

# The Dwarves

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Translated by Sally-Ann Spencer

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Extract

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*“Appearances are there to be ignored, for the biggest hearts may reside in the smallest and unlikeliest creatures. Those who fail to look beyond the surface will never encounter true virtue—not in others and certainly not in themselves.”*

—From “Collected Wisdom of a Dead Stranger”  
in *Philosophical Letters and Texts* from the  
archive of the Hundred-Pillared Temple of  
Palandiell in Zamina, Kingdom of Rân Ribastur.

*“Dwarves and mountains have one thing in common: It takes an almighty hammer and a tremendous amount of persistence to overcome them.”*

—Traditional saying from the Murk  
region, northeast Idoslane.

*“Fleeing from an angry dwarf requires fleetness of foot. For consider this: The target of dwarven wrath must be capable of outstripping the irate warrior’s flying ax. Those lucky enough to escape with their lives should take pains to alter their appearance. The dwarven memory is dangerously good. Even after twenty cycles the threat remains and no one can predict when the chamber might ring with vengeful dwarven laughter as a tankard smashes against the offender’s head.”*

—From “Notes on the Races of Girdlegard:  
Singularities and Oddities” from the archive of  
Viransiensis, Kingdom of Tabaîn, compiled  
by the Master of Folklore M.A. Het  
in the 4299th Solar Cycle.

