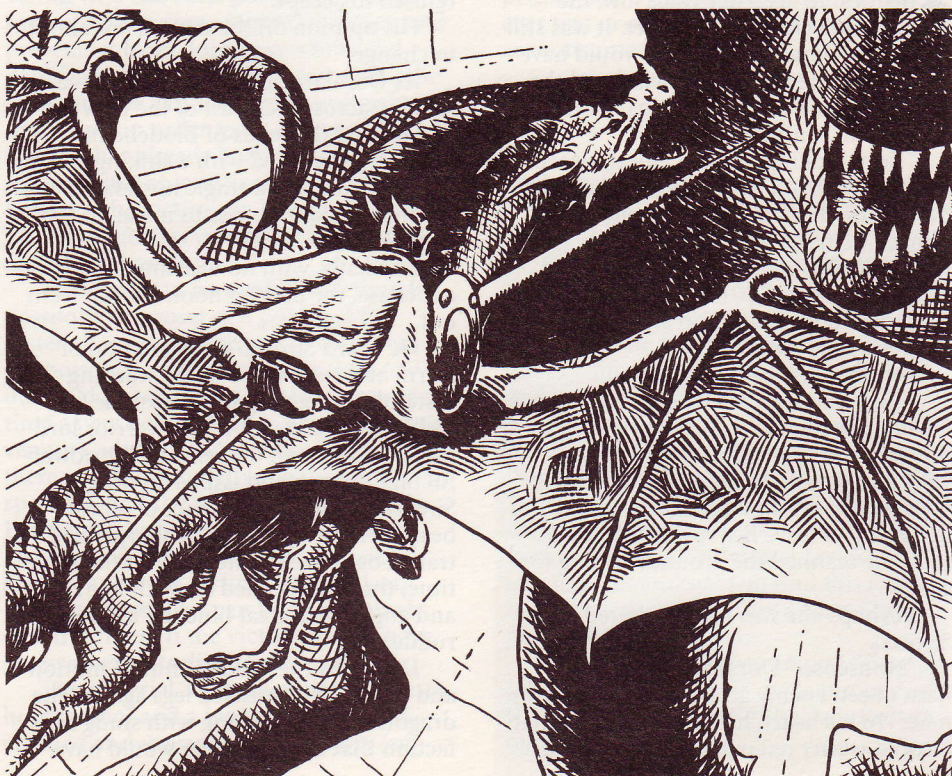
True, responded Sirocco, **and we have never before faced so massive a wyrm.**

It was then that Doral made his second mistake.

Realizing with a sinking feeling that the dragon was right, the warrior aimed the lance and thrust at his foe. However, he had underestimated the speed of Sable's dive, and the lance tip met its target too soon and at a poor angle. Even worse, the blow struck before Doral had managed to brace the weapon properly.

With a loud crack, the lance he had carried since his days at Storm's Keep snapped cleanly in half, then was torn from his grip. The wave of pain as his wrist shattered was lost to Doral in the sea of anger rising within him. Through his clumsiness, he had just destroyed his best means of fighting the black! Doral bellowed his rage. Rolling with the force of the impact, his dragon snarled in warning.

The rider refocused his vision on the attacking wyrm as Sirocco twisted to avoid the raking claws of the massive black dragon. He almost succeeded. Sirocco howled as one of the great talons pierced her flank and tore a gaping wound from the base of her neck to the middle of her ribs. Blood flowed freely and a shower of scales plummeted to the



sea below.

Now Doral's anger shifted to vengeful fury. Such a wound would not go unpunished! Craning his neck, Doral saw that the speed of Sable's dive had carried her past them. The blue dragon's rolling maneuver had brought them out from under the attacking wyrm and, with another great stroke of her sapphire wings, Sirocco plunged out of Sable's shadow and into the bright sunlight once more.

His own injury forgotten, the rider spurred Sirocco to greater speed, offering his dragon encouragement. But at the same time, a tiny voice he never acknowledged—the part of the man that knew fear—whispered that Doral should abandon all illusions of escaping this battle.

"Climb!" Doral shouted above the winds. "Get some distance between us!" He spurred his mount, leaning forward in the saddle. In response, Sirocco beat her wings savagely. Gradually, the snapping whitecaps that spread across the New Sea began to fall away into the salty haze that hung above the water.

After a few moments, Doral dared turn around again. Sable had spread her ebony wings wide, catching great masses of air to slow her descent. The warrior grinned. *She sees that our clever maneuvers have thwarted her!* he thought, pounding Sirocco's neck fondly. His grin faded, though, as he saw the gigantic wyrm pull out of her dive. Wings hammering the air, Sable swoveled her neck up and swept the sky for her prey.

Still climbing, Doral considered his options. He knew Sable would not quickly spot them—Sirocco's azure coloration made her blend in perfectly with the clear sky. Years of combat experience had left Doral hardened to the ebb and flow of battle. Any defeat, even one as major as this, might be turned to a victory, he reminded himself.

