

# Prak in Black

She awoke with a laugh, one of pure mirth and contentment, until the harshness of reality set in. It had been the dream again, one that she'd had regularly for the past two years. Her smile disappeared rapidly as she realized that she was *not* with her family and that the elves had indeed been wiped out.

Cheleste quickly shook off the remnants of her blissful sleep and began to don her armor. She could hear a fierce wind, howling outside and rain falling noisily upon the roof. Marinthea was undergoing another Cleansing, facilitated by the priests of Be'Lath. Cheleste knew though that the process would be a long one, as the land had been reclaimed from the devastation of what was formerly Diathilos.

With both swords strapped securely to her belt, Cheleste stepped out of the antechamber and into the main hall of the new temple dedicated to Amitar. It was nearing completion and would likely be one of the first temples to hold services in the newly founded holy land.

Cheleste walked briskly outside into the gloom, where only an ambient glow of early morning twilight shone through the thick, dark clouds. Rain pattered on her face as she trudged through the mud making her way to a group of people gathered around her "uncle" Brennan. He was pointing and shouting orders to the workers and guardsmen, urging them to complete their tasks with haste. He didn't like being out in the weather.

Brennan saw Cheleste approach and sent the others on their way. "Sleep well?", he asked.

"Until I woke up," was the reply.

"The dream again?" he inquired.

Cheleste merely nodded.

"You'd think they could pick a better day for this," Brennan complained, motioning towards the storm clouds.

"You'd think they could pick better land," Cheleste answered.

Brennan merely smirked at Cheleste's pragmatism. Marinthea was founded where it was for a reason: it was the most central path to all of the nations of the Third Age, allowing a great opportunity to serve as a focal point for all of the world's worship and grievances. It was also a very convenient place for observation of the world's politics.

"We're almost done here," commented Brennan, "This place should be up and running in the next few days."

"Good," exclaimed Cheleste, anxious to be done with it, "Then let's head out to the border and make sure everything is secure there."

"Alright then," assented Brennan, "I'll just need to grab my gear."

Together they turned and headed towards the sanctuary. They stopped short, though, when they saw a striking figure blocking the doorway, clad in white and silver robes, proudly clutching the Sceptre of Judgment, their holiest of relics.

"Your Eminence!" exclaimed Cheleste and Brennan simultaneously, both bending their knees into the mud and lowering their heads.

“The least you could do is come inside to bow,” chastised the arch-priest, “Lest we dirty our blades.” His voice was strong, for though he was nearly seventy years of age, Father Coluscus was a robust and imposing man.

“I apologize your Holiness,” demurred Cheleste, “We just didn’t expect to see you here until the commencement ritual.”

“One must always be prepared for the unexpected,” imparted Coluscus, “As borderguard and Battlepriestess you should know that.”

The three of them walked in silent humility towards the inner sanctum where hung the Greatsword of Amitar, the shining symbol of their faith. Each in turn crossed themselves with the Sign of the Sword and kissed its pommel. After a few moments of silent prayer, the arch-priest spoke.

“I take it that our progress is unimpeded by the Cleansing and that we will be finished on time?”

“Yes your Holiness,” confirmed Brennan, “I believe they are securing the last of the roofing now, including the Swordspire.”

The Swordspire was a 12 foot tall silver mock-up of the Greatsword that was to stand upon the highest steeple of the temple. Its reflected light would be able to be seen for miles.

“Excellent,” replied Coluscus, “All that remains now is to prepare for the commencement ritual. Have you sanctified yourselves?”

Both nodded in the affirmative.

“Good. Then let us—“

The arch-priest was interrupted by the sound of a blood-curdling scream from outside the temple. All three rushed outside, fearing that one of their comrades had fallen from the roof. They skidded to a sliding halt on the muddy ground as a bloody limb fell from the sky and landed at their feet. The left arm of one of the workers had been ripped from its body and still clutched the hammer it had been using.

Thunder rolled as the trio looked up into the sky to see a dark, winged shape swallowing the body of a worker. The other men scrambled over the roof and scaffolding looking for a place to hide from the large reptilian beast.

“Dragon?” asked Cheleste nervously.

“No,” Brennan said shaking his head, “Wyvern.”

The lesser dragonkin was nothing to be taken lightly, however. Its teeth and talons were razor sharp and it had a tail spike infused with enough venom to kill over a dozen horses.

“Take care of Coluscus,” screamed Brennan over the din, “I’ll take care of the men!”

Cheleste immediately drew her two swords, ready to defend herself and the arch-priest should the flying terror come near.