# *Enchanted Realms of Girdlegard*



Tabatn

*Elven Kingdom  
of Alandur*

*Dsôn Balsur*

Urgon

Gauragar

Turguria

Brandôkai

Weyurn

Lios Nudin

Oremaira

Idoslane

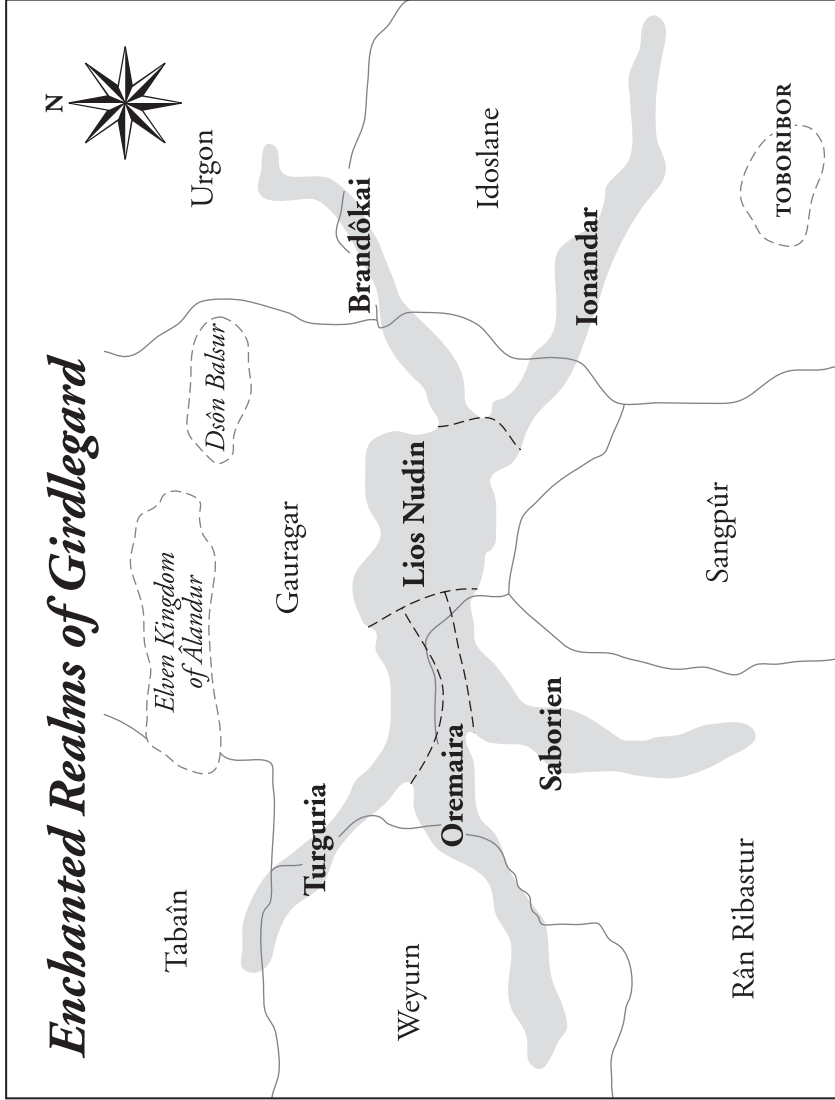
Saborien

Ionandar

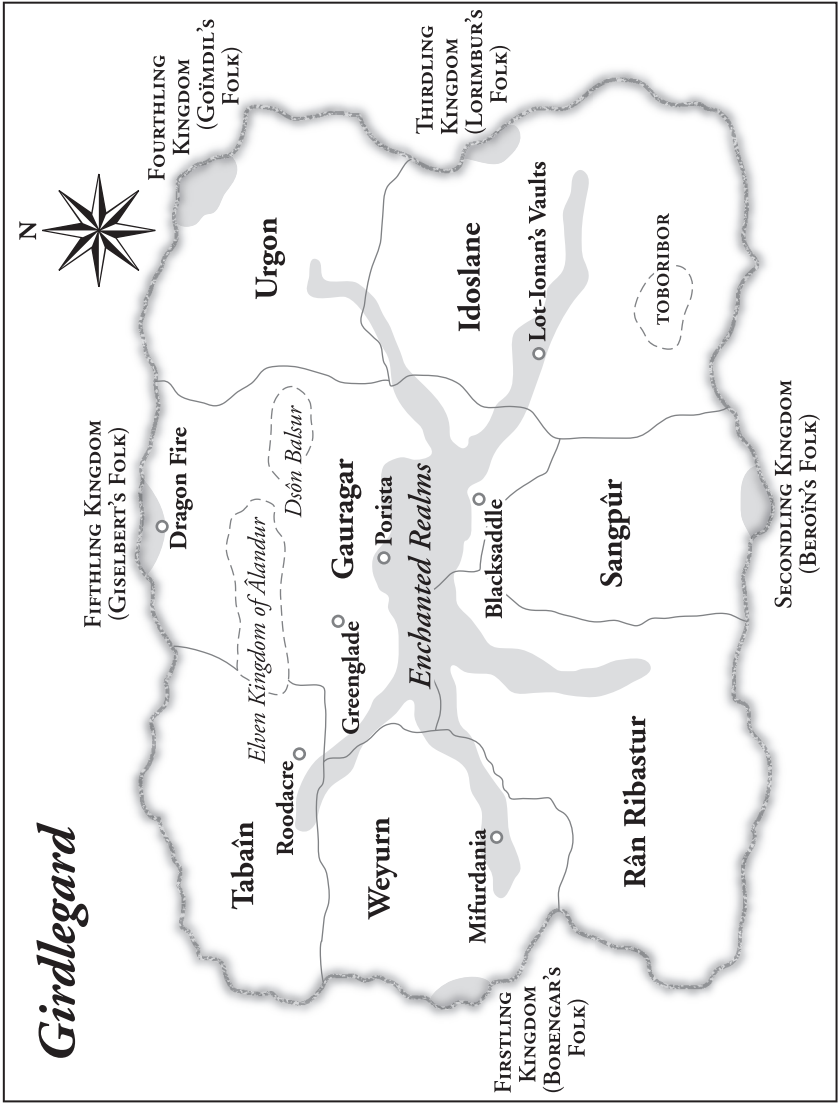
Sangpûr

Rân Ribastur

TOBORIBOR



# Girdlegard



# PART ONE

# *Prologue*

*Northern Pass,  
Stone Gateway to the Fifthling Kingdom,  
Late Summer, 5199th Solar Cycle*

Pale fog filled the canyons and valleys of the Gray Range. The Dragon's Tongue, Great Blade, and other peaks towered defiantly above the mist, tips raised toward the evening sun.

