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## CHAPTER ONE

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*26 Tarsakh,  
The Year of Wild Magic (1372 DR)*

**T**wenty Lords of Shade stood chest-deep in a lake that had never before known the color of light, pulling strands of shadow up from the milky bottom and splicing them into a curtain of umbral darkness that hung down from the cavern's thousand-needed ceiling. Save for the ripples of grime rinsing out of their travel-worn cloaks, the water was as clear as air, and thousands of limestone cave pearls could be seen gleaming in the inch-deep shallows along the shore. Farther out in the heart of the pool, a garden of white faerie stalks rose out of the limpid depths and blossomed across the surface in a carpet of alabaster mineral pads. Of the hundred natural wonders Vala Thorsdotter had witnessed since departing her home in Vaasa, this one was

by far the loneliest and the eeriest, the one that felt most forbidden to human eyes.

“This will be the ruin of it, you know.”

Galaeron Nihmedu was sitting on his haunches beside Vala, watching the shadow lords work. Tall and solidly built for a moon elf, he had the pale skin and regal features common to his race, but two decades of Tomb Guard postings along the Desert Border South had left his face rugged and weather-beaten enough to be considered handsome even by Vaasan standards.

“The ruin of what?” she asked.

“The lake,” Galaeron explained. “The dirt washing out of their clothes will settle on the cave pearls and stop them from growing. The oil from their bodies will work its way into the mineral pads and break them up. A hundred years from now, this will be just another mud hole.”

Vala shrugged. “It’s in a good cause.”

“Spoken like a human.” Galaeron’s tone was more remorseful than unkind. “And I find myself in agreement. How sad is that?”

“Not as sad as feeling sorry for yourself,” Vala answered sharply. Elves worshiped beauty like a god, but there were more important concerns at stake than a lake no one ever saw, and she couldn’t let its destruction sink Galaeron into one of his dejections. “If we could ask Duirsar what he wanted, I’m sure he’d tell us to go ahead.”

“He would tell us to find another place to complete the Splicing—or not to finish at all. Elves do not destroy nature’s treasures to save their own.”

Vala rolled her eyes. “Galaeron, you *know* this is the only way. If the phaerimm aren’t contained, they’ll destroy more than this one lake. Far more.”

“Being the only way seldom makes something the right way.”

Galaeron looked back to the lake, watching the shadow lords weave their dark curtain, then laid a hand on Vala's arm.

"But what's done is done," he said. "You can stop worrying about me."

"Sure I can," Vala said. "Someday."

Her gaze followed Galaeron's out across the lake. The cavern was lit by three magic glowballs hovering among the stalactites. The shadow lords working most directly beneath the brilliant light looked most human, with swarthy complexions, dark hair, and gem-colored eyes. Others, laboring in the dim boundaries or shadowed areas, looked more like silhouettes, their lithe bodies bending and stretching in ghostlike whorls as they stooped down to pluck dark filaments out of the water. They would braid three strands together and give the resulting ribbon a single half twist, then splice it into the curtain fringe. After half a dozen splices, they would weave a few strands of shadow silk into the fibers and speak an arcane word, and a dark fog would fill the empty spaces and solidify into a translucent veil of murk.

Galaeron and Vala watched in silence for another quarter hour, then Galaeron said, "They're sly, these Shadovar."

"That surprises you?"

"They always surprise me." Galaeron pointed at the shadowy curtain. "You see the way they're turning the fibers back on themselves?"

Vala gave a tentative nod. "I see, but I don't understand magic."

"Dimensional twisting," Galaeron explained, "to make the shadowshell one-sided."

Vala gave him a blank look.

"So nothing can leave," he said. "Anything that passes into the shadow goes all the way around the shell and

comes out where it entered. It would be like stepping through a gate and always returning to the same garden.”

“Not much gardening in Vaasa,” Vala commented, trying to wrap her mind around the idea of twisting a dimension. “You can tell that just by watching?”

Galaeron looked at her askance. “The magic isn’t difficult.” His expression grew distant and dark, and he peered through a section of uncompleted curtain into the black depths beyond. “If I can understand it, so can they.”

“‘They,’ Galaeron?” Vala asked. She didn’t like the emphasis Galaeron had placed on the word *they*—or the look that had come to his eyes. “The Shadovar?”

“No.” Galaeron touched two buckles, and his Evereskan chain mail loosened its form-fitting embrace. “*Them*. You know.” He continued to speak as he pulled off his armor. “They’re out there, somewhere there in the dark.”

