



KAZ

THE MINOTAUR

*HEROES
Volume Four*

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KAZ, THE MINOTAUR

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To Jennifer Ashley King,
niece and godchild,
who wasn't yet with us
when last I dedicated a book
to the family

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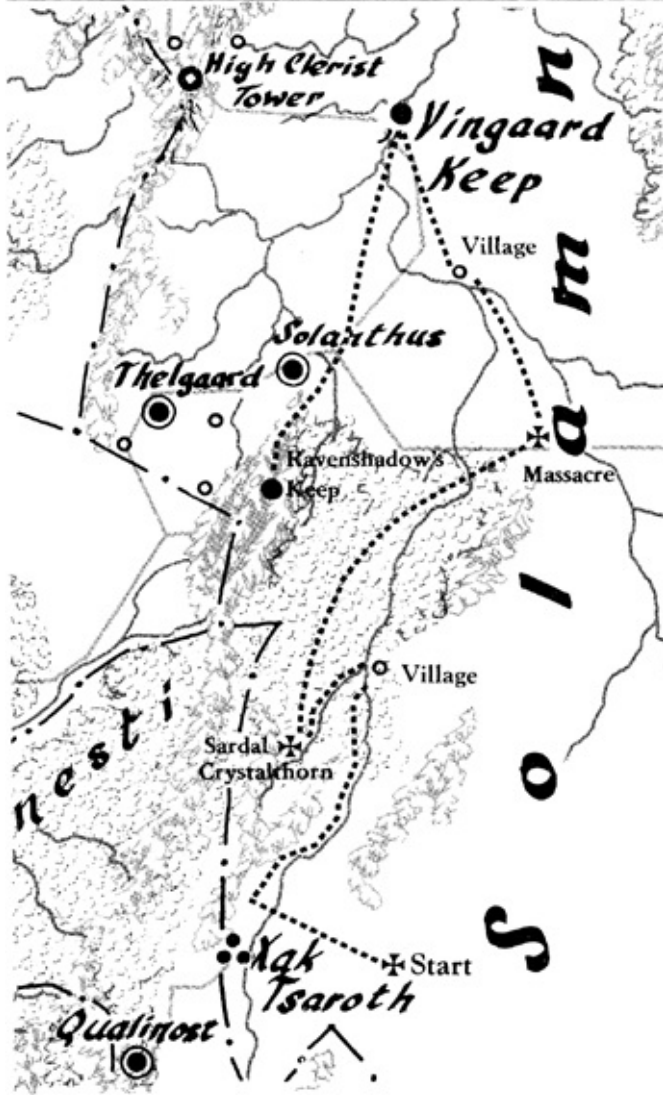
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KAZ'S JOURNEY





CHAPTER 1

They sat huddled around a small campfire, twelve and one. The distinction was important because, although the twelve followed the one who was their leader, they despised him as much as he despised them. Only necessity and a matter of honor threw them together and somehow held them together for so long.

The one was an ogre, a coarse, brutish figure well over six feet tall and very wide. His face was flat, ugly, with long, vicious teeth, good for tearing flesh from either a meal or a foe. His skin was pasty and mottled, and his hair was flat against his head. He wore only a dirty kilt and belt. In a scabbard strapped to his back, he carried what would have been, for a man, a two-handed sword, but for the ogre was just fine for one: a trophy of war. Stuffed into his belt, seemingly insignificant compared to the huge blade, were two knives. The ogre's name was Molok, and as he used his huge, bloody claws to tear meat from his portion of the kill, he surreptitiously eyed the others.

Most of the others, when standing, were a full head taller than the ogre, not that the fact disturbed Molok. He tore another piece of the nearly raw meat from the bone in his hand and jammed the morsel into his mouth while he watched the dozen minotaurs eat their own meals. Unlike the ogre, the minotaurs ate more slowly, carefully, albeit still with a certain savageness that would have unnerved humans or elves. There were nine males and three females, and all were armed. A couple had spears and three others' swords, like those the unwelcome companion carried, but the remainder carried huge, double-headed battle-axes. The males had horns more than a foot long, while the females' were a bit shorter.

The minotaurs were too at ease, Molok decided. That did not suit him. He wanted them agitated and anxious to be done with this task, if only so they would not have to travel wi

an ogre much longer.

“It’s been near a week, Scar-face, since you found any trail.” Molok picked a piece of meat out from between two yellowed fangs. “Is it maybe that the coward is craftier than you? He your *better?*”

At the sound of his gravelly voice, all twelve of the minotaurs looked up, the fire giving their eyes a burning, haunting look. One minotaur, whose ravaged features bespoke many fierce combats, threw his meat down and started to rise. A smaller one, female, grabbed hold of one arm.

“No, Scurm,” she said quietly. Her voice was deep, but for a minotaur, it would have been considered quite pleasant.

“Release me, Helati,” the one called Scurm rumbled. His voice was like the low, rolling thunder before a great storm. The battle-axe he used, which lay next to him, was huge even for one of his kind. Molok had seen it wielded most effectively, but was not concerned. He knew how to manipulate this band. Had he not kept the chase alive for over four years now?

