



THE LAKE OF DEATH

JEAN RABE





The dragon burst from the lake in a tremendous spray of water, midnight black and brilliant blue scales gleaming like perfect gems in the light of two full moons. It took to the sky and spread its wings, hanging above the steamiest land in Ansalon. The great beast seemed the sum of every dragon on Krynn, of every creature that lived in the primordial swamp. Elegant in form, it was at the same time breathtakingly beautiful and awe-inspiringly terrifying. Demonic and divine, repulsive and majestic—it was all of those things at once.

The creature dipped its head, drew its wings in close and dived. It became a stroke of glistening blue-black that arced down like lightning then rose at the very last instant to unfurl its wings before crashing. Beating them almost imperceptibly to keep itself a breath above the water, it glided forward. Dangling front talons, it brushed across the surface of the lake, heading toward the marshy shore. It settled, half on the bank and half in the shallows, stretching its neck into a row of young

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cypress trees that grew beyond the lake's edge, its nostrils quivering, jaws opening, tongue snaking out to seek prey.

Suddenly the dragon clamped its teeth on a creature hiding in the small trees, a thing that looked like a cross between a man and a lizard. Called a bakali, the creature was thickly muscled and had the girth of an ogre. It carried a double-bladed poleaxe and boasted a mouthful of jagged teeth that added to its fierce countenance. To the dragon, the bakali scout was a nuisance, certainly not a threat, and was almost beneath its notice.

Almost.

The haft of the creature's poleaxe splintered like a dry twig when the dragon slammed its jaws shut. The creature's bones broke just as easily, and the dragon swallowed it in one gulp. Instantly the undergrowth sprang alive. A force of bakali had been quietly approaching behind the scout, each scaly soldier weighed down with weapons—axes, swords, spears, knives, and javelins. Now they rushed the dragon as one, whooping a long, hideous war cry, panicking parrots and egrets that flew screeching from the trees to add to the hellish cacophony.

The largest of the bakali barked orders over his shoulder as he closed in on the dragon, his commands a series of hisses and clicks. There were well more than a hundred bakali, and as the first wave reached the dragon—with spears and javelins thrusting forward—their war whoops turned to screams.

The dragon surged against the bakali, slamming them into the row of cypresses, snapping the trees and biting at the creatures, tossing its head back lustily as it swallowed bakali after bakali. At the same time it slashed with its front claws, cutting through the soldiers' thick

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flesh, slicing several in two and causing blood to splatter and rain everywhere. Its huge tail whipped back and forth, batting away the ones who were splashing into the water and trying to come at it from the side, its rear claws pinning the nearest bakali beneath it, drowning them in the shallows. It lowered its head and skewered a few of the berserk creatures on its splendid horns, then with a flick tossed them yards away and began to spear more.

The sounds of the fight were deafening—the war cries from the still-attacking bakali, the death-screams of the closest victims, the cracking of weapon hafts and tree limbs and bakali bones, the ghastly crunching as the dragon continued to devour its foes, and now all of it was topped by a great whoosh of wind created by the dragon's beating wings. The rush of air hurled many of the bakali to the ground. Those still on their feet fell victim to the dragon's powerful jaws, but despite the carnage and their dwindling numbers, the bakali did not retreat.

The bank was slick with blood as the dragon crawled up onto higher ground, crushing a dozen bakali beneath its massive body. More than half the enemy were down, dying, or slaughtered, and the remaining creatures continued to press their hopeless onslaught as the dragon edged deeper into the trees. A barrel-chested bakali directed the soldiers to concentrate on the dragon's front legs and to stay clear of its haunches, where its tail was proving especially lethal. Another ordered those in the second rank to hurl spears and knives at the dragon's head. Seemingly oblivious, the dragon persisted in its wholesale butchering of the bakali until one clever foe stepped in close and shoved a javelin between a narrow gap in the scales on its chest. Black blood spurted from the wound. The valiant bakali hollered excitedly and

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again swung hard with his cutlass at the spot. This drew more blood and compelled the dragon's attention, briefly giving it pause.

