

DRAGONLANCE PRELUDES

BEFORE THE WAR OF THE LANCE . . .

BEFORE THEY BECAME HEROES . . .

DARKNESS AND LIGHT
PAUL B. THOMPSON &
TONYA C. COOK

KENDERMORE
MARY KIRCHOFF

BROTHERS MAJERE
KEVIN STEIN

RIVERWIND THE PLAINSMAN
PAUL B. THOMPSON &
TONYA C. COOK

FLINT THE KING
MARY KIRCHOFF &
DOUGLAS NILES

TANIS, THE SHADOW YEARS
SCOTT SIEGEL &
BARBARA SIEGEL



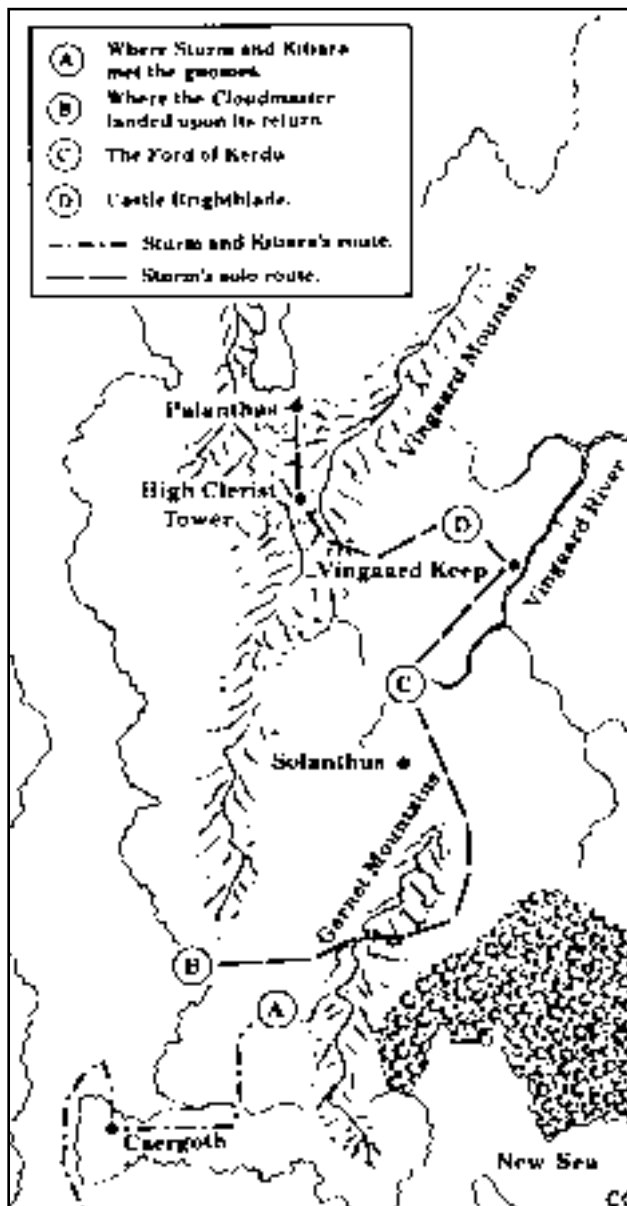
PRELUDES
VOLUME ONE

DARKNESS & LIGHT

Paul B. Thompson &
Tonya C. Cook

Cover Art
MATT STAWICKI





Chapter 1

Separate Ways

Autumn painted Solace in gay colors. Each porch, each window, was filled with red, orange, and yellow foliage, for the shops and houses of Solace were nestled among the stout branches of a vale of vallenwood trees, well above the mossy ground. Here and there were clearings in the treetown. These were the town's commons, where there might be a market one week and a traveling carnival the next.

On this bright afternoon three figures stood in a sunlit clearing—two men and a woman. Two swords played back and forth, flashing with fire when the sun's rays caught them. Two figures circled warily, feinting with sudden flicks of their naked blades. The third one stood back, watching. The swords scraped together with a kiss of tempered steel.

"Well met!" said Caramon Majere, the onlooker. "A very neat parry, Sturm!"