“Easy, Scurm,” muttered another minotaur next to Helati. These two bore a strong resemblance to one another. Hecar was sibling, brother, to Helati. They were the weak link as far as the ogre was concerned. Over the four years, they had gone from dedicated pursuers to abject admirers of the renegade the band sought. The renegade that these minotaurs could never return home without.

The scarred minotaur settled down, but Molok saw that he had already accomplished his purpose. He had stirred things up. As always, the band began to talk about the latest setback.

“Cannot deny that Kaz is crafty.”

“Even cowards have minds!”

“Coward? He survived the lands of the Silvanesti!”

“Scurm said that was just a rumor, didn’t you, Scurm?”

The ravaged head tipped forward briefly. His horns, even in the light of only a single moon, Lunitari, were quite plainly worn from action. Scurm was a fighter, one who, if his mind had been as strong as his body, would have been leader of his people by now. Scurm was headstrong. He was perfect for Molok’s purposes.

“Kaz never journeyed into the lands of the Silvanesti,” Scurm snorted in derision. “He’s a coward and dishonorable. Just another ploy to throw us off the trail.”

“Which he be doing all too well,” added Molok casually.

Scurm glared at him with blood-red eyes. He wanted to take the ogre by the neck and squeeze until the life was gone. He could not, however. Not, at least, until their journey was over and Kaz was either dead or captured. “You’ve been of little help to us, Molok. All you are good for is telling us how bad we are. What have you done to speed up this Sargas-blasted quest? We are as sick of staring at your mongrel face for the past four years as you are of staring at ours.”

Shrugging disinterestedly, the ogre bit off another chunk of meat. “I was told that you be great trackers, great hunters. I see nothing so far. I think you be losing your edge. Does your honor mean so little to you? What about Tremoc? Would you be less than him?”

The ogre liked to bring up Tremoc at times like this. It was a favorite minotaur tale. In the name of honor, Tremoc had crossed the continent of Ansalon four times in his quest to bring the murderer of his mate to justice. The pursuit had lasted more than twenty years. It was

useful story for two reasons. First, it reminded his bullheaded companions of dedication and what was most important in their lives and, second, it urged them to renewed efforts. None of them wanted to be doing this for twenty years.

He had stirred them up enough. Now it was time to get them thinking about the hunt. “Not among the elves, Scurm, where be he?”

It was Hecar who answered. “Whether or not Kaz journeyed to the lands of the Silvanes elves—which he could have—he probably turned west.”

“West?” Scurm glanced at the other minotaur. “Qualinesti? That’s as foolish as entering the lands of the Silvanesti!”

Now it was Hecar who snorted. “I was meaning Thorbardin. The dwarves are more like to leave him alone. He can go from there to the land called Ergoth.”

Studying them both, the ogre said nothing. He was interested in hearing what the scarred minotaur’s response would be.

Scurm rose, tore off a piece of fat and gristle from their catch, and tossed the piece into the low flames. The fire shot up, a sizzling, spitting sound erupting where the fat melted away. The disfigured minotaur laughed, an ugly sound.

“You are either growing stupid or you have come to admire Kaz so much for his ability to run and hide that you are trying to steer us away!”

Hecar started to rise, and it looked as if the two creatures would come to blows. Many of the others began to grow agitated, snorting loudly in their excitement. Helati, once more trying to be peacemaker, quickly rose in front of her brother, facing him.

“No, Hecar!” she hissed quietly.

“Out of my way, female,” her brother muttered through clenched teeth.

“Scurm will kill you,” she whispered. “You know that!”

“My honor—”

“Your honor can take a little punishment. Remember, it is the wise minotaur who knows when to pick his battles. Another time, perhaps.”

“I will not forget this. The others—”

Despite their difference in height, she somehow managed to look him straight in the eye. “The others know full well that you can defeat any of them any time.”

Hecar hesitated. He glanced briefly toward the ogre, who appeared to be busy examining the bone he held on the off chance that it still held some shred of meat, and snorted quietly. Nothing is certain about that one. Finally he nodded and sat down. Helati joined him. Scurm gave him as much of a triumphant grin as a minotaur’s bovine features could. What his expression mostly consisted of was a showing of sharp teeth. Hecar could barely contain his fury.

“Kaz will not go west, nor will he go east. He will stay in the south, hoping to evade us.” Scurm turned toward Molok for agreement.

The ogre gazed at the minotaurs around him as if only just now remembering he was the instigator of this heated argument. It was time to settle things, Molok decided. Wiping his hairy paws on his kilt, he reached down to a pouch between his feet and pulled out a crumbled piece of parchment. With one fluid motion, he tossed it at Scurm. The startled minotaur succeeded in catching it before a sudden burst of fire scorched both paper and his own hand.

“What is this?”

Molok cracked open the bone he had been picking over and began sucking the marrow. Frustrated, the minotaur unfolded the sheet and tried to make out the markings in the dim, flickering light of the flames. His eyes widened, and he looked angrily at the ogre.

“This is a proclamation signed by the Grand Master of the Knights of Solamnia himself!”