Slowly, as if afraid of the jagged peaks, the ball of fire sank in the sky, bathing the Northern Pass in waning red light.

Glandallin Hammerstrike of the clan of the Striking Hammers recovered his breath. Leaning back against the roughly hewn wall of the watchtower, he cupped his hand to his bushy brown eyebrows and shaded his eyes from the unaccustomed light. The ascent had been grueling and his close-woven chain mail, two axes, and shield weighed heavy on his aged legs.

There was no one younger to stand watch in his stead.

Only a few orbits previously, the nine clans of the fifthling kingdom had been attacked in their underground halls. Many had lost their lives in the battle, but the young and inexperienced were the first to fall.

Then came the sickness. No one knew where it had sprung from, but it preyed on the dwarves, sapping their strength, clouding their vision, and enfeebling their hands.

And so it was that Glandallin, despite his age, was guarding the gateway that night. Two vast slabs of solid rock erected by

Vraccas, god and creator of the dwarves, stemmed the tide of invading beasts. For some the sight of the imposing gateway was not enough of a deterrent; bleached bones and twisted scraps of armor were all that remained of them now.

The solitary sentry unhooked a leather pouch from his belt and poured cool water down his parched throat. A few drops spilled out of the corners of his mouth, flowing through his black beard. Elegant braids, the work of untold hours, hung from his chin and rested on his chest like delicate cords.

Glandallin replaced the pouch, took his weapons from his belt, and laid them on the parapet. The steel ax heads jangled melodiously against the sculpted rock, carved like the rest of the stronghold from the mountain's flesh.

A ray of sunlight glowed red on the polished inscriptions, illuminating the runes and symbols that promised their bearer protection, a sure aim, and long life.

Glandallin turned to the north, his brown eyes sweeping the mountain pass, thirty paces across, that led from the watchtower into the Outer Lands. No one knew what lay there. In times gone by, human kings had dispatched adventurers in all directions, but the expeditions were rarely successful and the few who returned to the gateway brought orcs in their wake.

He scanned the pass carefully. The beasts learned nothing from their defeats. Their vicious, choleric minds compelled them to throw themselves against the dwarves' defenses. They were bent on destroying anyone and anything in their path, for their creator, the dark lord Tion, had made them that way. The raids were conducted in blind fury. Raging and screaming, the beasts would scale the walls. From the first tinges of dawn light until the setting of the sun, armor would be cleaved from flesh, and flesh from bone. A tide of black, dark green, and yellowy-brown blood would lap against the



impregnable gates, while battering rams and projectiles shattered as they hit the stone.

The children of Vraccas suffered casualties, deaths, and crippling injuries too, yet it never occurred to them to quarrel with their fate. They were dwarves, Girdlegard's staunchest defenders.

*And yet we were almost defeated.* Glandallin's thoughts turned again to the strange beings that had invaded the underground halls, killing many of his kinsfolk. No one had seen them approach. Outwardly they resembled elves: tall, slim, and graceful, but as warriors they were savage and ruthless.

Glandallin was almost certain that the creatures were not elves. There was no love lost between the dwarves and their pointy-eared neighbors. Vraccas and Sitalia, goddess and creator of the elves, had ordained the races with common loathing from the moment of their birth. Their differences had resulted in feuds, the occasional skirmish, and sometimes death, but never war.

*Then again,* he thought critically, *I might be wrong. Perhaps the elves hate us enough to draw arms against us—or maybe they're after our gold.*

A bitter northerly wind whistled round the mountaintops, gusting through Glandallin's braided beard. Suddenly, his brow furrowed angrily as his nostrils detected a stench that offended the core of his being: orcs.

Spilled blood, excrement, and filth—that was the perfume of orcs—mixed in with the rancid odor of their greasy apparel. They basted their armor with fat, believing that the dwarves' axes would slither over the metal and leave them unharmed.