The tall young man with the drooping brown mustache grunted a brief acknowledgment. He was rather busy. His opponent sprang forward, lunging at his chest. Sturm Brightblade cut hard at the onrushing point, backpedaling as he swung. It missed him by a scant inch.

Sturm's foe wobbled as she came down off balance, her feet too far apart.

"Steady, Kit!" Caramon called. His half-sister recovered with the practiced grace of a dancer. She brought her heels together with a smack of boot leather and presented Sturm with only her slim profile as a target.

"Now, my friend," she said. "I'll show you the skill that comes from fighting for pay."

Kitiara cut tiny circles in the air with her sword tip. Once, twice, three times—Sturm watched the deadly motion. Caramon watched, too, open-mouthed. At eighteen, he was the size of a full-grown man, but he was still a boy inside. The wild and worldly Kitiara was his idol. She had more drive and dash than any ten men.

From his place, Caramon could see every nick in the edge of Kitiara's blade, mementoes of hard-fought battle. The flat of the blade was shiny from frequent and expert polishing. By contrast, Sturm's sword was so new that the hilt still showed the blue tinge from the smith's annealing fire.

"Watch your right," said Caramon. Sturm closed his free hand over the long pommel and awaited Kitiara's attack square on, as a Solamnic Knight would.

"Hai!" Kitiara whirled on one leg, cleaving the air with an upward sweep of her sword. Caramon's breath caught as she carried her swing forward. Sturm did not move. Her sword would complete its arc at his neck. Caramon shut his eyes—and heard a solid ring of steel. Feeling foolish, he opened them again.

Sturm had parried straight across, hilt to hilt, with no finesse at all. He and Kitiara stayed locked together with their sword points high. Kitiara's wrists shook. She stepped in and braced her sword arm with her empty hand. Sturm forced her guard down. Her face paled, then flushed red.

Caramon knew that look. This friendly bout was not going to her liking, and Kitiara was getting angry.

Vexed, she shifted her stance and strained against Sturm's greater size and strength. Still her hilt fell. The knobbed quill on of Sturm's new sword brushed her chin.

With an explosive gasp, Kitiara ceased the struggle. Both sword points stabbed into the green sod.

"Enough," she said. "I'll buy the ale. I should've known better than to let you bind up my guard like that! Come on, Sturm. Let's have a tankard of Otik's best."

"Sounds good to me," he replied. He freed his blade and stepped back, breathing heavily. As he moved, Kitiara thrust the flat of her weapon between his ankles. Sturm's feet tangled, and he sprawled backward on the grass. His sword flew away, and in the next instant Kitiara stood over him holding thirty-two inches of steel poised at his throat.

"Combat is not always a sport," she said. "Keep your eyes open and your sword firmly in hand, my friend, and you'll live longer."

Sturm looked up the blade at Kitiara's face. Sweat had stuck dark curls of hair to her forehead, and her naturally dark lips were pressed firmly together. Slowly they spread in a lopsided smile. She sheathed her weapon.

"Don't look so downcast! Better a friend knock you down as a lesson than an enemy cut you down for good." She extended a hand. "We'd better go before Flint and Tanis drink all of Otik's brew."

Sturm grasped her hand. It was warm and calloused from gauntlets and sword grips. Kitiara pulled him up until they were nose to nose. Although a head taller and fifty pounds heavier, Sturm still felt like a callow youth beside her. But her bright eyes and engaging smile dispelled his anxiety.

"I see now how you've managed to prosper as a fighter," he said, stooping to retrieve his sword. He buried the blade in its sheath. "Thank you for the lesson. Next time I will keep my feet out of reach!"

"Later, will you teach me some of your moves, Kit?" asked Caramon eagerly. He carried a short sword himself, a gift from his adventurous sister. She'd picked it up on one of her many battlefields. Flint Fireforge, who knew metalwork

as few did, said that Caramon's sword had been made in southern Qualinesti. Only by clues such as this did her friends know where Kit's wanderings had taken her.

"Why not? I'll tie one hand behind my back to make it fair." Caramon opened his mouth to retort, but Kitiara clapped a hand over his lips. "Now, to the inn. If I don't get a draft of ale soon, I'll perish!"