There was renewed muttering on the parts of the assembled group. After four years of pursuing their quarry through the lands of humans, they now knew more about the Knights of Solamnia than any others of their race did, save Kaz.

“What does it say, Scurm?” one of the other minotaurs asked impatiently.

“The Grand Master offers a reward for several beings of various races. One of them is Kaz!” The last was said with total disbelief. “He is wanted, it says, for conspiring against the knighthood, specifically, the planned assassination of the Grand Master himself. There is also mention of murder here, but it does not specify whose and when.” Scurm’s tone indicated that he was a bit confused about what he had just read.

“Then he is wanted by the knighthood as much as he is wanted by us,” someone stated.

“Where did you get that proclamation?” Hecar snapped at the ogre.

Molok shrugged. “I find it yesterday. It had ... fallen ... from the tree that someone had posted it on, I think.”

“Why would the knights demand Kaz? He was their comrade!” one of the other females asked the group as a whole.

“As are some of these others,” Scurm added. He tossed the parchment to one of the other minotaurs, who started reading it slowly. The minotaurs prided themselves on the fact that of all races save perhaps the elves, they were the most literate. While physical strength was the final arbiter in their society, knowledge was the tool that honed that strength.

“The knights are mad!” Hecar muttered. “Have they given a reason?”

“Have they given a reason for anything we have seen in the time we have pursued Kaz?” Scurm glanced around. “They may have a reason; they may not. There are names on the proclamation that were their staunchest allies in ... in that time.”

“That time” was a war that the minotaurs were doing their best to wipe from their memories. More than one gave Molok a look of bestial hatred. The minotaurs had been slaves to soldiers to the ogres and humans who had followed the dark goddess, Takhisis, in her struggle against her counterpart, the lord of light, Paladine. The Knights of Solamnia had represented that god, and in the end, it was one of their number, a Knight of the Crown named Humbarth who had literally forced the goddess to capitulate. Only one other who had witnessed that costly victory had survived.

Kaz. Very few actually knew what part he had played in the final battle. Humans did not care to glorify what they tended to think of as a monster. The other minotaurs had pieced the story together over the years, though some, like Scurm, denied its plausibility.

“If the Knights of Solamnia want his head,” the mutilated warrior began, “then he will surely stay in the south, where their presence is weaker.”

Many of the others nodded. Molok looked at each and every one of them and then shook his head. “After four years, you know nothing. Even you who knew Kaz.”

He received twelve steady glares, which he ignored, as usual. “The knights be acting strange. His friends be now his foes, even the Lord of Knights, who, if what we learned be

true, called him comrade in the war.”

There was a pause. He had their full attention now. “Kaz will go north—north to Vingaard I think.”

It was fortunate that the land they presently roamed was empty of settlements, for the shouts that rose among the group could no doubt have been heard for miles around. It was finally Scurm who quieted the others—Scurm and Hecar.

“The Knights of Solamnia may have become twisted, Molok,” Hecar blurted, “as we have seen time and again, but do not make Kaz one with their madness. Despite all else, he is still a minotaur!”

Scurm nodded. Even he did not believe their prey was enough of a fool to head north.

Molok retrieved the proclamation and glanced at it one last time. With a toothy, predatory smile, he thrust it into the fire. After watching it burn to ash in mere seconds, he looked up once more at his companions ... his hated companions.

“He be no fool. Never said he was.” Molok reached down, gathered his few belongings, and rose. He gave the minotaurs a look full of contempt for what they were. Even now, no longer slave-soldiers, they needed an ogre to lead them around by their ugly noses. “He be Kaz though, and that be why he will go north to Vingaard. He needs no other reason.”

The ogre turned and stalked away, a disturbing look on his face, hidden from the minotaurs.



CHAPTER 2

I should go west, Kaz thought grimly. West or remain in the south.

He snorted as he glanced back at the path he had been following. The sun was high in the sky, making it possible to see quite some distance. *So why am I continuing north, when each day brings me nearer and nearer to Vingaard Keep and whatever madness has descended upon the Knights of Solamnia?*

His mount, the giant war-horse that Lord Oswal himself had bestowed upon the minotaur as a token of his appreciation, nickered impatiently. After five years with Kaz, the animal had picked up rebellious tendencies that would have shocked the more formal knighthood. In many ways, the horse was a reflection of its master.

Kaz quieted his mount and stared at the proclamation once more.

It was the fifth copy he had seen of this particular one, and it made no more sense to him now than it had the first time he had read it. Lord Oswal was a friend, a comrade. The elderly Knight of the Rose, made Grand Master after the death of his brother, had even given Kaz a seal permitting him safe passage in any land that respected the might of the Solamnic Order. Yet now this same comrade was making unsubstantiated accusations of crimes Kaz had supposedly committed!

The notices had only recently reached the southern lands. Kaz snorted. He glanced at the other names listed as outlaws along with his. Some he recognized, such as that of Lord Gu Avondale, the Ergothian commander who had aided in the final battle against the renegade mage, Galan Dracos, and his dark mistress, the goddess Takhisis. Huma had always spoken well of the man, once going so far as to say that Avondale deserved to wear the garments of a Solamnic Knight, so admirable was his individual code.