And today, victory lay in escape. The warrior knew he must carry what he had learned to the rest of the world. He grimaced. The twice-cursed Solamnics had been right! Much as he hated to admit it, this was an enemy that would call for an alliance between all men. If the rumors of other Great Dragons were true, and he now believed they were, dark times were ahead for every man, elf, or dwarf on Ansalon.

Far behind him, the thunderous roar of the black dragon boomed through the air. Out of the corner of his eye, Doral saw the great beast climbing toward them. He knew Sirocco was more agile than the behemoth, but she would never outrace

her while injured.

The clouds? the blue dragon offered, her voice hoarse with pain.

Doral leveled his gaze upon the billowy form hugging the coastline. Once inside the clouds' concealing folds, Sirocco could elude the winged juggernaut. The rider's heart lifted. "The clouds!" he cried in sudden acknowledgment.

Sirocco redoubled her efforts, but her rider saw that the increased strain was making blood flow even faster from the wound in the dragon's flank. Doral uttered a quick prayer to powers that he knew weren't listening.

Then the warrior checked the enemy's position. "She's losing ground!" he shouted triumphantly—too soon. In a matter of heart-pounding minutes broken only by the sound of leathery wings whipping through cold air, the greater strength of the black dragon began to overcome the agility of the blue. The gap between the wyrms closed—slowly at first, then more quickly, as Sirocco's injury began to take its toll.

Doral cursed. The tenuous edges of the clouds seemed impossibly far away! He took a moment to flex the fingers of his right hand, but the fingers refused to move, and stabs of pain shot up his arm. The rider dropped his gaze to examine his broken wrist. Although the shattered bones had not pierced skin, he could tell the injury was severe. With a few loops and a deftly twisted knot, he tied the reins about the useless limb, lashing himself to his mount.

With his free hand, Doral drew forth the broad sword that had belonged to his grandfather, an officer in the Blue Dragoonry during the War of the Lance. He pressed the flat of the blade to his lips and offered a word of honor to the memory of that great warrior.

"If ever you struck true, Torandor," he said to the weapon, "do so now."

The pursuing dragon roared again. This time, the beast was so close that the sound was a physical force that rolled across Doral, nearly deafening him. Even his specially padded helmet, designed to protect his hearing from the report of Sirocco's lightning breath, could not hold back the concussion.

Doral looked quickly over his shoulder. Sable loomed impossibly large—how could any living thing, even a dragon, get that big?—and drew nearer with every stroke of her great wings. The veteran rider had not felt dragonawe in years, but that fear consumed him now. In less than a minute, he knew, the black would be

near enough to hit them with her deadly breath weapon. If this massive creature was like others of her kind—and Doral saw no reason to believe that she wasn't—he and Sirocco would be showered with a stream of the most caustic acid known to man. Neither of them, he knew, was likely to survive that.

And he would never see Salina again.

Even as that terrible thought crossed his mind, he saw Sable open her hideous mouth. A predatory gleam burned in the creature's snakelike eyes as she drew in her breath and prepared to attack.

Then, suddenly, Doral and Sirocco found themselves enveloped in an intangible white gauze.

The warrior let out a whoop of joy as Sirocco shot into the cloud. The blue dragon banked hard to the left, even as a torrent of oily black liquid leapt through the moist, white haze. Sirocco's scales hissed and melted away as the acid touched her wingtip.

The disgorging of acid into a cloud of water vapor filled the air with a sizzling, spitting sound. The bitter smell of bile made Doral retch, but he quickly fought down his revulsion and nudged Sirocco into a gradual climb.

"South...along the coast!" he shouted sickly. His mind whirled. Surely now that they were safely wrapped in the rolling white cloud, they should easily be able to escape the hunting wyrm. However, Doral based this assumption on tactics he had learned fighting dragons of similar size to his own mount.

This was the third mistake he would make in the battle.

As it turned out, it was also his last.

Another glance back showed Doral that Sable had surged into the veil of vapor after them, her massive wings creating great drafts within the mist. The warrior felt his heart turn to ice as he watched the torrents of air currents tear the cloud apart. Only seconds before, he and Sirocco had thought themselves safely shrouded from the hungry eyes of the dragon. Now they were exposed again.

Before he had even finished the thought, the powerful backdraft of the mammoth wings hammered the pair with the force of a hurricane. Doral cried out to his mount but, for all the dragon's strength, Sirocco was helpless before this gale.

End over end they rolled, Doral screaming in pain as the knotted reins pulled savagely at his broken wrist. For all that, however, Sirocco drowned out his cries with shrieks of agony at the wrench-

ing of her wounded flank. Disoriented and dazed, they began to tumble toward the churning surface of the ravenous sea below.

The warrior's head snapped back as his out-of-control dragon spun, allowing him to see Onysablet swing back on her path to pursue. Doral was barely conscious. The pain from his shattered wrist combined with his fury at his impotence clouded his vision with a red haze. Through this obscuring agony, he watched the great black beast surge toward them.

His pain gave him a measure of detachment. He observed as she brought her talons forward. As if a spectator, he watched her sweep her wings back. Absurdly, the image of a hawk swooping down on a tiny sparrow came to mind. The acrid smell of the black dragon rolled across him. The wicked claws would reach them in seconds.