When they reached the base of the great vallenwood tree that supported the Inn of the Last Home, they found their friend Flint sitting at the bottom of the ramp. The dwarf had a split of kindling in his massive, knobby hands and was shaving off hair-thin slices with a single-edged knife.

"Well, you came back with your skin whole," said Flint, eyeing Sturm. "I half-expected to see you carrying your head under your arm."

"Your confidence in me is enormous," the young man replied sourly. Kitiara halted and draped an arm across Caramon's broad shoulders.

"Better watch yourself, old dwarf. Our Master Sturm has an uncommonly strong arm. Once he learns not to hold to outdated knightly codes—"

"Honor is never outdated," said Sturm.

"Which is how you landed flat on your back with my sword at your neck. If you would—"

"Don't start!" groaned Caramon. "If I have to hear another debate on honor, I'll die of boredom!"

"I won't argue," Kitiara said, slapping her brother on the rump. "I made my point."

"Come with us, Flint. Kit's buying," said Caramon. The elderly dwarf rose on his stumpy legs, sweeping a cascade of white wood slivers off his lap. He straightened his clothing and tucked his knife back in his leggings.

"No ale for you," Kitiara said to Caramon with mock maternal sternness. "You're not old enough to drink."

Caramon ducked under her arm, sprinted up to Sturm, and said, "I'm eighteen, Kit."

Kitiara's face showed surprise. "Eighteen? Are you sure?" Her 'little' brother was an inch or so taller than Sturm.

Caramon gave her a disgusted look. "Of course I'm sure. You just haven't noticed that I'm a grown man."

"You're a baby!" Kitiara cried, whipping out her sword.

"Any more out of you and I'll spank you!"

"Ha!" Caramon laughed. "You can't catch me!" So saying, he dashed up the stairs. Kitiara returned her sword and bounded after him. Caramon's long legs covered the steep boards quickly. Laughing, he and his sister disappeared around the tree trunk.

Flint and Sturm ascended more slowly. A light breeze rustled through the tree, sending a shower of colored leaves across the steps. Sturm gazed out through the branches at the other tree homes. "In a few weeks, you'll be able to see clear to the other side of the commons," he mused.

"Aye," said Flint. "It's strange not to be on the road right now. For more years than you've been alive, boy, I've tramped the roads of Abanasinia from spring to autumn, plying the trade."

Sturm nodded. Flint's announced retirement from his itinerant metalworking had surprised them all.

"It's all behind me now," Flint said. "Time to put my feet up, maybe grow some roses." Sturm found the image of the bluff old dwarf tending a rose garden so unnatural that he shook his head to dispel the thought.

At the level platform midway up to the inn proper, Sturm paused by the railing. Flint went a few steps beyond before halting. He squinted back at Sturm and said, "What is it, boy? You're about to burst to tell me something."

Flint didn't miss a thing. "I'm going away," said Sturm. "To Solamnia. I'm going to look for my heritage."

"And your father?"

"If there is any trace of him to be found, I shall find it."

"It could be a long journey and a dangerous search," Flint said. "But I wish I could go with you."

"Never mind." Sturm moved away from the rail. "It's my search."

Sturm and Flint entered the door of the inn just in time to receive a barrage of apple cores. As they wiped the sticky pulp from their eyes, the room rocked with laughter.

"Who's the rascal responsible?" roared Flint. A gawky young girl, no more than fourteen, with a head of robust red curls, handed the outraged dwarf a towel.

"Otik pressed some new cider, and they had to have the leavings," she said apologetically.

Sturm wiped his face. Kitiara and Caramon had collapsed against the bar, giggling like idiots. Behind the bar, Otik, the portly proprietor of the inn, shook his head.

"This is a first-class inn," he said. "Take your pranks outside, if you gotta pull 'em!"

"Nonsense!" said Kitiara. She slapped a coin on the bar. Caramon wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes and stared. It was a gold coin, one of the few he'd ever seen. "That will ease your temper, eh, Otik?" Kitiara said.