*No amount of fat will save them.* Glandallin did not wait for the ragged banners and rusty spears to appear over the final incline of the path. Standing on tiptoe, he placed his callused hands on the coarse wooden handles of the bellows.

A low drone vibrated through the shafts and galleries of the fifthling kingdom.

The dwarf worked two bellows in rotation to produce a constant stream of air. Gathering in volume, the drone became a single piercing note, loud enough to rouse the soundest of sleepers. Now, as so often in their history, the fifthlings were being summoned to fulfill their noble duty as Girdlegard's protectors.

Sweating from the exertion, Glandallin glanced over his shoulder.

Tion's beasts had formed a wide front and were marching on the gateway, more numerous than ever before. Elves would have fled to the woods and a man's heart would have stopped at the sight of the monstrous hordes. The dwarf stood his ground.

The attack on the gateway came as no surprise to Glandallin, but the timing was unsettling. The coming battle would stretch the dwarves' resources more than usual. *More bloodshed and more death.*

The defending warriors lined up on the battlements on either side of the gateway, their movements slow, some lurching rather than walking, weak fingers wrapped loosely around the hafts of their axes. The band of dwarves stumbling to the defense of the gates numbered no more than a hundred brave souls. A thousand would have been too few.

Glandallin's watch was at an end; he was needed elsewhere.

"Don't forsake us, Vraccas. We're outnumbered," he whispered, unable to wrest his eyes from the stinking stream of orcs that poured along the path. Grunting, shouting, and jostling, they headed for the gates. The bare rock cast back their bestial cries, the echo mingling with their belligerent chants.

The strident noises jangled in his mind, and it seemed to

him that the beasts had somehow changed. There was a palpable air of confidence about the raging, shouting mob.

For the first time, he was afraid of the beasts.

What he saw next did nothing to ease his mind.

Scanning the ranks of the invading army, his gaze fell on a cluster of lofty fir trees. Since childhood he had watched them thrive and grow on the otherwise barren slopes.

Now they were sickly and dying.

*The trees are faring no better than we.* Glandallin's thoughts were with his wounded and ailing friends. "What strange forces are these? Your children need you, Vraccas," he prayed briefly, gathering his axes from the parapet.

With growing dread, he pressed his lips to the runes. "Don't abandon me now," he enjoined the blades softly, before turning and hurrying down the steps to join the small troop of defenders.

He reached them just as the first wave of beasts struck the wall. Quivering arrows rained down on the dwarves. Ladders were thrust against the walls, and orcs hastened to scale the wobbly rungs, while others set down their catapults and launched burning projectiles to reinforce the bombardment. Leather pouches, filled to the brim with paraffin, spluttered through the air and burst on impact, covering everything around them in an oily liquid and setting it ablaze.

The first salvo was aimed too low, but the dark hordes were undeterred by the sight of their front line burning in a storm of fire. Nothing, not the battery of stones nor the torrent of molten ore, could check their rapacious zeal. For every orc that was slain, five new aggressors scaled the walls. This time they were determined to breach the defenses. This time the gateway was destined to fall.

"Look out!" Glandallin ran to the aid of a dwarf whose shoulder had been pierced by an arrow. One of Tion's min-

ions, a stunted creature with thick tusks and a broad nose, had seized his chance and squeezed through an embrasure, hauling himself over the parapet and onto the battlements.

Dwarf and orc stared at each other in silence. The clamor of voices, the hissing of arrows, the clatter of axes faded to an indistinct buzz.

Glandallin's ears were tuned to his opponent's heavy breath. The red-veined eyes, buried deep within the head, flicked nervously from side to side. The dwarf knew exactly what was going on inside the creature's mind. The orc was the first of its kind to have set foot on the battlement and could scarcely believe its good fortune.

A foul odor rose from the thick gray layer of tallow that coated its armor plating. The smell filled Glandallin's nostrils, drawing his attention back to the battle.

