

FORGOTTEN REALMS

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Chosen of Aedraen Book I
THE FALL OF HIGHWATCH





ONE



CHAPTER

HE CROSSED THE FROZEN STREAM, KNOWING HIS pursuers would not. The knowledge of what lurked on the mount—the fear of it—would hold them back.

Still they might loose a few arrows if they caught sight of him. So he moved on. Over the ice-slick rocks of the riverbank, through the winter-bare branches of the trees that leaned over the river like eager listeners, and on into the deeper shadows of the pines.

He'd made it. He was . . . not free. But he was away from *them*.

Up the slope he ran, crouching under branches thick with snow, finding his way as much by scent as sight, for the pines blocked out the starlight. His boots kicked at old bones—and some not so old. But he kept going, up and up, to the very height of the hill. He knew the futility of trying to run or hide. His only hope was to find the horror before it found him.

Bare of trees, the summit gave him a wide view of the lands below. To the north, the peaks of the Icerim, starlit snow creased with black rock, a wall against the sky. Southward, the wooded hills fell away into the steppes of Narfell.

He had never been to this place, but he had visited others like it in other lands, had stood vigil while others sought the



secrets in the holy places of the land—the Hearts. A thick tower of bare rock broke from the soil of the mount. Cracks and fissures marred it from top to bottom. Frost filled them, reflecting the starlight and giving the entire rock the appearance of being shattered by pale light.

Except near the bottom, where the largest fissure opened into blackness—the cave leading to the Heart. It waited like an open mouth, a jagged row of icicles making it seem not so much to yawn as prepare to bite. The breeze, which down in the valley had only whispered in the topmost branches, quickened to a wind and howled over the cave mouth.

A new light rained down upon the height. He looked up. The rim of the moon was climbing over the mountains. The full moon. Called by his people the Hunter's Moon. That meant—

All at once, he knew he was not alone on the mount. Eyes watched him. Hungry mouths tasted his scent on the breeze. The very air held a Presence.

He turned and looked back down the slope.

Eyes burned from the moving shadows under the trees. Dozens of them. Some large and close to the ground, their gazes mean and hungry. Wolves' eyes. Winged silhouettes watched him from the treetops, and dozens upon dozens of shadows hopped and flapped against the white background of the snow. Ravens.

Why have you come?

The voice thundered in his head, so strong that he fell, his knees breaking through the snow. He caught himself on both hands. The sharp rocks under the frost scraped the skin from his palms.

From the trees came the howl of wolves and the caw of ravens. They did not advance. Still, their meaning was clear. *You are surrounded. You are caught.*

He looked back to the cave, and something tugged his gaze upward.



The rising moonlight fell on a figure crouched on the rocks above. Larger than a man, his frame thick with muscle, his flesh patched with scars. Clothed in ragged skins, some of which still dripped and steamed in the cold air. Antlers rose like a twisted crown from the skull he wore as a mask, and from within the sockets his gaze burned with green fire. In his right hand he gripped the shaft of a long spear, its black iron head barbed. His left hand dripped blood.

Nendawen. Master of the Hunt.

Why have you come? said Nendawen.

“Salvation from my enemies,” he said.

And who are you?

“Lendri,” he said.

You know the covenant. To come without sacrifice means death.

Lendri felt the world shake around him, and a great roar filled his ears. He opened his eyes—he could not remember closing them—and looked up into the visage of the Hunter. Nendawen stood over him, the point of his spear on Lendri’s throat.

I see no sacrifice.

“My sacrifice awaits you in the valley. A living sacrifice. Not one. I brought many.”

You brought nothing, said Nendawen. They pursued you. And now you come to me, begging me to save you. He crouched, the spear never wavering, and brought his head close, the skull mask only inches from Lendri’s face. The stench of death washed over Lendri, thick and close. *You have blood on your hands. The blood of a king.*

“Y-yes.”

You are an exile. Cast out from your clan. Your people gone from this world. Returned home in victory. But you? Left behind in dishonor.

Lendri said nothing. He knew these things already.

But did you know that our victory was incomplete? Your people returned home, yes, but to a home despoiled by Jagun Ghen. We



defeated him in the end, but he fled our vengeance. Did you know this?

“N-no.”

Jagun Ghen escaped. Fled the Hunting Lands. Fled here. To this world. And here you are, Lendri, killer of kings.

It was not a question, but Lendri could see that Nendawen waited for a response. The point of the spear touched his throat, pressed, drawing blood.

“Wh-what do you want, holy one?”

What I ever want, said Nendawen. Blood. I want Jagun Ghen, him and all his ilk, delivered to me.

Lendri swallowed. He could feel the movement of his throat touching the cold iron of Nendawen’s spear.

What do you want, little one?

“I . . .” He’d come here looking for no more than a night’s safety. But Nendawen’s question seemed to ask for more.

Salvation, you said. From your enemies.

“Yes.”

I grant your request, said Nendawen.

Gratitude filled Lendri, but he said nothing.

This night, under the Hunter’s Moon, I will hunt. Those sniffing your trail will not survive to see the sun. But when the Hunter’s Moon sets, I may hunt no longer.

“Wh-why are you telling me this?”

Jagun Ghen cannot be allowed to roam free. In the Hunting Lands, Jagun Ghen almost conquered. Only hundreds of years of blood and sacrifice vanquished him. Here, in this corrupt world beneath its cold stars, Jagun Ghen could become a god. This cannot be allowed. You know the pact. In our holy places, within the shrines, I may enter this world, but beyond . . . only my sight may roam, except under the Hunter’s Moon. Other nights, and days beneath the sun . . . another must hunt in my place. My Eye requires a Hand.

“What has this to do with me?” Lendri said, though he feared he already knew the answer.

Thunder shook the sky, and a deep rumbling filled the earth, and Lendri realized that Nendawen was laughing.

You are not to be the Hand of the Hunter. You may have ties to this world, but you are of the Hunting Lands . . . heart, soul, and blood. To hunt Jagun Ghen, I require one who is of this world.

Lendri swallowed. He could feel a trickle of blood running down his neck from where Nendawen's spear had pierced it.

You will bring me my chosen Hand, said Nendawen. Do this, and you may return to the Hunting Lands. When next the Hunter's Moon rises, I will have my Hand, or I will have your blood, Lendri, killer of kings.

"How will I find this . . . Hand?"

Hunt.

"And how will I know him?"

She carries death in her right hand.