A tall, well-favored man stood up from his table and approached the bar. His motion was oddly graceful, and his high cheekbones and golden eyes eloquently proclaimed his elven heritage. He picked up the coin.

"What's the matter, Tanis?" Kitiara asked. "Haven't you ever seen gold before?"

"Not as large a coin as this," Tanis Half-Elven replied. He flipped it over. "Where was it struck?"

Kitiara lifted her mug from the bar and drank. "I don't know," she said. "It's part of my wages. Why do you ask?"

"The inscription is Elvish. I would say it was minted in Silvanesti."

Sturm and Flint came over to examine the coin. The delicate script was definitely Elvish, Flint said. Far-off Silvanesti had practically no contact with the rest of Ansalon, and there was much curiosity as to how an elvish coin managed to drift so far west.

"Plunder," said a voice from the corner of the room.

"What did you say, Raist?" asked Caramon. In a corner of the inn's common room a pallid figure could be seen. Raistlin, Caramon's twin brother. As usual, he was immersed in the study of a dusty scroll. He rose and moved toward the group; the colored light filtering through the inn's stained-glass windows gave his pale skin odd tints.

"Plunder," he repeated. "Robbery, rapine, booty."

"We know what the word means," said Flint sharply.

"He means the coin was probably stolen in Silvanesti and later turned up in the coffers of Kit's mercenary captain," said Tanis.

They passed the coin from hand to hand, turning it around and feeling the heft of it. More than its crude monetary value, the elven coin spoke of far-off places and distant, magical people.

"Let me see," said an insistent voice from below the bar. A small, lean arm thrust between Caramon and Sturm.

"No!" said Otik, taking the coin from Tanis's hand. "When a kender gets hold of money, you can kiss it a quick good-bye!"

"Tas!" cried Caramon. "I didn't see you come in."

"He was in the room the whole time," Tanis said.

Tasslehoff Burrfoot, like most of his race, was both clever and diminutive. He could hide in the smallest places, and was known to be light-fingered—"curious," as he said.

"Ale all around," said Kitiara, "now that my credit is good." Otik filled a line of tankards from a massive pitcher, and the friends retired to the great round table in the center of the room. Raistlin took a chair with the others, instead of returning to his scroll.

"Since we are all here," Tanis said, "someone ought to make a toast."

"Here's to Kit, the founder of the feast!" said Caramon, raising his clay mug of cider.

"Here's to the gold that pays for it," his sister responded.

"Here's to the elves who coined it," offered Flint.

"I'll drink to elves in any form," Kitiara said. She smiled over her mug at Tanis. A question formed on his lips, but before he could speak it, Tasslehoff stood on his stool and waved for attention.

"I say we drink to Flint," said Tas. "This is the first year since the Cataclysm that he won't be on the road."

A chuckle circled the table, and the old dwarf reddened. "You whelp," he growled. "How old do you think I am?"

"He can't count that high," said Raistlin.

"Well, I'm a hundred and forty-three, and I can lick any man, woman, or kender in the place," Flint declared. He thumped a heavy fist on the table. "Care to test me?"

He had no takers. Despite his age and short stature, Flint was powerfully muscled and a good wrestler.

They toasted and drank from then on with good cheer, as

afternoon became evening and evening became night. To stave off tipsiness, one of Otik's large suppers was ordered. Soon the table was groaning under platters of squab and venison, bread, cheese, and Otik's famous fried potatoes.

The red-haired girl brought each platter to the diners. At one point, Caramon put his gnawed chicken bones in her apron pocket. The girl responded gamely, dropping a hot potato slice down Caramon's collar. He squirmed out of his chair as the girl skipped back to Otik's kitchen.

"Who the blazes is she?" asked Caramon, wiggling the crispy potato slice out his shirttail.

"She is in Otik's care," said Raistlin. "Her name is Tika."

The night passed on. Other patrons came and went. It grew late, and Otik had Tika light a fork of candles for the friends' table. The merry banter of the early evening gave way to calmer, more reflective conversation.

"I'm going tomorrow," Kitiara announced. By candlelight her tanned face seemed golden. Tanis studied her and felt all the old pangs return. She was a most alluring woman.