“*Who*, Galaeron?” Vala asked, more concerned about what had come over Galaeron than what was lurking in the dark. “The pherimm?”

Galaeron nodded. “Giant scaly slugs that’ve been down here in the dark for a long time, since before I felt the cave breathe, since before I followed that little crack down here to this place no one has ever left.”

He let his chain mail breeches clink to the ground, then waded out into the water, kicking cave pearls loose with every step.

“They were out there then,” he said, “and they’re out there now, lurking in the dark, their tails just aching to stick someone with an egg.”

“Galaeron, you know that can’t be.” Vala was fumbling at her own buckles, struggling to remove her heavy scale mail. “Wait!”

She was furious with herself for being caught off guard; she had seen him slipping toward dejection but allowed herself to be taken in by his reassurances.

“Galaeron, you’re imagining things.”

He half turned, a wild look in his eyes, and spoke over his shoulder. “You know how they like that, Vala, putting an egg in some wretch’s gut and watching it grow until it’s as big as his arm and squirming up his throat. They love that. It’s the only thing they love at all.”

Vala let her armor clank to the stone and splashed in after him, her shins still covered by her greaves. The Change had never been this deranged before.

“There aren’t any phaerimm,” she called, loudly enough to draw the attention of the Shadovar. “Prince Escanor checked.”

“No, he didn’t. Not well enough.” Galaeron sank to his chin as the bottom dropped away beneath him, then floated back to the surface and began to swim toward the curtain. “They’re out there. It makes sense. They *have* to be there.”

Vala reached the drop-off and swam after him, half breaststroking and half treading water because the weight of her greaves prevented her from floating her legs to the surface.

“Maybe they don’t know where we are,” she suggested. “Or maybe they couldn’t get here. Not everyone can just turn into a shadow and slip down a crack, you know.”

Galaeron rolled into an easy backstroke. “How long did they take to capture the Sharaedim? Five days—five days to take what Evereska has held for fifteen centuries.” A hand came down on the edge of a mineral pad, shattering the whole thing and sending it fluttering to the lake’s milky bottom. He appeared not to notice. “If I can find this place, *they* can find this place.”

“There is a difference between *can* and *have*, elf.” It took a moment to recognize the raspy voice. While Prince Escanor was ten places away splicing strands into the shadow curtain, his magic made him sound as though he were in the water beside them. “If the phae-*r*imm were here, they would have attacked by now.”

“The phae-*r*imm *are* here—they must be—and have they attacked?” Galaeron asked, facing the prince. “No, they haven’t. So, you’re wrong. Absolutely wrong.”

Escanor’s copper-glowing eyes flared. “How am I wrong, elf?” He began to wade toward them, a bugbear-sized silhouette limned in silver spell-light. “Explain.”

Galaeron looked as though he were about to answer, then he cocked his head and, passing within a lance-length of an astonished shadow lord, vanished through a breach in the curtain. Vala followed as quickly as she was able, but the steel greaves on her shins made her slow. Escanor, swimming as well, beat her through the gap. She cringed at what was likely to follow. One did not ignore a prince of Shade Enclave.

Vala passed through the gap and found them standing close together in the shallows, Galaeron’s lean form submerged to the waist and Escanor’s to the knees. Like all the shadow lords, the prince was swarthy and powerful, with a mouthful of ceremonial fangs and a long, raw-boned face that lent a demonic aura to an already otherworldly mystique. They were standing close together, speaking intensely but quietly.

“. . . are spell collectors,” Galaeron was saying. He sounded less irrational but just as intense. “They haven’t attacked because they want to watch the Splicing.”

“You suggest they’re spying on us?” Escanor asked.

“If I can learn to use shadow magic, why can’t the phae-*r*imm?” Galaeron replied. “If they understand it, they control it.”

“What you say stands to reason, as far as it goes.” Escanor glanced over as Vala touched bottom beside them, then looked back to Galaeron. “But if the phaerimm were here, we would have detected their magic. They cannot hide that from us.”

“Only phaerimm know what the phaerimm can do,” Galaeron said. He was looking past the prince into the darkness, studying it as though he could find the enemy by sheer force of will. “And only a fool would believe otherwise.”

Escanor’s eyes brightened to a fiery red. “Watch that tongue, elf. A shadow crisis excuses only so much.”