Sirocco issued a growl of frustration and pain. Doral felt the valiant blue dragon struggle to pull out of her fall and halt their cataclysmic descent. Rage over his mount's suffering drove out the warrior's pain, infusing him with new strength. The passions that had ruled his life just might save it. With a cry of fury so vigorous that Sable might actually have heard it over the beating of her wings, Doral brought his sword around. As the keen edge of the magical weapon traced an arc through the bitter air, a shower of sparks trailed, hissing, from the blade.

As the gigantic claw began to close about Sirocco, the blade cut through the black dragon's scales and slashed the flesh beneath. A rippling wave of fire burst from the weapon, searing the wound and singeing the scales around it. For the second time, Doral smelled Sable's burning flesh, and he allowed himself a tired moment of pride. This time, however, he heard no outcry from the black dragon. Doral moaned as he realized Sable had never even noticed his final blow.

Doral! Loyal Sirocco offered her rider one last warning. But there was nothing the Knight could do.

Biting talons sheared the reins that bound Doral to his mount, sending him tumbling off the dragon. The passing moments seemed to slow to a crawl, leaving him hanging suspended in the summer sky to watch in horror the gruesome scene before him. His disbelieving eyes saw Onysablet tighten her grip about the bleeding blue dragon, then savagely crush the life out of his beloved Sirocco. The end came so quickly that his mount had made no utterance of pain—Doral

doubted that she'd felt anything.

Impossibly, time continued to creep while Doral hung in the air—or was it the pain that made him perceive it so? As the dismounted rider looked on, Sable did something both wondrous and terrible. Closing her gleaming eyes, she drew in a great breath. Tenuous streams of shimmering blue light slowly rose from Sirocco's limp body, then moved—as if drawn by the black dragon's force of will—to settle around Sable like an aura. After an endless moment, the last of the glow was absorbed into the black scales, and the aura was gone.

Twining her neck skyward and beating her wings with a triumphant roar, Sable opened her talons and released Sirocco. To his horror, Doral saw that the blue dragon's corpse was now desiccated, shriveled. "Great Queen," he murmured in awe, wanting to turn away from the sight. As the husk—all that remained of Sirocco—spun toward the sea below, the scales peeled away from it like dry leaves torn from their branches by an autumn storm. Flesh, now no more resilient than dry sand, streamed away to reveal yellowed bones. Doral could not suppress a gasp of sorrow as an uncharacteristic tear



rolled out onto his cheek. Could that have truly been his living, breathing Sirocco only moments before?

Looking down at the rolling waters of the New Sea spread out below him, the warrior realized the waves were drawing closer. He was falling now—the flow of time had returned to normal. Doral turned his head slightly to the right and saw the jagged edge of the coastline and the Khalkists rising beyond. It was a beautiful sight, he thought, the misty horizon of the sea to one side and the rolling hills of Blodehelm stretching off on the other. Even as the warrior felt the

wind rushing past him and saw death below loom ever closer, he had to admire the grandeur of the land.

Odd, Doral thought. The fiery passions which ruled his life had fled now. None of the horrors he had just witnessed seemed to matter to him any more. Pride, anger, fear, awe, sorrow—all were gone. Death, it seemed, would be a good deal less exciting than he had always hoped.

The warrior angled his head upward to look again at the black dragon that had beaten him. She seemed just as large as she had been moments before, even though he had by now fallen thousands of

feet away from her. The dragon was gazing down, watching Sirocco's ruined bones fall away from each other. When they hit the water they would make scattered, insignificant splashes. The wyrm seemed to take absolutely no notice of him.

As he fell, something caught the doomed warrior's eye. A shape appeared in the clouds behind Sable. At first, Doral wasn't sure what it was, but then he recognized it as a dragon. A glint of emerald in the summer sun told him the dragon was green...Salina was the only Knight of Takhisis to ride a green. Doral's heart leapt. Surely, this was she! Salina had seen his plight and was even now racing to his aid.

Then, the truth became clear. The arriving dragon was riderless. Larger than Sirocco, but still smaller than Sable, the emerald wyrm was not Brimstone, whom his beloved Salina had ridden.

There was no doubt in Doral's mind that the green dragon had made use of Sable's distraction with Sirocco to maneuver above the black behemoth. In the blink of an eye, the green had swept down upon Sable. With screams of challenge, the two serpents coiled around each other in ferocious battle. Doral roused himself to shout encouragement to the newcomer, knowing his words would never carry far enough for the green to hear.

Then, as the wyrms fought high above him, the Knight finally found what he had sought. Far below, on the shores of the New Sea, he saw Brimstone's desiccated remains. Clearly, he had met the same fate as Sirocco. There could be no doubt about the whereabouts of this dragon's rider. Her body was almost certainly hidden beneath the waves that drew closer to him with every passing second.

Doral turned his gaze back to the battling dragons. The languid passivity that had overcome him only moments before was gone, driven out by grief and anger. He screamed in rage, cursing the name of the great black dragon and calling upon the newly arrived beast to destroy her.

Long before it became clear which dragon would triumph, however, the churning waters of the New Sea embraced his shattered body. At last, he and Salina were reunited.