"Going where?" asked Caramon.

"North, I think," she answered.

"Why north?" Tanis asked.

"Reasons of my own," she said, but her smile softened the flat answer.

"Can I go with you?" Caramon said.

"No, you can't, brother."

"Why not?"

Kitiara, seated between her half-brothers, glanced at Raistlin. Caramon's gaze went from her to his twin. Of course. Raistlin needed him. Though twins, they were not much alike. Caramon was a genial young bear, while Raistlin was a studious wraith. He was frequently ill and had an uncanny habit of antagonizing large, belligerent types. After the birth of the twins, their mother had never recovered her strength, so Kitiara had fought for young Raistlin's health. Now it was Caramon who watched out for his twin.

"I'm leaving, too," put in Sturm. "North." He glanced at Kitiara.

"Fool" said Tasslehoff. "North is dull. I've been there.

Now east, there's the way to go. There's lots to see in the East—cities, forests, mountains—"

"Pockets to pick, horses to 'borrow'," said Flint.

The kender stuck out his lower lip. "I can't help it if I'm good at finding things."

"Someday you'll find from the wrong person, and they'll hang you for it."

"I have to go north," Sturm said. He leaned forward, resting his chin on his hands. "I'm going back to Solamnia."

They all stared at him. They knew the story of Sturm's exile from his homeland. Twelve years had passed since the peasants of Solamnia had risen against the knightly lords. Sturm and his mother had escaped with only their lives. The knights were still despised in their own country.

"Could you use a good right arm?" offered Kitiara. Her offer caught everyone by surprise.

"I wouldn't want you to go out of your way," said Sturm, noncommittally.

"North is north. I've been east and south and west."

"Very well then. I'd be honored to have you with me." Sturm turned from Kitiara to Tanis. "What about you, Tan?"

Tanis pushed a hunk of bread through the remains of his dinner. "I've been thinking of doing some travel myself. Nothing specific, just a trek to see some places I haven't seen. I don't think my journey will take me north." He looked at Kitiara, but her gaze was directed at Sturm.

"That's the idea," Tasslehoff said briskly. His right hand dipped into his fur vest and came out with a flat copper disk. He rolled the disk over the back of his knuckles. It was an exercise he sometimes did to keep his fingers nimble. Not that he needed practice. "Let's go east, Tanis, you and me."

"No." The flat turn-down froze the copper disk midway across the back of the kender's small hand. "No," said Tanis again, more gently. "This is a trip I must make alone."

The table was silent again. Then Caramon let out a single great hiccup, and the laughter returned.

"Pardon me!" said Caramon, reaching for Kitiara's tankard. She was not fooled. As his hand closed around the pewter stem, she rapped his wrist with her spoon. Caramon snatched his hand back. "Ouch!" he protested.

"You'll get worse if you try it again," said Kitiara. Caramon grinned and made a fist.

"Save your energy, brother," Raistlin said. "You'll need it."

"How so, Raist?"

"Since everyone has decided to undertake journeys, this seems like a good time to announce one of my own."

Flint snorted. "You wouldn't last two days on the road."

"Perhaps not." Raistlin folded his long, tapering fingers.

"Unless my brother goes with me."

"Where and when?" asked Caramon, pleased to be going anywhere.

"I cannot say where just now," Raistlin said. His pale blue eyes stared fixedly at his nearly untouched plate of food. "It may be a long and perilous voyage."

Caramon jumped up. "I'm ready."

"Siddown," Kitiara said, dragging on her brother's vest tail. Caramon plumped down on his stool.

Flint sighed a great, gusty sigh. "You're all leaving me," he said. "I'll not go a-tinkering this season, and all my friends are going their own way." He sighed again, so heavily that the rack of candles flickered.

"You old bear," Kitiara said. "You're feeling sorry for yourself. There's no law that says you have to stay in Solace by yourself. Don't you have any relatives that you can impose on?"

"Yes," Tasslehoff added, "you can visit your gray-bearded, I mean gray-haired, old mother."