Shrieking, he threw himself against the beast. His shield jabbed smartly downward, shattering his opponent's foot, while he lunged with his ax from above. The blade smashed through the unarmored flesh around the armpit. The orc's arm, sliced cleanly at the joint, fell to the stony floor. Dark green blood sprayed upward from the open wound.

The orc let out a high-pitched scream, for which he was rewarded by a mighty stroke perpendicular to the neck.

"Tell your kinsfolk I am anxious to make their acquaintance!" Glandallin gave the dying brute a final shove and sent him tumbling against the parapet, where he took the next invader with him as he fell. They vanished over the side and plummeted to the ground. *With any luck, they'll crush half a dozen others*, thought Glandallin.

From then on the enemy gave him no respite. Running from one end of the parapet to the other, splitting helms, cleaving skulls, ducking arrows, and evading firebombs, he felled orc after orc.

Darkness was descending on the Stone Gateway, but Glandallin was untroubled by the fading light; even the thickest gloom could be penetrated by sharp dwarven eyes. But each blow and every movement took its toll on his weary arms, shoulders, and legs.

“Vraccas, grant us a moment to gather our forces,” he coughed, rubbing his braids across his face to free his eyes of blood.

The dwarven deity took pity on his children.

A fanfare of horns and bugles bade the hordes cease their assault, and the orcs complied, pulling away from the walls.

Glandallin dispatched a lingering assailant and sank to the stone floor, fumbling for his drinking pouch. He tore off his helmet and poured water over his sweat-drenched hair. The cool fluid trickled over his skin, revitalizing his will.

*How many of us remain?* He stumbled to his feet and went in search of survivors. Of the hundred-strong army, seventy were left, among them the formidable figure of the fifthling monarch.

Nowhere were the enemy corpses stacked higher than at Giselbert Ironeye’s feet. His shiny armor, made of the toughest steel forged in a dwarven smithy, gleamed brightly, and his diamond-studded belt caught the flames that licked from pools of burning oil. He climbed atop a stone ledge to speak to his folk.

“Stand firm!” Steady and true, his voice sounded across the battlements. “Be as unyielding as the rock from which we were hewn. Nothing—no orc, no ogre, no creature of Tion—will break us. We will cut them to pieces as dwarves have done for millennia. Vraccas is with us!”

The speech was met with low cheers and grunts of approval. The dwarves had been dealt a blow, but already their confidence was returning. They had grit and pride enough to stop the enemy in its tracks.

The warriors replenished their weary bodies with food and dark ale. With every sip and mouthful they felt stronger, more alive. The worst injuries were treated as time and circumstance permitted, gaping wounds sewn hurriedly together with fine twine.

Glandallin found himself a space on the floor beside Glamdolin Strongarm. The two friends ate in silence, watching the mass of orcs that had retreated a hundred paces from the gates. To Glandallin's eyes it seemed the enemy had formed a living battering ram, intent on smashing down the gateway with their flesh.

"Such persistence," he said softly. "I have never seen them as dogged as they are tonight. Something has changed." The thought of the dying trees sent a chill down his spine.

All of a sudden an ax clattered to the floor beside him. Turning just in time, he saw his companion slump forward. "Glamdolin!" He caught hold of the dwarf and was dismayed to see delicate beads of sweat glistening on his forehead, drenching his face and his beard. His reddened eyes were glazed and unseeing.

Glandallin knew at once that the mystery illness had claimed another victim, finishing what the enemy had left half-done.

"Get some rest. The fever will soon be over." Hauling Glamdolin's heaving body to one side, he settled him as comfortably as he could, knowing full well that the illness was probably fatal.

The long wait sapped the strength of dwarves and orcs alike. Fatigue, the warrior's enemy, set in. Glandallin dozed on his feet until his helmet hit the parapet with a thud. Awaking with a start, he looked around anxiously. Yet more of his

kinsmen had fallen prey to the sickness. Fortune had turned her back upon the children of the Smith.

A bugle call rent the air, setting his heart racing.