With a snarl, the minotaur ripped the sheet from the tree. *Conspiracy and murder?* He crumpled the paper up tightly and tossed it into the underbrush.

Kaz led the war-horse by the reins to a more secluded spot to the left of the path and leaned against one of the trees to wait for someone. Patience was not a habit he had been successful in cultivating during his life so far, and what little he did have was just about used up from waiting.

“Paladine’s Blade, Delbin!” he muttered under his breath. “If you don’t make it back in the next hour, I’m moving on!”

He could only imagine what sort of mischief his companion was getting into in Xak Tsaroth, the city a few miles due west. Xak Tsaroth bordered southwestern Solamnia and eastern Qualinesti, the land of the elves, and was a center of commerce linking north and south. Kaz had hoped his companion might be able to purchase a few of the things they needed. He also hoped that Delbin would be able to overhear some gossip that might explain the Sargas-be-damned rumors floating in from the regions surrounding the knighthood’s seat of power in Vingaard—rumors that could not—must not—be true.

But sending Delbin Knotwillow had been a risk at best. Kaz cringed each time his comrade of four months cheerfully volunteered for any task. It was that cheerfulness that unnerved the huge, powerful minotaur.

Delbin Knotwillow was a kender, and kender were born to mischief.

As if on cue, he heard the sounds of a horse. Delbin had departed three days ago, promising that he would return at the appointed time. If properly motivated, the short kender made an excellent spy. No one paid attention to a kender, except to check their personal valuables. Kender picked up a good deal of information, which they were all too willing to pass on to anyone who made their acquaintance. The kender thought this all one grand adventure—something he could brag about to his kin—and anyone else who would listen. After all, how many kender got to travel with a minotaur?

Kaz was all set to call out to his diminutive companion when he heard the second horse. He quickly reached up and took hold of his horse’s muzzle. The war beast, trained for all combat situations, recognized the gesture and froze.

The trees obstructed the minotaur’s view, but he thought he caught a glimpse of black. It was impossible to say whether what he saw was part of one of the riders or one of the horses. Either way, he knew by now that the newcomers were not his companion.

The riders slowed and then halted their mounts. He heard the clank of armor and the low muttering of the two men as they talked. Their words were unintelligible, but one was evidently angry at the other one. Kaz snorted quietly. This was a fine time and place to have an argument! If Delbin showed up now ...

When he heard the third horse, Kaz was ready to look up to the heavens and curse every god. Another rider? Then he realized that this latest one was coming from the south. If they kept up, the minotaur planned to open up an inn. The location was obviously excellent, what with the heavy traffic.

The other riders grew silent. Kaz began reaching for his battle-axe, aware that at least one of the newcomers had started moving in his direction. One sharply clawed hand tightened around the lower end of the axe shaft. Only a few more yards of foliage and the rider would be upon him.

Kaz caught a glimpse of ebony armor as the rider suddenly turned his steed back toward the road. The minotaur's eyes widened. He had seen armor like that during the war against the goddess of darkness. He had served under men and ogres who had worn that armor and, near the end, had fought alongside Huma against some of the deadliest of them.

This was one of the elite, fanatical soldiers of the deceased warlord Crynus, commander of Takhisis's armies, who long ago had been dispatched to whatever dark domain his king deserved by Huma of the Lance and the silver dragon. Kaz remembered the moment all too vividly. Crynus had refused to die; finally it had taken dragonfire to destroy him.

Regardless of the danger to himself, Kaz could not let one—no, two!—of the warlord's guardsmen roam about the countryside. It was not the first time he had come upon such marauders during the last five years. There were still a great number of the Dark Queen's servants who refused to acknowledge that their mistress had been utterly defeated. With nowhere to hide, they generally became traveling bands of thieves and murderers—all in the name of Takhisis, of course. The guardsmen were the worst; they still believed that she truly would return.

Kaz tapped the horse on the side of head, a signal that he had learned from the knight-hood. The horse would remain where it was until he summoned it. Nothing short of a dragon would make it move, and since there were no more dragons, there was no reason to worry.

Slowly, carefully, Kaz brought his axe around in front of him. Maneuvering his horse in the thick brush would have given him away. If Kaz was lucky, he might be able to bring down his opponent without a struggle, but ...

The black figure before him abruptly stiffened, and Kaz knew he had somehow given himself away. A long, wicked blade, hidden from view prior to now, sliced a vicious arc through the air as his adversary half-turned in the saddle. Kaz brought his axe up to fend off the blow, but the guardsman had underestimated the distance between them. The black jarred to a halt only halfway to the minotaur, its tip caught firmly in the side of a mighty oak.

Cursing, the rider tried to free his sword while simultaneously turning his mount. Kaz altered his grip on the axe and swung. The sword rose up to turn his blow from the rider, so that he struck the horse instead. Bleeding and excited, the animal fought its master for control. Kaz was forced to fall back as the huge beast reared and struck out randomly. The horse began to wobble.