A claw swept in and snatched up the offending bakali, lifting him high while ignoring the frenzied blows of his comrades. The dragon brought the soldier up close, holding him even with its ink-black eyes and studying him intently for a moment before squishing him. Then the dragon dropped the pulpy mass and returned its focus to the bakali that were swarming around and trying to breach its armor-like scales. It growled horribly at them, the first sound it had uttered, then it did a surprising thing—it closed its eyes. Despite the chaos of the battle, the dragon was relaxing, releasing the tight control it had been maintaining over its innate fear aura. Liberated, the magical wave pulsed outward, sweeping over the surviving bakali soldiers and instantly filling them with bone-numbing fright. Most of them dropped their weapons and ran pell-mell, crashing through the foliage with no thought as to where they were going—as long as they got far away from the dragon. Only a mere handful were able to rally against the dragonfear and stand their ground, and these were dealt with swiftly.

In the span of only a few minutes all, of the scaly soldiers were slain or routed. The dragon plucked the javelin still sticking from its chest and tossed it into a bed of ferns as it watched the last few survivors flee deep into the swamp. It could smell their fear and their sweat even after they were lost from view, and something else—the coppery scent of blood—its own, and that of the fallen bakalis. Those acrid smells, coupled with the foul redolence of its own body, overpowered the richer and more pleasant odors of the fen, and therefore angered the dragon.

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It roared its displeasure that the land near its precious lake had been sullied and the air tainted. Then it pushed aside a bakali corpse that had fallen too near a red chokeberry bush, a favorite plant of the dragon's. It began to rake aside other bodies, then stopped and raised its head, nostrils quivering, picking up a new odor—the faint trace of sulfur evoking a blacksmith's shop. It spun to face the source.

"That rout was impressive. Truly impressive." The whispered words came from the base of a willow tree that reached high above the young cypresses. "I started running when I heard the commotion, fast as I could, but by the time I got here, it was all over."

The speaker swept aside a veil of leaves and emerged, plodding toward the dragon, making his way around the bakali corpses and stopping to tug free a few coin pouches he spotted. The scent of sulfur grew stronger as he approached.

The newcomer was a sivak draconian, a scaled creature, manlike in form but far more powerful, birthed centuries past by the goddess Takhisis from the corrupted egg of a silver dragon. His kind usually had wings and, like the dragon, could soar above this swamp and any other land, but this particular sivak could not fly. Scarred, knobby patches of hide marked where his wings once were.

"You could have left at least one of those beasts for me. You know I enjoy a good fight now and again."

"You'll have other chances," the dragon growled softly, so that only the faintest tremor rippled through the ground beneath the sivak's feet. "As you know, this wasn't the first force sent against me, and it won't be the last, but yes, next time, I'll try to remember to save a few of the stupid bakali just for you."

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“Disgusting beasts they are.”

The sivak prodded one of the dead bodies with his foot before stepping over it, and he unsuccessfully tried to conceal a shiver as he paused near an uprooted sapling a few yards from the dragon’s snout. The dragon recognized the sivak’s discomfort and again suppressed its fear aura.

The sivak quit trembling and nodded his thanks. He pulled a leather satchel off the back of one bakali and put the coin pouches and a few other trinkets inside it. Then he drew closer to the dragon, keeping himself from gagging at the great stench. Though he was large for a draconian and much larger than a man, his broad shoulders barely came up to the dragon’s dewclaw. He put the satchel on his own back, looked up into the dragon’s monstrous black eyes, and shook his head wearily.

“Dhamon, I well know that won’t be the last army to come for a visit. There’ll be another and another. Each one has been larger. First, men, a handful, then practically a whole army led by a Knight of Neraka with braids and medals on his chest and a sorcerer in tow. Now bakali, next spawn and abominations I reckon, maybe something worse, and all of them loyal to that demon of a dragon Sable.”

“Maybe,” the dragon said after a moment. He lowered his head until the barbels that hung from his jaw grazed the ground. A slimy rope of spittle edged over his lower lip. “Maybe, Ragh. Maybe she’ll send something to surprise us one of these days . . . something worse.”

“Oh, I think you can very definitely count on worse coming our way.” The sivak let out a deep breath. “I keep telling you, it’s not safe around here, Dhamon.”