Vala slipped between the two, placing her back to Escanor and raising a hand to silence the elf before he could make a retort. “Galaeron, you know better. The Shadovar have killed more phaerimm than all of Evereska’s High Mages together, and Prince Escanor has slain three personally. If there is a fool here, it is the one who speaks to him as though he were some Waterdhavian pikesman on his first march beyond the city gate.”

The rebuke shocked Galaeron into silence, for Vala was the one person in the world whose loyalties he could never question, the one person in the world who could break through the Change to tell him such things. Together, they had traveled the dark pathways of the shadow fringe, fought beholders, liches, and illithids, seen their friends and comrades die in ways horrible beyond imagining. Vala had stood fast through everything and nursed him back to health when all was done, and that had connected her to his true nature in a way no shadow crisis could obstruct.

Galaeron continued to stare past Vala and Escanor into the darkness for a long time, then finally shifted his gaze back to the Vala and said, “I didn’t mean to imply that the Shadovar are anything but the finest warriors.”

He looked to Escanor, but his eyes remained distant and dark. “The prince is right. If the phaerimm were using magic to conceal themselves, I’m sure your divination spells would reveal where they’re hiding.”

Galaeron held Escanor’s gaze a moment, then glanced toward the cave ceiling.

The prince seemed oblivious. “Good.” His eyes did not even stray from Galaeron’s face. “We’re almost done with the Splicing. Evereska need hold only a few months longer, elf. The phaerimm are doomed.”

“My city is grateful for the aid of Shade Enclave, Prince, but it would not do to underestimate our enemies.” Galaeron furrowed his arched brows and again rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. “I recall one of our high mages saying the same thing shortly before a phaerimm larva tore its way from his throat.”

This drew only a condescending smirk from the prince. “When will you learn, elf? We are not your high mages.” He reached over Vala to clap a huge hand on Galaeron’s shoulder. “The Shadovar have been preparing for this war for centuries.”

Vala barely heard this last part, for Galaeron’s efforts had drawn her attention to the mass of limestone fangs hanging down overhead, each with a single drop of water clinging to its stony tip. With broad roots narrowing down to sharp points, the stalactites were shaped more or less like phaerimm, save that they lacked spiny hides and four thin arms. There were hundreds in the lit area alone. At only three to six feet, most were too short to be phaerimm, a few were so long their flattened tips actually touched the lake surface, but a handful hung down in the ten-foot range. It didn’t take Vala long to locate three with suspiciously dry tips and odd dark lines where their bases pressed against the ceiling.

“ . . . that right, Vala?” Escanor asked.

“Is what right?” Hoping that all the blood had not drained from her face, Vala tore her gaze from the ceiling and tried to look calm. “Sorry.”

Escanor cocked a disapproving brow but said, “I was just assuring Galaeron that we Shadovar were hardly likely to make the same mistake as the elves and Waterdhavians.”

“I’m sure you won’t,” Galaeron said, still trying to draw the prince’s gaze to the ceiling. “But new mistakes will prove—”

“Rare, I’m sure,” Vala said, taking Galaeron’s arm.

The prince should have recognized the elf’s signal, and they didn’t dare push things too far. Once the phaerimm realized they were discovered, they would attack instantly—and there were few mistakes more grave than letting a phaerimm have the first blow.

“If you will excuse us, Prince,” Vala said, “it’s time we let you return to your work.”

Escanor dismissed them with an easy wave. “Of course.”

Vala drew Galaeron away, her iron grasp permitting no argument. Once they were a few steps away, with their backs facing the suspicious stalactites, she released his arm and began to twist her hands through the gestures of Evereskan finger talk.

*You’re never going to get Escanor to look up.* As Vala made the statement, she was careful to remain alert to any alien presences in her mind. The phaerimm were not so adept at telepathy that they could eavesdrop on a person’s thoughts without revealing their own presence, but it never hurt to be careful—not around these enemies. *Are you sure they were phaerimm?*

*No,* Galaeron admitted, *but it’s better to be sure they aren’t. You saw what I was looking at?*

*Disguised as stalactites,* Vala said. Her tempo was slow and awkward, for it was a complicated language and she

had only taken up its study as a way to pass the time while Galaeron lay immobile with a pair of broken ankles. *Dry tips and a dark line where they're pressing their bases to the ceiling.*

Galaeron raised his brow. *I missed the lines, he said. We can't run the risk of alerting them. We have to take them ourselves.*

*Ourselves?* Vala shook a fist downward to show emphasis. *How?*

*You take the closest one, Galaeron instructed. Throw your sword. I'll blast the other with a shadow bolt.*

Vala's fingers turned slow and clumsy. *I thought you were done casting spells.*

*You have another way?* Galaeron's gestures came so fast and sharp Vala could barely follow his meaning. *Maybe you can convince Escanor he's wrong—without alerting the phaerimm?*

The question required no answer. Vala knew as well as Galaeron that the prince could not be persuaded that he had made a mistake. They had no choice except to launch the attack on their own, and that meant Galaeron would have to use shadow magic to have any effect at all on the phaerimm, and using his shadow magic meant giving a little more of himself over to the darkness that was slowly devouring him from within.