“We should get back inside the temple,” said Cheleste, turning to Coluscus.

“I’ll not leave my followers to die,” said Coluscus, shaking his head resolutely, “Amitar will bring vengeance down upon this foul beast. Or bring us all down together.”

Coluscus slowly raised the Sceptre of Judgment over his head. “Stand back.” Cheleste assented as he began the holy invocation that would bring the relic to life. His words were almost inaudible as the wind and rain whipped around him, drenching his clothes fully.

Cheleste wheeled around trying to locate the beast in the near darkness. Lightning flashed and she caught a glimpse of Brennan and his men readying their bows as the wyvern reached the peak of its ascent and started to turn. Its dive was like something out of a nightmare, with only a silhouette to follow as it came down with frightening speed.

As it neared the ground, Brennan and his men loosed a volley of arrows that would have felled a charging rhino. But their efforts were in vain, for the wind was too strong and their arrows were blown far wide of the target. With nail and claw, the wyvern snatched one of the soldiers from the ground with grisly brutality. His death was instant.

“Fall back to the temple!” cried Brennan, and his men quickly obeyed.

Cheleste saw Brennan at the doorway, waving her inside. She nodded and quickly turned to the arch-priest. “Father we must retreat now! We cannot stop this thing!”

“We can’t,” was the only reply. Coluscus began walking forward, directly into the flight path of the winged creature, holding the now glowing Sceptre of Judgment high for all to see. Cheleste stood horrified as her mentor marched unprotected toward his apparent death.

The wyvern had lined up its dive and was now swooping down like a hawk ready to capture its prey. Coluscus drew the scepter back over his shoulder, preparing to swing. Cheleste realized what he was attempting to do and the utter futility of it shocked her into action.

“No!” she screamed charging forward through the mud.

But she was too late. The wyvern was on Coluscus in an instant. With a cry, Coluscus swung the scepter in a mighty arc that should have crushed the beast’s skull. But at the last moment, it lurched backward and reversed its position, bringing its spiked tail to bear on the arch-priest. It plunged into Coluscus’ shoulder with horrific force, sending bone and flesh flying out the other side. The arch-priest was ripped from the ground violently as the spike had imbedded itself firmly within his body. The force of the blow knocked the scepter from his grasp and it fell heavily into the mud directly at Cheleste’s feet.

Cheleste stared skyward, terrified by what had happened and powerless to do anything about it. She vaguely felt someone shaking her. Brennan had followed her out.

“Grab the scepter and let’s go!” he cried, pulling her back towards the temple. But Cheleste only stared at him, in a dazed stupor. “Coluscus is done for,” he continued, “and so are we if we don’t get inside!”

Something clicked in Cheleste’s tactical subconscious. “He’s not dead!” she realized, “The tail went all the way through and didn’t have time to inject its poison!”

“So?” questioned Brennan.

“So I know what he was trying to do! He wasn’t trying to physically defeat the wyvern. He was trying to use the scepter’s power of Judgment!”

Cheleste suddenly grabbed the scepter and took off at a run towards the temple door. Brennan hurried to catch up.

“Wait! What do you mean?” asked the elder borderguard.

Cheleste didn’t stop until she reached the inner staircase leading up to the bell tower. “The scepter is the ultimate tool of justice,” she explained, “When someone breaks our laws, the scepter is administered to them and with just the slightest touch it can judge a person’s entire life.”

“So how does that apply to something that is part dragon?” Brennan asked.

“Well, if a person’s intentions are basically good, or if they are acting out of survival and self-preservation, then they are merely knocked unconscious for a time. But if their intentions are evil,” she continued, “They are utterly annihilated.”

Brennan began to see the picture.

“I’m betting it works just the same on creatures such as this,” Cheleste finished.

“Good luck,” whispered Brennan.

Cheleste turned and bolted up the stairs as fast as she could.

“Wait!” Brennan cried after her, “What about Coluscious?”

“Find a net!” she called back.

Cheleste found that the wind and rain had not died down when she climbed out of the bell tower and onto the roof. She saw the wyvern directly overhead, spiraling upward towards the clouds. She yelled loudly at the wyvern, waving the scepter to attract its attention and draw it in. Ready to collect its final prey, the winged beast came out of its spiral pattern and engaged a wide turn that would line it up directly with Cheleste. She steadied herself, not wanting to slip or be knocked off the roof. She could see the arch-priest still hanging limply from the creature’s tail as it approached at incredible velocity. It bared its massive fangs ready to devour Cheleste in one bite, but at the last possible second, Cheleste dropped into a kneeling position, gripping the angled roof with her thighs and holding on for dear life. As the dark monster passed over her, she swung upwards with the scepter and landed a blow that connected solidly with the wyvern’s jaw. She turned quickly to see the effect.