The minotaur blinked. There was no longer anyone in the saddle. Now it was his turn to curse. He had forgotten how swift as well as deadly the ebony warriors could be.

A figure burst from the foliage beside him. Kaz parried the sword thrust, but lost ground in doing so. For the first time, he got a close look at his adversary. The man—he was too short to be an ogre, though possibly he was an elf—wore a face-concealing helm, but the eyes that peered out seemed to stare through the minotaur to some point well beyond. The soldier was building up to a berserker fury.

Briefly Kaz heard the sounds of a struggle coming from the path, but the other soldier continued to harry him. An axe, especially a battle-axe designed for two-handed use by humans, was not a good weapon in such close quarters. Every time Kaz tried to back up, his opponent moved with equal speed and pressed yet another attack.

It was the woods that saved him. Almost unmindful of the world about him, the raging

guardsman stumbled over the exposed root of a tree. It was not much of a delay—in fact, the soldier regained his balance almost immediately—but the hesitation gave Kaz the opening he needed.

He brought the axe around in one clean swing, his full strength behind it. There was no denying the power in that swing, for very few humans could approach matching a minotaur at full strength. Given the proper tool, a minotaur could chop a fair-sized tree down with one blow.

By comparison, armor was next to nothing.

The head of the axe caught the guardsman just above the elbow of his sword arm and kept going without pause. It tore into the hapless fighter's side and did not stop until its arc was complete. As Kaz stepped back, his foe, arm and trunk awash in red, toppled forward, the rage and life already gone from his eyes.

Kaz inhaled deeply. Up the path, the sounds of struggle had ceased, to be replaced by the growing clatter of several more mounted riders arriving from the south. Kaz had no way of knowing whether or not the others were friend or foe of the single rider.

No one shouted any commands, but Kaz heard a number of riders enter the woods. He wouldn't take them long to locate him. Wiping the blade of his axe, he hooked the weapon into place in his back harness. The harness was designed to allow him to carry the axe sometimes two, at all times. Practice enabled him to unhook the battle-axe in seconds. It was a design suitable only for someone with a backside as expansive as a minotaur's, and with the reach to match.

He mounted the war-horse just as the first searcher spotted him.

"Stand where you are! In the name of the Grand Master, I order you to stay!"

Kaz twisted around and glimpsed the familiar and once respected armor of a Knight of Solamnia—a Knight of the Sword, if he read the crest right. The knight was on foot, having evidently been forced to lead his horse through the thick brush. Kaz turned away and urged his horse forward even as the knight called out something to his companions.

Long ago, Kaz would have stood and fought, likely taking a good half-dozen of the stubborn knights with him before dying from multiple wounds. Huma, however, had taught him the wisdom of avoiding conflict—and certain death—in some situations. The minotaur understood now the pointlessness of always taking a stand. Many of his own people would have thought him cowardly—not that they didn't already.

Under Kaz's guidance, the war-horse picked out a path that led deeper and deeper into the woods. That was his only hope for retreat. Kaz knew that such a path would take him close to Xak Tsaroth, but to the north of that city, not directly east of it. Kaz realized, too, that he had probably seen the last of his kender companion. Of course, Delbin might have already forgotten him, anyway. There was also a possibility that the young kender had gotten caught in the knights' trap, for surely that was what it had been. They must have known about marauder activity in this area and had set up a trap of their own in order to catch the band by surprise. No doubt they would be disappointed in their catch: only two renegade guardsmen, at least one dead. If Delbin was a prisoner, he doubted the kender had anything to worry about. No one could possibly mistake any member of the kender race for a dangerous threat.

The knights were pursuing him in force now, though he dared not look back to see how close behind him they were. There had to be at least half a dozen, likely more, he estimated.

“Let’s see how well you know this land,” he muttered. He and Delbin had been scouting over this area for nearly a week. Indeed, they had crisscrossed this southern territory for nearly nine months. Always there was someone dogging their heels. Usually it was his own kind. “It’s just my luck if I ran into *them* now,” he added.

It was still too long until nightfall. Kaz would have to continue riding and hope that he lost his pursuers before the horse or his cover gave out. On maps, this land was not marked as heavily wooded, and the minotaur knew that in many spots the trees gave way to open fields quite abruptly. An open field would be the death of him. The knights might deliver him to Lord Oswal, but they were just as likely to deliver his body instead. The Grand Master’s proclamation made it clear that Kaz was an enemy, and the Knights of Solamnia were not going to waste effort trying to capture a minotaur alive when dead was just as satisfactory.

He was putting some ground between him and his pursuers; that was evident from the slow dwindling of shouts. It was too soon to hope, however, because the order was not known for giving up easily. They might hound him for days ... as if he needed still more following him in pursuit.

The horse stumbled over fallen limbs and depressions in the earth. The ground here was more treacherous, and a wrong step could injure both horse and rider. With a strength that brooked no argument from his mount, Kaz suddenly reined the horse to the right. The animal let loose with an irritated grunt and followed his lead. Kaz steered him around a precipitous drop, knowing that each second of delay was precious lost time. Once on level ground, he urged the war-horse on with a kick of his heels.