Resigning herself to the heartache of watching the Galaeron she knew slip even deeper into shadows, Vala gave a curt nod, then asked, *What about the third one?*

*You're joking, Galaeron replied.*

*I could be wrong, but I'm not joking. One above Escanor, one over the mineral pads—*

*That one I missed.* Galaeron's fingers fell motionless for a moment, then he said, *I'll have to try a shadow door.*

*Bad idea, Vala said, even more concerned. Shadow magic was far more dangerous for the wielder than*

normal Weave magic. If a magic-user overreached his limits, he invited in just the sort of darkness already consuming Galaeron. *You're barely holding on as it is.*

*Then it's good you are watching over me. I am grateful—very grateful.*

Vala looked away, then spoke aloud. "Galaeron, it isn't fair to hold me to that promise . . . not now."

"Nevertheless, I do hold you to it." Galaeron's voice was firm. "When the time comes, you must not hesitate."

"If, Galaeron." They reached the shore, and Vala sat down to remove her greaves. "If the time comes."

Galaeron turned away without answering and started down the shore, moving far enough away that they both could not be struck down by the same spell. Vala looked back across the lake to where the shadow lords were just closing the last few breaches in the shadow curtain. Though the shadow lords had left their armor on shore, all were armed with glassy black weapons similar to Vala's darksword—one reason, no doubt, that the enemy was being so careful to remain concealed.

The two phaerimm Galaeron had noticed hung about fifty feet apart in a rough line on the interior side of the curtain. On the flanks of their conical bodies, Vala could see a regular pattern of bumps where their body thorns lay concealed beneath the hardened lime-mud they had used to disguise their scaly hides. The third phaerimm, the one Galaeron had missed, hung over the mineral pads about forty paces away, barely noticeable in the gloomy boundary between dark and light. Though Vala had no way of guessing whether the creatures had seen enough to defeat the shadow curtain, the simple fact that they were making no attempt to stop the final Splicing made clear what they believed.

Finding no signs of any enemies beyond the three already located, Vala stood and waded back into the lake,

angling toward Prince Escanor to avoid alerting the phaerimm. She had no idea how Galaeron had sensed the enemy's presence—or why that had brought on a Change—but she felt confident in his conclusions. Every good warrior knew the value of camouflage, and the thornbacks were nothing if not good warriors.

When Vala drew within throwing range of the nearest phaerimm, she stopped and looked back. Galaeron was just setting a loop of shadowsilk on a stone beside him. He peeled another strand off the mat of dull fabric he was holding, then soaked it in a drop of armor oil and glanced in Vala's direction. She nodded. He pressed the filament to the limestone wall, his lips already moving as he spoke his spell incantation.

A film of oily shadow spread across the ceiling, filling the cavern with a soft, rainlike patter as thousands of drops of water lost their tenuous hold and plummeted into the lake. Vala drew her darksword and in a single smooth motion sent it whirling up at the nearest phaerimm. The glassy black blade tore a three-foot gash across the thornback's body and became lodged with little more than the hilt showing.

The stain on the ceiling swept past overhead. The astonished phaerimm came loose one after the other, the hardened lime-mud camouflage falling in cakes from their squirming bodies and their strange language of winds stirring the air into whistling vortexes. The phaerimm hit the water almost as one and sank beneath the surface.

Escanor and his shadow lords stopped working and whirled toward the splash rings, shouting to each other in their own language and trying to make sense of what was happening.

“Phaerimm!” Vala stretched her hand toward the one she had attacked and thought of her darksword, and the

blade rose out of the water and flew back into her grasp. "Three of them!"

She heard Galaeron intoning his second spell and looked over to see him flipping the ring of shadowsilk toward the place the third phaerimm had entered the water. A disk of black shadow appeared two inches above the surface. Vala was distracted as the startled phaerimm activated their floating magic and began rising out of the water. The two nearest the curtain came up in the midst of the astonished shadow lords, who quickly proved the truth of Escanor's boasts by assailing them with shadow webs and darkswords.