The dwarf bellowed his outrage. Those sitting closest to Flint—Caramon and Sturm—slid quickly away from the furious dwarf. Flint banged his tankard on the tabletop, sending a splash of ale at Tasslehoff. Rivulets of sticky golden ale ran off the kender's nose and soaked into his topknot of wild brown hair. He rubbed the brew from his eyes.

"Nobody makes sport of my mother!" Flint declared.

"Not more than once, anyway," Tanis observed sagely.

Tas wiped his face on his sleeve. He picked up his own scaled-down tankard (it was empty) and tucked it under his arm like an absurd helm. Assuming an air of injured dignity, he declaimed, "Now we must fight a duel!"

Kitiara said gleefully. "I'll be your second, Tas."

"I'll stand for Flint!" Caramon cried.

"Who has choice of weapons?" asked Tanis.

"Flint's challenged; it is his choice," Sturm said, smiling.

"What'll it be, old bear? Apple cores at ten paces? Ladles and pot lids?" asked Kitiara.

"Anything but ale mugs," Tas quipped, his pose of haughty dignity replaced by his usual grin. The laughter didn't stop until Tika returned.

"Shh! Shh, it's late! Will you people be quiet!" she hissed.

"Go on, before someone spansks you," Caramon said, without turning to look at her. Tika slipped in behind his stool and made horrid faces at him. The others laughed at her. Caramon was puzzled.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

Tika deftly lifted the dagger from Caramon's belt sheath. She raised it over her head with a terrifying grimace, as though to stab Caramon in the back. Tears ran down Kitiara's face, and Tas fell off his chair.

"What?" shouted Caramon. Then he snapped his head around and spied Tika in midgrimace. "Aha!" He started after her. The girl darted around the nearby empty tables. Caramon blundered after her, upsetting chairs and stumbling against stools.

Otik appeared from the kitchen with a lamp in his hand. His nightshirt was askew and his sparse white hair was standing up in comic tufts. "What's this row? Can't a man get some sleep around here? Tika, where are you, girl?" The red-haired girl peeked over the rim of a table. "You were supposed to hush them, not join in the party."

"That man was chasing me." She pointed at Caramon, who was busy studying the candle-lit rafters.

"Go to your room," Tika went regretfully. She cast a last grin back at Caramon and stuck out her tongue. When he started toward her, she flipped his dagger at him. It struck the floor quivering, inches from his feet. Tika vanished through the kitchen's swinging doors.

Otik planted his fists on his hips. "Flint Fireforge! I expected better of you. You're old enough to know better. And you, Master Sturm; a well-bred fellow like you ought to know better than to be roistering this late at night." Flint looked properly abashed. Sturm smoothed his long mustache with his right forefinger and said nothing.

"Don't be an old sop," said Kitiara. "Tika was very amusing. Besides, this is a going-away party."

"Everything is amusing to people who've got four kegs of ale in their bellies," growled Otik. "Who's going away?"

"Well, everybody."

Otik turned back to the kitchen. He said, "Well, for pity's sake, go quietly!" and left.

Caramon returned to the table. Through a gaping yawn he said, "That Tika's the ugliest girl in Solace. Old Otik'll have to put up a big dowry to get her married off!"

"You never know," said Raistlin with a glance at the kitchen. "People change."

It was time to part. There was no reason to delay any longer. Sensing this, Tanis stood with folded hands and said, "Though we friends will separate, our good wishes cannot be diminished by time or distance. But to keep the circle in our hearts, we must come together again, each year on this day, here in the inn."

"And if we cannot?" asked Sturm.

"Then five years from today, everyone here tonight shall return to the Inn of the Last Home. No matter what. Let's make this a sacred vow. Who will take it with me?"

Kitiara pushed back her stool and put her right hand in the center of the table. "I'll take that vow," she said. Her eyes fixed Tanis in a powerful hold. "Five years."

Tanis lowered his hand on hers. "Five years."

"Upon my honor, and in the name of the house of Brightblade," Sturm said solemnly, "I vow to return in five years." He placed his sword hand on Tanis's.

"Me, too," said Caramon. His broad palm hid even Sturm's hand from sight.

"If I am living, I will be here," said Raistlin, with a strange lilt in his voice. He added his gracile touch to his brother's.