In the cold light of the moon he watched the approaching rows of colossal silhouettes, four times as tall as the orcs. There were forty of them. Their hideous bodies were clad in poorly wrought armor and their monstrous hands clasped fir saplings, roughly fashioned into clubs.

*Ogres.*

The dwarves' defenses would crumble if the giants were to scale the walls. The cauldrons of molten slag were empty, the cache of stones depleted. For a moment Glandallin's doubts returned, but a glance at Giselbert's gleaming figure assured him that evil would be defeated in the time-honored way.

The mass of orcs stirred and a cheer went up as the ogres approached.

Marching to the head of the army, the enormous beasts, uglier and more oafish than even the orcs, deposited their grappling irons, the four prongs of which were the length of a fully grown man. They attached long chains to the stem of each hook.

*The apparatus is ill suited to climbing,* thought Glandallin. *The beasts intend to topple the walls.*

Whistling through the air, three dozen claws buried themselves in the stonework. A shouted order summoned the watching orcs to join the ogres in their tug-of-war. A crack of whips sounded and the jangling links pulled taut.

Glandallin heard the wall groan softly. The stronghold, built many cycles ago by his kinsmen, was no match for the beasts' raw power.

"Quick, bring the wounded to safety!" he bellowed.

The party of dwarves responsible for tending the cauldrons

left their stations and carried off Glamdolin and the other ailing warriors.

Masonry crumbled as a section of crenellated battlement ripped from the wall. The grappling hook went into free fall amid the showering stonework, killing two ogres and ten orcs. The enemy forces held their ground. Soon the hook was ripping through the air again, poised to sink its claws into the wall.

This time the dwarves retreated, abandoning the parapet just in time. They took up position in the barbican above the gates.

Glandallin listened as a large section of wall crashed and shattered on the ground below. The earth quaked and the invading army howled in triumph.

*Good luck to them,* thought Glandallin, endeavoring to stay calm. *I hope they dash their brains out on the doors.* The gateway was built to withstand more than a few paltry grappling irons.

He peered cautiously over the steel-plated wall. More reinforcements were on their way. Horsemen mounted on jet-black steeds galloped to the head of the army of ogres and orcs. Glandallin instantly recognized the pointed ears of the tall, slim creatures.

A red glow shone from the horses' eyes and their hooves struck the ground in a shower of white sparks. Two riders thundered to the gateway and gave orders to the troops. The orcs and ogres set about clearing the pathway of fallen masonry so the assault could start afresh.

Wheeling round on their horses, the riders found safe quarter from which to watch. One of the two creatures unshouldered a mighty bow and nocked an arrow against the woven bowstring. The marksman's gloved fingers held the weapon loosely as he bided his time.



Hastily, the fifthlings pushed boulders over the parapet and onto the beasts below. The enemy flinched, jostling to evade the projectiles, and three of the orcs turned to flee. The archer raised his bow. Before the deserters could take flight, the first arrow, too fast for Glandallin to follow, sang through the air and an orc fell to its knees.

Already a second missile, uncommonly long for an arrow, sped from the archer's bow. The second beast perished, shrieking, followed a moment later by the third. The remaining minions took heed of the warning and resumed their work on the pathway. The orcs did not venture a protest at the murder of their kinsmen.

**B**y the coming of dawn, the path had been cleared.

The fifthlings marveled at the scene unfolding before their eyes. The sky had brightened in the east, heralding the rising of the sun, yet a thick bank of fog loomed in the north. Its luminous center, a maelstrom of black, red, and silver, flickered with coursing light.

In defiance of the wind, it rolled toward the gateway, sweeping over the beasts below. The raucous orcs fell silent, huddling nervously together and shrinking away from the fog. Stooping, the ogres allowed it to pass. As if hailing their leader, the riders bowed their heads and saluted the vaporous mass. The shimmering mist lowered itself gently to the ground and hovered in front of the horses.