Nothing.

But the creature had to have *some* intentions, be they good, evil or otherwise. Unless the scepter was only intended for humanoid races....

The wyvern pulled itself upward into a loop that would put it back on course with the temple rooftop. Cheleste knew she would not be able to fool the beast with the same trick a second time. She looked around desperately for something to use and spotted the ropes securing the steeple and Swordspire. She quickly grabbed them and began fashioning lassos that she prayed would be strong enough to hold the wyvern.

The half-dragon swooped in low and began to hover above Cheleste, as if waiting for her to make the first move.

That was its first mistake.

Cheleste saw a hint of movement from the barely conscious arch-priest. “Father, catch!” she implored, tossing one of the ropes to him. Coluscious barely had enough strength left to grab the rope and wrap it securely around his hand and wrist.

The wyvern attempted to pull away from this strange activity, but found its tail still caught in the arch-priest’s flesh. Cheleste pulled with all of her might trying to free her mentor as he held on for dear life. The wyvern whipped its sinewy neck down and began to bite the rope, trying to chew through it.

That was its second mistake.

Cheleste quickly seized the opportunity to grab a second rope and throw the lasso over the wyvern’s head. Now it was doubly caught and this sudden realization made it jerk back in instinctual fear. That was enough to free Coluscious from its grasp, and he fell painfully onto the rooftop. Cheleste struggled to hold the wyvern down while gently lowering Coluscious off of the roof.

Brennan saw the titanic battle that raged above, and he was there when the arch-priest came slowly to the ground. Coluscus was still alive, but barely breathing. His wound was large enough to stick a fist through and could become easily infected before too long. Brennan hefted the larger man and quickly carried him inside the temple to administer first aid.

Upon feeling the rope go slack, Cheleste released it and put all of her strength into keeping the wyvern from flying away. His power was immense and he threatened to take Cheleste, the attached scaffolding and a few of the temple eaves with him into the sky. The battlepriestess was fast running out of energy and so put all she had left into one heroic yank, trying to break the creature's neck.

It did not have the effect she'd intended.

The wyvern's head was pulled down and instantly impaled upon the Swordspire. The rest of the monster's bulk fell out of the sky, crashing into the steeple and breaking through the roof. The temple face crumbled as the dead wyvern smashed into the ground and was quickly buried by the falling masonry.

Cheleste looked down from what remained of the roof and uttered a single word: "Justice."

Brennan, having stabilized the arch-priest's condition, left Coluscus in the care of the acolytes. He walked over to examine the fallen creature that had nearly crushed him and the rest of the parishioners. Its skin was jet black and it had a foul stench to it, but strangely enough, it was a stench that Brennan was familiar with.

Death.

The wyvern's body appeared to have been decomposing for some time now. But that was impossible unless...

"Having a little trouble with the native wildlife?" came a cocky voice from behind him.

Brennan turned to see Maavegor, High Priest of Prak, standing confidently in his black and silver robes. "Nothing we cant handle," assured Brennan.

"I trust no one was injured?" queried the priest.

"We lost two borderguards," answered Brennan, "And Coluscus will be bedridden for a few days."

"Pity," quipped Maavegor.

"Funny thing, though," began Brennan, "A wyvern's favorite delicacy is that of livestock. Our corrals are only a hundred yards away, yet he never went for them. It's almost as if he was specifically targeting us."

"The undead hunger for *all* life," explained the unholy necromancer.

"I never said it was undead," retorted Brennan.

Just then, Cheleste made her way down one of the ropes to land squarely on her feet behind her uncle.

"Brennan are you hurt?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine," he answered, "I was just talking to—"

Brennan spun back around to find that he and Cheleste were standing alone. The High Priest had disappeared.

"Talking to whom?" Cheleste asked.

"Someone we should keep an eye on," was Brennan's response.

Cheleste looked perplexed.

“Come on,” Brennan said, “let’s go check on Coluscus.”

Slowly they made their way through the rubble of the temple, which would now have to be rebuilt. As they approached the inner sanctum, Brennan motioned over his shoulder towards the monstrous carcass that lay in a heap on their temple’s steps.

“By the way,” he commented, “Did you know that this wyvern was undead?”

“No, I didn’t,” Cheleste answered.

“Maavegor did.”