"And me! I'll be here waiting for all of you!" So saying, Tasslehoff stepped up on the tabletop. His tiny hand rested next to Raistlin's, both lost on Caramon's wide hand.

"Lot of confounded nonsense," Flint grumbled. "How do I know what I'll be doing five years from now? Could be a lot more important than sitting in an inn, waiting for a pack of errant rascals."

"C'mon, Flint. We're all taking the oath," said the kender.

"Hmph." The old dwarf leaned over and set his age- and work-worn hands around the others. "Reorx be with you until we meet again," he said. His voice caught, and his friends knew him for the sentimental old fraud he was.

* * * * *

They left Flint at the table. The twins departed. Tanis, Kitiara, and Sturm strolled to the foot of the stairway. Tasslehoff trailed after them.

"I will say good night," said Sturm, with a glance at Tanis. "But not good-bye." They clasped hands. "Kit, my horse is stabled at the farrier's. Will you meet me there?"

"That's good. My beast is there, too. Sunrise tomorrow?" Sturm nodded and looked around for Tas.

"Tas?" he called. "Where did he get to? I wanted to say good-bye."

Tanis gestured toward the inn above. "He went back up, I think." Sturm nodded and strode away into the cool night. Tanis and Kitiara were left with the crickets, which sang from the massive trees, a symphony of hundreds.

"Walk with me?" asked Tanis.

"Wherever you like," Kitiara replied.

They strolled a dozen paces from the inn before Kitiara took the opportunity to slip her arm through Tanis's. "I have a thought," she said slyly.

"What's that?"

"That you should stay with me tonight. It may be five years before we see each other again."

He halted and drew his arm free. "I cannot," said Tanis.

"Oh? And why not? There was a time not so long ago when you couldn't keep away from me."

"Yes, in between the times you spent far away, campaigning for whoever would pay you."

Kitiara lifted her chin. "I'm not ashamed of what I do."

"I don't expect you to be. The point is, I've come to realize more and more clearly that you and I are of two worlds, Kit. Worlds that can never hope to be reconciled."

"So what are you saying?"

DRAGONLANCE Preludes

"I had a birthday while you were gone. Do you know how old I am? Ninety-seven. Ninety-seven years old, Kit! If I were a human, I'd be a withered ancient. Or dead."

She eyed his willowy form appreciatively. "You're not withered or ancient."

"That's the point! My elvish blood will extend my life far beyond the normal span of humans." Tanis stepped closer and took her hands. "While you, Kit, will age and die."

Kitiara laughed. "Let me worry about that!"

"You won't. I know you, Kit. You're burning your youth out like a two-ended candle in a gale. How do you think I feel, knowing that you might be killed in battle for some petty warlord, while I would live on and on without you? It has to end, Kit. Tonight. Here and now."

Though it was dark, and the white moon, Solinari, was hidden by boughs of vallenwood, Tanis saw the hurt in Kitiara's expression. It was there but an instant. She mastered it and forced a superior smile.

"Maybe it's just as well," she said. "I never did like being tied down. My poor fool of a mother was like that—she never could get along without a husband to tell her what's what. That's not my style. I take after my father. Burning in the wind, am I? So be it! I ought to thank you, Tanthalus Half-Elven, for holding a mirror up to the truth—"

He interrupted her tirade with a kiss. It was a gentle, brotherly kiss on the cheek. Kitiara glared.

"It's not what I want, Kit," Tanis said with great sorrow. "It's how it must be."

She slapped him. Being the warrior she was, Kitiara's slap was no light tap. Tanis staggered and put a hand to his face. A thin smear of blood showed in the corner of his mouth.

"Keep your pretty gestures," she spat. "Save them for your next lover, if you find one! Who will it be, Tanis? A full-blooded elf maiden? But no, the elves would despise you as a half-breed. You need a female version of yourself to love." She marched away, leaving Tanis staring. "You'll never find her!" Kitiara called from the darkness. "Never!"

The crickets had quieted under Kitiara's shouts. In their own time they began to sing again. Tanis stood alone in the night, finding no comfort in their song.