Kaz counted nearly up to thirty before he was rewarded by the echo of bewildered and angry cries. He heard at least two horses neigh madly and one man scream. The sounds of pursuit dropped off, but still not completely. He dared to glance briefly behind him. One knight still pursued, at some distance. His face was uncovered, and Kaz thought he looked rather young. He may have had a beard; it was impossible to say whether that was the case or whether he had merely glimpsed the knight’s hair blowing in the wind. Kaz had no idea why he should care about the other’s visage, save that he had almost expected it to be Human.

An arrow shrieked past his head, embedding itself in a tree behind him. But it had come from ahead of him, not from behind.

Paladine, do you have something against me, too? What had Kaz succeeded in stumbling into now?

He was answered by the sight of several figures, some clad in green, others in black armor, moving to intercept him. These were undoubtedly the very same marauders the knights had been seeking to flush out. Kaz had unwittingly completed that part of their mission for them. Now he had to get out alive.

Desperately he turned his mount. One hapless attacker flew back against a tree, bounced there by the horse’s left flank. The minotaur recalled the single knight still chasing him. He opened his mouth to warn him, but the knight’s horse was already riderless; another arrow had marked the end of the determined young warrior. Kaz snorted furiously. Yet another futile death for which he would get the blame.

He fully expected a bolt in his back, but the marauders had their own problems. The other knights were catching up now, and the element of surprise was no longer on the side of the raiders. Kaz’s eyes widened as he realized just how many knights had followed him. He was

about to be enmeshed in the middle of a full-scale fight unless somehow he broke free.

An ugly figure dressed in ragged brown and green garments tried to pull him from the war horse but received a skull-shattering kick from the animal instead. A few of the marauders and knights were already exchanging blows. A man with a sword was run down by a Knight of the Rose and literally trampled to death. Another knight was pulled off his horse by two black-suited guardsmen. Reinforcements from both sides were moving to join the fray.

“Paladine,” Kaz hissed, “if I have done anything at all worthy of you in these last few years, would it be too much to ask to provide me with a path out of here?”

Kaz didn’t expect an answer; after all, gods spoke only to clerics and heroes. Then a flash of white caught his attention. It looked like some kind of a white animal, whether a stag, bear, or wolf he could not say. Had Paladine actually heard him?

Unless Kaz departed instantly, the blood urge would overwhelm him and he would waste the last few precious seconds of his life hacking away at his adversaries, as did so many of his respected but short-lived ancestors. While he revered his ancestors, he had no intention of joining them in the land of the dead just yet.

So he turned his mount and rode madly in the direction of the white vision.

Kaz rode for a solid quarter of an hour before daring to slow down. By then, the sounds of combat had been left far behind him. He was now just northeast of Xak Tsaroth.

“I’m no coward,” he suddenly whispered to himself and to whatever powers might be listening. Nevertheless, he still felt some misgivings. By rights, shouldn’t he have stayed and aided the Solamnic Order in any way he could? Had he not betrayed his trust to Huma, a man he had admired as much as the greatest of his ancestors?

“My honor is my life.” The phrase sounded strange now as he whispered it. It was part of the Oath and the Measure that Huma’s order had sworn to follow. To a minotaur, it was one reason why the Knights of Solamnia had been held in higher esteem than any other human organization.

Maybe you could have explained honor to me, Huma. He sighed, a very unminotaurish thing to do, and studied his surroundings.

He was at the edge of a field of wild grass, which he hoped would not suddenly reveal yet another dire threat. If Kaz continued on in the same direction, he knew that he would first come across an offshoot of the mountain range that more or less ran the length of Qualinesti. If he continued farther, he would find himself in the densely packed forests of the elven lands. That, he knew with bitter satisfaction, was one choice he did not have to ponder. After Silvanesti, he had no desire to see another elf ever again. Let them stay happy in their seclusion from the outside world. Kaz knew of a shortcut. Delbin had told him of a river that ran north to Vingaard Keep. It meant passing through some mountains and part of the vast forest of Qualinesti, but it would lead him to his goal: Vingaard Keep, and a confrontation with the Grand Master himself.

He found himself wishing the kender was with him, if only to act as guide. Delbin knew the land well, but Kaz could not afford to wait for the ever-cheerful little annoyance. Luckily, he carried Delbin’s map.

Though he wouldn’t admit it to himself, Kaz had grown fond of the kender. Only a fool would have pointed that out to him, however, for minotaurs are generally picky about their companions, and to admit befriending a pouch-picking, childish creature like Delbin was

tantamount to weakness.

With a grunt, Kaz urged his mount onward. He wasn't going to get anywhere remaining where he was, contemplating everything under the heavens.

* * * * *

As the minotaur rode west, something stirred in the high grass. It was pale white and hairless. The eyes had no pupils and glowed scarlet. It remained in the tall grass as much as possible, hating, in some dim way, the light that burned in the sky. Its eyes remained fixed on the receding figures of rider and mount. When the figures were far enough away, the beast rose and began to follow. Standing, it resembled something that had once been a wolf—wolf long dead, perhaps.