Then the unthinkable happened. With a shudder, the first of five bolts on the doors shot from its cylinder. The gateway quaked. Someone had spoken the incantation, delivering Girdlegard into the clutches of the invading hordes.

“No!” bellowed Glandallin, turning his back to the enemy and leaning over the inner wall to seek the culprit below. “No dwarf would ever...”

*Glamdolin Strongarm.* Alone, the dwarf was standing by the doors, lips moving, hands raised in supplication.

“Silence!” Glandallin bellowed. “Can’t you see what you’re doing?”

His shouts fell on deaf ears. The second lock glowed brightly, illuminated by the runes. The bolt creaked back.

“He’s been bewitched,” muttered Glandallin. “The fog has infected his mind.”

The third bolt left its ferrule and shot free.

At last the custodians of the gateway stirred. Springing to their feet, they darted down the staircase, racing to put a stop to the treacherous magic before it was too late. The fourth bolt drew back. With one bolt remaining, Glamdolin was still standing unchallenged on the pathway.

*Time is against us,* Glandallin thought grimly. “Forgive me, Vraccas, but I have no choice.” He gripped his ax and hurled it with all his might and fury at his comrade-in-arms.

The blade sliced through the air, spinning, then plunged sharply toward the ground. Glandallin’s aim was unerring and the ax drove home.

Glamdolin groaned as the weapon struck his shoulder. Blood spraying from the wound, he stumbled to the ground. Watching from above, Glandallin sent a quick thanks to Vraccas for guiding his blade.

His relief was short-lived. Death had come too late to prevent the traitor from achieving his terrible purpose. The final bolt shot back.

Slowly, the colossal gateway opened. The vast slabs scraped and dragged across the ground, as though reluctant to obey the treacherous command.

There was a grinding noise of stone on stone. The chink became a narrow channel, which widened to fill the breadth of the path. Time slowed to a crawl as the gates swung open.

One final creak and for the first time in creation the path into Girdlegard was clear.

*No!* Glandallin stirred from his paralysis and hurtled down the steps to join Giselbert and the remaining warriors defending the gates.

He was the last but one to take his place in the doorway. Already the others had closed ranks and were holding their shields in front of their bodies, their axes held aloft.

Shoulder to shoulder they formed a low wall of flesh against the tide of orcs, ogres, trolls, and riders. Forty against forty thousand.

The enemy hung back, fearing an ambush. Never before had the gates opened to allow their passage.

Glandallin's gaze swept the front line of monstrous beasts, shifting back to survey the second, third, fourth, fifth, and countless other grunting rows, all poised for the attack. He glowered from under his bushy eyebrows, forehead furrowing into a frown.

Giselbert lost no time in reversing the incantation. At the sound of his voice, the gates submitted to his authority, swinging back across the pathway but moving too slowly to stop the breach. Giselbert strode behind his troops, laying a hand on each shoulder. The gesture was a source of solace as well as strength, calming and rallying the last defenders of the gates.

Trumpets blaring, the riders ordered the attack. The orcs and ogres brandished their weapons, shouting to drown out their fear, and the army advanced with thundering steps.

"The path is narrow. Meet them line by line and give them a taste of our steel!" Glandallin called to his kinsfolk. "Vracas is with us! We are the children of the Smith!"

"The children of the Smith!" the fifthlings echoed, feet planted firmly on the rocky ground beneath.

Four dwarves were chosen to form the final line of defense. Throwing down his shield, the king took an ax in each hand and led the surge toward the enemy. The dwarves, all that remained of Giselbert's folk, charged out to slay the invaders.

Ten paces beyond the gateway, the armies met. The fifth-lings tunneled like moles through the vanguard of orcs.

With only one ax with which to defend himself, Gandalin struck out, slicing through the thicket of legs. He did not stop to kill his victims, knowing that the fallen bodies would hinder the advancing troops.

"No one gets past Gandalin!" he roared. Stinking blood streamed from his armor and helm, stinging his eyes. When his ax grew heavy, he clasped the weapon with both hands. "No one, do you hear!" His enemies' bones splintered, splattering him with hot blood. Twice he was grazed by a sword or a spear, but he battled on regardless.