Even caught off guard, the phaerimm reacted like the terrors they were, unleashing a flurry of fire strikes and lightning bolts that left a dozen Shadovar bobbing dead in the darkening waters. A pair of scorched shadow lords popped up beside Vala, their arms and legs blasted off by the force of the strike that had killed them. Vala threw her sword again, only to see her target scythed down the middle by a falling wall of black glass as Escanor unleashed his own magic.

Vala glanced over to see the third phaerimm's tail vanishing into the circle of shadow Galaeron had placed over its splash ring. The elf himself was pointing across the lake roughly in her direction. Knowing the creature would be disoriented for a moment when it emerged from Galaeron's shadow door, Vala nodded and reached out to summon her sword back.

Galaeron's finger shifted in Prince Escanor's direction.

"No, Galaeron!" Vala cried. "Here!"

Too late. The third phaerimm had already reappeared, stunned and disoriented by its dizzying journey through the shadow plane. But Escanor happened to be turning to attack their other surviving foe, and so this thornback

appeared behind him instead of in front. Vala's stomach turned to ice. With the prince at least twenty paces away and in a direct line beyond the dazed phaerimm, she did not dare throw her sword again.

She started toward him, yelling, "Escanor, behind you!"

The prince cocked his head in response but only stretched a hand toward the second phaerimm, who was assailing five of his lords with a roaring storm of meteors. A sphere of spinning darkness shot from his hand and streaked through the thing's torso, leaving a basket-sized hole in the heart of its body. The creature splashed into the lake and slowly sank out of sight.

The third phaerimm was already bringing its tail out of the water, ten steps away.

"Watch your back!" she cried.

A murky aura of darkness—more of Galaeron's magic, Vala guessed—enveloped the phaerimm, but the spell did not prevent the creature's tail from catching Escanor in the pit of the stomach as he spun to meet the attack. The barb sank to its root, doubling the prince over and drawing an eerie gurgle of anguish.

Vala hurled her darksword. The blade tumbled three times, then sank hilt-deep in the phaerimm's torso. The creature began to flicker between material and immaterial, and Vala was astonished to realize that Galaeron had not cast his spell to protect the prince but to trap the phaerimm beside him.

Had Galaeron finally been taken by his shadow self?

Escanor wailed in pain and slipped off the barb, then rolled to his back and floated, groaning. Vala called her darksword back to her grasp and began to angle in the prince's direction.

"Vala, no!" Galaeron splashed into the water. "The phaerimm! It knows too much!"

Vala glanced at the prince, who, unlike most of his wounded lords, was at least floating faceup. She decided to place her trust in Galaeron a little longer. She sprang at the phaerimm, her black sword blocking the tail as it arced toward her throat, lopping the dangerous barb off at the root. On the backswing, she removed two of the thing's four arms, then reversed her grip, jammed the blade into the creature's enormous mouth, and split it down the side.

The dark aura vanished from around the phaerimm—only to reappear an instant later as Galaeron recast his snare spell. The phaerimm flickered between materiality and immateriality again as it tried once more to teleport away, and again Vala sank her sword deep into its body. It pummeled her with one of its remaining arms, and the other clamped onto her throat, trying to crush her windpipe. She kned it in the flank and felt sharp pain as one of its body thorns impaled her thigh. The phaerimm began to overpower her, pulling her face toward the fang-filled mouth atop its shoulders. She croaked in Galaeron's direction.

He was already pointing a sliver of obsidian at the creature and yelling a string of mystic syllables. A finger-thin ray of darkness left his hand, catching the phaerimm in one of its remaining arms and severing it at the elbow. Vala snapped the other with a palm strike, then kicked free and brought her darksword around in three eviscerating swings.

The thing's heart slipped out of the second gash, still beating. Vala sent it flying off with a flick of her blade, and the phaerimm dropped, motionless, into the water. She struck again and again, not stopping until she had opened it from tail to lip and left it floating in the water like a dressed eel.

Galaeron waded up. "Are you hurt?"

“I’m alive.” She shook her head clear and gave herself a cursory glance, then looked over and found herself staring into a pair of black, empty eyes. “G-Galaeron? How many spells did you cast?”

Instead of answering, Galaeron pushed her toward Escanor’s floating form. “See to the prince and the others,” he said as he turned and started toward the shadow curtain. “I’ll finish the Splicing.”