Fighting the searing pain of daylight, it began to follow the minotaur.



CHAPTER 3

At times, it seemed to Kaz that his life was nothing but turmoil. Following Huma's sacrifice and the war's end, he had hoped things would be different. His fellow minotaurs might have called him soft, dishonorable, but he no longer cared. The more he thought about the minotaur way of life, the less he liked it, which was not to say that the ways of humans, dwarves, elves, or even kender were any better.

The ride to the river was surprisingly without incident. If this river had a name, the mapmaker had forgotten to include it. Delbin had never said exactly where he had picked up his map, and Kaz, knowing kender, did not push the point. It served its purpose, and at least it was fairly accurate as far as landmarks.

The sun hung very low in the sky. Kaz estimated that he had perhaps a little less than an hour before it sank from sight. Lunitari was already visible above the horizon. Solinari, the pale white moon, would reveal itself later on. It would be a fairly bright night.

A river this size meant settlements and shipping along its length. That meant more people than Kaz really cared to encounter, but it was still the quickest route. For the time being, his best bet was to skirt the minor chain of mountains east of the river and just north of his present position. By the time the mountain range turned from the direction he needed to go, there would be forest, which would provide him concealment for nearly half the journey. He tried not to think about Northern Solamnia, which from what he had heard, was still a fairly desolate land. And if half the rumors were true, the knights were behaving strangely indeed.

He rode on. The mountains began to grow.

As the last vestiges of sunlight retreated before the night, Kaz began to wonder if he had made the right choice.

It was only a small range of mountains, and the mountains themselves were nothing in comparison to some of the giants he had crossed before. They were rather ordinary peaks. Yet he was disturbed by them in some way he could not decipher.

“Any magical weapons lying about?” he whispered half-mockingly to them. The minotaur’s eyes widened as he realized that was what disturbed him—the memory of Huma, that final conflagration. Kaz could not look at a mountain without subconsciously remembering how it all started—the search for the legendary Dragonlances, the only weapons capable of defeating the hordes of dragons of the Dark Queen, Takhisis. They had found those lances, but only a couple of dozen at first. Kaz, riding along with Huma, had been one of the small band that had first wielded them in battle. He was also one of the few survivors of that band and the only one to see Huma, in the last moments of his life, utterly defeat the evil goddess, forcing her to swear an oath that she would depart Krynn and never return. In the last five years, Kaz had often gone out of his way to avoid getting too near mountains. Granted, there had been times when it had proven unavoidable, but he had always tried his best to pass through them as quickly as possible.

Afraid of mountains! Kaz snorted in self-disgust and urged his horse forward. Tonight he would sleep with his head against one of these leviathans. The more Kaz thought about it, the more determined he became. At the very least, the minotaur would stand less of a chance of being discovered by some other traveler. Kaz eyed the looming peaks and tried to estimate how long it would take him to reach the nearest one. Past nightfall, the minotaur decided grimly. He would have preferred it otherwise.

Under a tall, worn peak, Kaz made camp. At some point, perhaps in the distant past or perhaps in the war, a good portion of one side of the mountain had broken away, giving it a toothy look. It reminded the minotaur of his grandsire, a once-fierce bull who had survived to a great age despite a number of improperly healed injuries. He dubbed the mountain Kefo, in his ancestor’s honor. It made sleeping under its shadow much easier.

After months of incessant kender chatter, it was odd to rest with only the sounds of the night to keep him company. Kaz snorted. If he was beginning to miss Delbin, then perhaps it would be better if he turned himself over to his enemies!

“Paladine preserve my mind!” Kaz whispered wryly.

Delbin had come across him in the south, just after Kaz had returned from a long and hazardous journey to the frozen lands in the extreme south. The proclamations from Vingaard were just appearing in the southern regions, but the unorthodox captain who had led the expedition and who had grown fond of Kaz gave him the benefit of the doubt despite the harsh accusations of murder and treachery that the proclamations spouted with no evidence to back them up. The seal given to Kaz by Grand Master Oswal of the knighthood only strengthened the minotaur’s story of the truth. Besides, having a minotaur proved fortuitous for the icy domains proved to be treacherous in more ways than one. A hardy explorer the

human might have been, but after that one trip, when the soil of Kharolis, his home, was once more beneath his feet, he told Kaz he was looking forward to spending the rest of his days—and he was still a young man—in some nice, peaceful market haggling with customers over the price of apples or something.

A high, curious voice had asked, “Did you really come back from the ice lands? Is it true your breath freezes so hard there that you’ve got to melt it over a fire to hear what you said? I heard that somewhere! Are you a minotaur? I’ve never seen a minotaur before! Do you bite?”

At first Kaz thought the intense questioner no more than a half-grown human child with a long, thick ponytail. Only when the captain swore and reached for his gold pouch did the minotaur realize the horror that they were facing.