The prize was not survival but the closing of the gates. Girdlegard would be safe if they could stave off the invasion until the passageway was sealed.

Until this hour his ax had defended him faithfully, but now the magic of its runes gave out. Glancing to his right, Gandalin saw a comrade topple to the ground, skull sliced in half by an orc's two-handed sword. Seething with hatred, and determined to fell the aggressor, Gandalin lunged once, twice, driving his ax into the creature's belly and cleaving it in two. A shadow loomed above him, but by then it was too late. He made a last-ditch attempt to dodge the ogre's sweeping cudgel, but its rounded head swooped down and struck his legs. Bellowing in pain he toppled against an orc, severing its thigh as he fell, before tumbling onward through the army of legs. He lashed out with his ax until there were no more orcs within his reach.

"Come here and fight, you cowards!" he snarled.

The enemy paid him no attention. Fired by an insatiable

hunger, they streamed past him toward the gateway. They had no need of stringy dwarf flesh when there were tastier morsels in Girdlegard.

Trembling with pain, Glandallin rose up on his elbows. The rest of his kinsfolk were dead, their mutilated bodies strewn on the ground, surrounded by scores of enemy corpses. The diamonds on Giselbert's belt sparkled in the sunlight, marking the place where the fifthling father had fallen, slain by a trio of ogres. At the sight of him, Glandallin's soul ached with sorrow and pride.

The sun rose above the mountains, flooding through the gateway and dazzling Glandallin with its light. He raised a hand to his sensitive eyes, straining to see the gateway. *Praise be to Vraccas! The gates were closed!*

A blow from behind sent pain searing through his chest. For the duration of a heartbeat the tip of a spear protruded through his tunic, then withdrew. He slumped, gasping, to the ground. "What in the name of...?"

The assassin stepped round his body and knelt beside him. The smooth elven face was framed by fine fair hair that shimmered in the sunlight like a veil of golden threads. But the vision bore a terrible deformity; two fathomless pits stared from almond-shaped holes.

The creature wore armor of black metal that reached to its knees. Its legs were clad in leather breeches and dark brown boots. Burgundy gloves protected its fingers from grime, and its right hand clasped a spear whose steel tip, sharp enough to penetrate the fine mesh of dwarven chain mail, was moist with blood.

The strange elf spoke to the dwarf.

At first the words meant nothing to Glandallin, but their morbid sound filled him with dread.

"My friend said: 'Look at me: Sinthoras is your death,'"

a second voice translated behind him. “‘I will take your life, and the land will take your soul.’”

Glandallin coughed, blood rushing from his mouth and coursing down his beard.

“Get out of my sight, you pointy-eared monster! I want to see the gates,” he said gruffly, brandishing his ax to ward away the beast. The weapon almost flew from his grip; his strength was ebbing fast. “Out of my way or I’ll cut you in two like a straw, you treacherous elf!” he thundered.

Sinthoras laughed coldly. Raising his spear, he inserted the tip slowly between the tight rings of mail.

“You are mistaken, my friend. We are the älfar, and we have come to slay the elves,” the voice said softly. “The gates may be closed, but the power of the land will raise you from the dead and from that moment on, you will be one of us. You know the incantation; you will open the door.”

“Never! My soul belongs to Vraccas!”

“Your soul belongs to the land, and you will belong to the land until the end of time,” the velvety voice cut him short. “Die, so you can return and deliver Girdlegard to us.”

The spear’s sharp tip pierced the flesh of the helpless, dying dwarf. Pain stopped his tongue.

Sinthoras raised the weapon and pushed down gently on the battered body. The final blow was dealt tenderly, almost reverently. The creature waited for death to claim its prey, watching over Glandallin’s pain-ravaged features and drinking in the memory.

Finally, when he was certain that the last custodian of the gateway had departed, Sinthoras left his vigil and rose to his feet.