The dragon cast his gaze about the marshy landscape, taking in the broken bodies of the bakali and the pools

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of blood that glimmered darkly in the light of the moons Solinari and Lunitari. The air was still, and everything was eerily silent; not even the insects were chirping in the aftermath of the fight.

“Not safe here, Ragh? Not safe for the bakali, don’t you mean? Or any spawn. Sable’s minions are not welcome in my lands.”

“These aren’t *your* lands, Dhamon,” the sivak muttered under his breath. “Sable certainly doesn’t see it that way. She thinks this whole swamp is hers. She created it, after all.”

The dragon pretended to ignore him, turned and started west, careful not to trample the sivak in the process or disturb the prized chokeberry. The sivak was quick to follow, pausing only to grab at a few bakali corpses where the moonlight glinted off valuables. Here a well-made halberd, there some matched throwing daggers and another coin pouch, a small bag filled with ivory belt buckles, another pouch filled with pearls—all things the bakali had no doubt taken off hapless victims. After several minutes there was a flutter overhead, the birds finally returning to the trees. From somewhere along the shores of the lake behind them came a series of splashes, likely large alligators and gar getting busy feeding on the bakali remains.

The dragon’s course took them through a stand of ancient locusts and water hickories, the canopy so dense that the bright moonlight was reduced to haunting, infrequent beams. The cattails and marsh bulrushes were thick between the trunks, and there was a sizeable patch of pickerel weed stalks and tall switch grass. Salt-marsh fleabane was growing nearby. The camphor scent its purple flowers gave off was heavy in the humid air. Beneath it was the sweet odor of wild azaleas.

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In spite of Dhamon's size, he was able to slip through the maze of swampland. Though neither he nor the draconian were attempting to be quiet, the animals that made their homes in this desolate area, mainly snakes and lizards that lounged on the high branches, barely gave the odd pair passing notice. A king snake wrapped around the base of a green ash only half-opened its eyes. The creatures were used to the draconian and the dragon by now and knew they were irrelevant to the pair.

The canopy thinned where the dragon crossed a wide stream, and the moonlight spilled down on a clearing circled predominantly by weeping cedars and black oaks. In the center was a bog patch swarming with craneflies and mosquitoes. The dragon and siva skirted the bog on their way to a hoary shagbark, one of the giants of the swamp. Dhamon pressed against the trunk as he went, letting the uneven knobs scratch his side. Behind the tree lay an even denser weave of branches. Though a man would be blind here, the dragon could make out a small rise and further a cave opening that was well masked by a cascade of vines. Dhamon exhaled, his breath fluttering the vines and effectively parting before him. He stepped through, then listened for the siva to follow.

The draconian's claws clicked lightly against the stone floor, which was smooth from the frequent passage of the dragon. One hand brushed against the side of the cave. Here the darkness was so black that neither of them could see, and shortly, the siva took his hand from the wall and mumbled sing-song words that caused a globe of pale blue light to settle in his open palm. It was one of the small number of modest spells he had learned by studying under sorcerers he'd met and later killed during his centuries on Krynn. It was a spell he found

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exceedingly useful in this swamp, and in particular, in Dhamon's dark lair.

The magic light revealed moisture-slick walls of gray granite that sparkled with crystals and veins of minerals, surrounding a floor that sloped down at a relatively steep angle. The sivak hurried past the dragon and took the lead, holding the light high, and with a few arcane words, coaxing an even brighter illumination. The wide passage narrowed as it plunged, and Dhamon could barely squeeze through the entrance. Then it opened into a massive chamber, one side of which was filled with mountains of coins, piles of decorative weapons, and mounds of other shiny baubles the dragon had collected during the past several months. The sivak added the halberd and the bag of ivory belt buckles to a pile.

The air in the cave was warm and suffocating, filled with the malodorous scent of the dragon. Ragh fought against the bile he felt rising in his throat and breathed shallowly as he concentrated. After a few minutes he was able to inure himself to the awful smell.

"Sable will find this place eventually and send her force right into our lair," the draconian said. "She's looking for it now. I spent enough years under her claw to know how she thinks, and don't think she won't discover this place, Dhamon. She will. She makes it a point of pride to know about everything in this damnable swamp."