Delbin Knotwillow, Kaz thought in retrospect, *is probably annoying even to other kender*. Certainly they never seemed to come across any others—at least not for long. Delbin, who had stuck by the minotaur’s side from that time on, plying him constantly with all sorts of inane questions about minotaurs and everything else, was a young male, handsome by human people’s standards. He was slightly larger than most of his kind, perhaps an inch or two under four feet and almost ninety pounds. He considered himself studious and had taken it upon himself to write a history of present-day Kryn— a worthy goal, except that often when he reached into his pouch for his book, instead he pulled out an item that some clumsy human had apparently dropped. In the excitement of finding it, Delbin would forget all about the incident he had wanted to record.

Now the kender was likely somewhere in Xak Tsaroth or hopelessly searching for Kaz east of the city, unless something else had caught his attention. Or, for all the minotaur knew, Delbin was at this moment deep in Qualinesti looking for an elven horse, something he had always wanted to see.

Staring at the two visible moons, Kaz began to wonder if he was going to spend the entire night thinking about the kender or getting some of the rest he so badly needed. He hoped to have journeyed well into the forest before tomorrow evening.

Exhaustion finally began to overwhelm his senses. Nightmare visions of hundreds of curious and excited kender began to fade into the warm darkness of slumber. Kaz almost sighed in relief as at last he drifted away in peace.

* * * * *

He was standing before a great fortress that seemed to cling precariously to one side of the jagged peak. Creatures of all races lay dead or dying, and it was difficult to say who had been fighting whom.

“It’s all over now,” Huma sighed. Kaz turned to gaze at his friend and comrade. Despite his relatively young age, Huma’s handsome visage was marked with lines, and his hair, including his mustache, was silver-gray. His face was pale, almost deathlike.

An inhumanly beautiful woman with gleaming tresses of silver stood at his side, her arm linked with the knight’s. Kaz blinked. Every now and then, her face seemed to shift to that of a dragon.

“We won,” she said sweetly.

“You have won nothing but death!” a voice cried.

The ground before the vast citadel burst open, and a fearsome creature with a multitude of heads

rose before them. Huma pulled a Dragonlance from his scabbard, but the monstrosity only laughed. The woman at Huma's side melted and grew, wings bursting from her delicate back. Her slender arms and legs gave way to misshapen limbs that could only belong to a dragon. A symbol of majesty, she flew into the air and challenged the horror that Kaz realized must be Takhisis, the dark goddess.

Takhisis laughed mockingly and burned the silver dragon in midflight. A shower of ash, all that remained of Huma's love, scattered in the breeze created by the goddess's massive, leathery wings.

Takhisis laughed even harder. Kaz uttered an oath to his adopted god, Paladine. The heads of Takhisis were not the heads of dragons, as the minotaur had thought at first. Instead, most were human. One was incredibly beautiful, so that even Gwyneth, the silver dragon, was ugly by comparison. Takhisis the seductress. Turning his gaze from that visage to another did not help. The next head was the ebony-helmed visage of the mad warlord, Crynus. Spittle ran down his chin. Another was the head of the sorcerer Magius, Huma's childhood friend, who had died a prisoner of the Dark Lady's servants.

Yet another, this one the gaunt, deathly visage of a Knight of Solamnia, made both Kaz and Huma gasp. This was Rennard, he who had helped sponsor Huma to the knighthood and who, in the end, had been revealed not only as the lad's uncle, but also as a treacherous cultist serving Morgion, god of disease and decay. Rennard had died horribly after failing in his mission to kill both Lord Oswal and Huma. Morgion was not a forgiving god.

The worst was last. Towering above the other heads, even that of the temptress, was one that Kaz had never really seen, but knew without having to hazard a guess. Grinning like a death's-head, the long, narrow face swelled until it was almost as large as the rest of the abomination itself. Huma could see a term one could only loosely apply to it, for the skin had a slightly greenish tinge to it, and Kaz could see an elaborate network of scales, like those of a snake, covering it. The hair lay thin and flat against the head. The teeth were long, sharp, and predatory.

"Dracos," Huma muttered. "In the good graces of his queen once more." He shifted his grip on the Dragonlance, the only weapon ever to defeat Takhisis, and to Kaz's horror, held it out for the minotaur to take.

"What—what's this?"

Huma smiled at him sadly. The young-old face was drawn and white, as dead as ghostly Rennard's. "I cannot do any more. I'm dead, remember?"

As Kaz watched in horror, his comrade was caught up in the wind and scattered like ash all around. In seconds, there was not a trace left.

"Minotaurrrr. Wayward child. Time to come back to the fold."

He looked up at the leering faces and was gripped by an overwhelming panic. Despite a part of him that cried out at such cowardice, he turned and tried to flee, only to discover that no matter how hard he ran, he only seemed to be drawing closer to the five-headed beast.

The Knights of Solamnia were there, but instead of aiding him, they were jeering. Lord Oswal and his nephew Bennett, their hawklike features so identical it was uncanny, watched his struggles with as much interest as if they were studying an ant on the ground.

"I've never seen a five-headed dragon before," a familiar voice commented happily. "Will each head take a bite out of you? Does it have five stomachs? Is something wrong? Kaz? Kaz?"

The heads, maws open and grossly exaggerated in size, dove toward him.

The last thing he heard was a voice asking, "Kaz, do you want me to leave you alone?"

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