The dragon stretched out on the far side of the chamber and rested his head on a large mound of steel pieces. He snaked a claw forward and with a talon drew a crystal ball toward him. It was a souvenir from a Knight of Neraka sorcerer he'd bested and brutally killed, who had been among the most recent attackers.

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“Well, Sable hasn’t found out about my lair yet, Ragh, or she’d have sent the bakali here tonight. Why send them to the lake? The advantage was mine out in the open. Here they might have trapped me. No, Sable doesn’t have a clue . . . yet.”

Dhamon began tapping on the crystal until silvery wisps of fog appeared inside it.

The draconian thought a moment and scratched at his chin. “Maybe she didn’t send a force here because you’re rarely here, Dhamon. Because . . . because you’re usually out prowling around the lowlands. Because you like the marsh that’s by the lake, and you spend most of your time there. You’re almost peaceful by that marsh; you drop your guard. Maybe that’s why the bakali attacked there.”

“I don’t drop my guard,” Dhamon growled softly, an old memory tugging at his mind, “and I don’t care much for the water. Even the bakali must know that.”

“The water hides your scent, so you were able to surprise them.”

“Sable’s minions are easy to surprise.”

The draconian shrugged. “Dhamon, sooner or later she will send an army here—an army so large that even you won’t be able to triumph.”

“Maybe because she’s waiting for me to accumulate more of a horde so she can swoop in and add it to her own. What little I have thus far . . .”

“. . . is considerable, Dhamon, and you gain more treasure with every force she sends against you. I don’t see the point of collecting all this stuff. Frankly, if we don’t do something with it . . .”

Ragh sat the globe of light at his feet, tugged off the backpack, and upended it. Pouches of coins and pearls spilled out, along with a small sculpture of a nightbird

that Ragh suspected was magical, and two exceptional daggers with inlaid handles.

Ragh bent and picked up one of the pouches he remembered was filled with pearls. He hefted it as if to judge their value. Then he picked up his light globe again with his other hand. "This hoard is sure to attract Sable, mark my words."

The dragon shifted his head and several coins rolled from the mound and clinked against the floor. The silver wisps brightened in the crystal ball and something indistinct appeared in the center.

"Let her send more bakali and knights against me, wherever she can find me. Let her send all the minions she has."

"You don't mean that."

Dhamon's eyes narrowed. "I do. Perhaps I want Sable to come herself."

The draconian started pacing, the light globe in his hand causing the shadows to dance as he stepped past alcoves and overhangs. "You can't mean that. You can't possibly mean that. Tell me you don't really mean that."

Dhamon didn't reply. He was studying the indistinct something in the crystal ball, cocking his head as if listening to another voice. "Where?" he asked the crystal. "Where?" His eyes narrowed as he leaned his head closer. "Just what is it?"

Ragh stared at him quizzically.

"You've told me the 'where' of it, crystal. Now tell me the 'what.' Saying what I seek is in a lake is not good enough. I repeat, I do not care for lakes, and I will not search one for a mysterious *something*. I need to know what is so important. What?" The object in the crystal remained indistinct. "Tell me!"

What is "what?" Ragh mouthed. It was all mysterious to the sivak, and he wanted to know what Dhamon was talking about, what Dhamon was searching for in the crystal ball, but he knew now wasn't the time. The dragon's rising irritation was already causing the cave floor to tremble ominously.

"What?" Dhamon repeated with a snarl. "What exactly do I need to find?"

Ragh studied his friend, relaxing finally when Dhamon appeared to give up the searching. The sivak had watched Dhamon use the crystal ball before, but he still couldn't figure out how it worked—and neither could the dragon, Ragh guessed. Perhaps they should have left the sorcerer alive and had him work the crystal's magic. Perhaps they should go find another sorcerer . . .

"I should look at that wound."

Dhamon reluctantly glanced up from the crystal. "It will heal on its own. It's not deep." Dhamon idly stirred some of the steel pieces with a talon and drew back from the crystal ball. The silver wisps disappeared. He grunted irritably.

"We've got enough treasure, that's for sure. Pouches of steel pieces, ivory buckles, pearls. We should get far away from here, take the treasure with us."

"The treasure is meaningless," the dragon said. "These steel pieces—as valuable as these things might be, they're worthless to me, yet I find that I want ever more. More!"

The draconian was startled by this statement, and he nearly dropped the light globe and the pouch of pearls. The light flickered and Ragh had to concentrate to make it brighter again.

"I can't walk into a town with a bulging coin purse and rent a room at an inn or buy a lady's company, can

I, Ragh? I don't need expensive clothes. I certainly don't need to buy fancy food. I can eat my enemies when I'm hungry, though the gods know those bakali tasted horrid. I can't spend a single steel piece, no matter how many thousands upon thousands I hoard."

"The places where I would be welcome to spend them, Dhamon, I no longer care to go either," Ragh whispered plaintively.

"So why do I—why does any dragon hoard this stuff?"

Ragh padded over. "Dhamon, I . . ."

"I want more. Like a man who craves ale, I crave wealth." He shook his great head, the barbels knocking loose steel pieces from the mound. The dragon stretched his neck and caught Ragh's stare. Dhamon's eyes held a great sadness. "Senseless for me to have bothered collecting all this from the men Sable sent against me, senseless for both of us. Whatever possesses me to want all of this?"

"Perhaps, Dhamon . . ."

"Maybe it's a dragon's instinct . . . this collecting. Maybe whatever shred of humanity is left in my soul thinks I will someday need these coins and jewels. The gods know that when I ran with Maldred we were always after treasure—never could get enough in those days either. Maybe that piece of me thinks that one day again I'll be able to stroll into a tavern, drop some steel on the bar, and order a tankard of dwarf spirits." He settled his head back down on the coins.

"Yes, maybe someday you'll be human again," the sivak offered consolingly. "There's magic in the world again. You've been consulting the crystal ball about the possibility. I've seen you try it many times. Dhamon . . ."

Dhamon let out a chuckle, the harsh sound bouncing off the walls and causing the stone floor to shudder. A row of spears that had been propped against a wall shifted and a few of them toppled over.

“Ragh, my friend, I stopped being human almost a year ago, remember? You were there when it happened in the mountains, and you followed me here—you, my only friend.”

The draconian nudged some spilled coins with a foot. The light caught an old gold one and made it softly gleam. “Of all the places to settle, Dhamon,” he scolded. “You could’ve picked someplace far from an overlord’s land. There’s nothing special about this damnable swamp—except the constant danger.”

“Sable claims it. That’s special to me, and I’m claiming some of it as my own—more and more and more of it.”

“Stop raging against her, Dhamon. You can’t win.”

“At least I trouble her.”

“Dhamon . . .”

The dragon raised what amounted to a large, scaly eyebrow.

“Dhamon, this swamp isn’t safe anymore, if it ever was. Isn’t there someplace you’d rather be? Let’s leave this place. Let Sable have her damned swamp.”

“As I said, I didn’t force you to follow me here.”

The draconian dropped the pouch of pearls and shifted the light globe to his other hand. “I’ve no friends either, save you. Where else was I to go?”

Dhamon wrapped his tail around his side, the gesture oddly catlike. After a moment, the sivak tried again.

“You’ve got wings, Dhamon. You can go anywhere. Don’t you want to explore the world? We could go to the Dragon Isles, visit places I haven’t seen in decades, places

you have never seen—maybe places where even a dragon and a draconian can spend some of this wealth.”

“Places that are safe?”

“Places that are safer than this.”

The dragon’s expression made it clear he was tiring of the discussion. “I have no intention of leaving because of Sable. In fact, I think I’ll start expanding my territory some more tomorrow.”

“Fine!” The draconian tossed the light globe up and let it hover just below the ceiling. Its glow paled just a bit, and Ragh knew that away from his hand it would go out within minutes. “Fine. Fine. Fine.” He ground the ball of his foot against the stone. “Let’s go exploring tomorrow—maybe find ways to expand your territory, add to your hoard, whatever you want. Fight all of Sable’s armies. Why not . . .?”

A rumble raced through the cavern floor and sent everything to jangling.

“Aw, Dhamon, there must be some place that interests you . . .”

The dragon stared at the crystal ball. “Some place? No. But there is someone.”