

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE CITADELS

Neversfall



ED GENTRY





chapter one

They approach, sir,” the dwarf said, handing the spyglass to Adeenya.

She took no notice of Marlke’s calloused hands as they brushed against hers, her own skin toughened from years of swordplay and training. She brought the glass to her eye to see the bright colors of the Maquar silks waving in the wind as the troops approached.

“Not much for subtlety, are they?” she said, scanning their ranks.

“They’ve little need for stealth, sir,” the dwarf replied.

It was true the Maquar, the elite warriors of Estagund’s rajah, might be as subtle as a blow to the head, but they were also as deadly. Their battle prowess was legendary, as was their discipline.

The marching lines of the Maquar were nothing short of perfect. No soldier marched faster than another, not one stood too close or too far from his neighbor in the lines. Their formations were arranged by height with the taller troops at the ends of each line. Marlke was right; they cut an impressive swath across the grassy land as they came. Though only a few score soldiers, each Maquar’s chest, shoulders, and head were held high as though the entire

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army of Estagund rode behind them in deference and support.

Adeenya handed the spyglass back to Markle with a nod. She had heard stories of the Maquar's prowess her entire life, and the spectacle that moved toward her sent a shiver up her back. Most of her childhood she had been enamored of the stories her father told of the peerless, loyal Maquar with their pageantry and glorious battles.

When she was still a young girl, Adeenya had begun training behind her father's back, in preparation for join the Maquar. Under the guise of learning responsibility, she worked hard in her father's shops to earn coin to pay for sword lessons. Paying the tutors to remain quiet had cost as much as the training itself. Her skill in fighting was as undeniable as her love of the art.

Her lessons continued until she learned that the Maquar never accepted foreigners in their ranks, not even those willing to expatriate. The Maquar took only natives of Estagund, as though the land somehow lived in their blood. Without Estagundian blood, Adeenya's place in the mercenary ranks of the Durpari was clear. As soon as she became of legal age, she'd joined the Durpari mercenary forces. She'd had nowhere else to go, after all.

Adeenya turned to study her own soldiers. They had broken camp and were packing away gear to be ready to march anew if the Maquar commander so ordered. The Durpari uniform of dark brown and gray stood in stark contrast to the bright, vivid blues and greens of the Maquar. The Durpari soldiers maintained most any hairstyle they wanted, while the Maquar were all neatly cropped. Adeenya watched as one of her troops tripped another, prompting a bout of laughter from many others standing around. She shook her head and turned back to the approaching force. Her soldiers

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were different, that was for certain. She glanced back over her shoulder and saw the tripped man come to his feet, mirth clear on his face. Different was all right.

“Sir, what’s our move?” the dwarf asked.

“We have no move, Marlke. We wait for them. The Maquar commander is in charge, be he genius, fool, or lout,” she said with a shrug. “There’s nothing to be done for it now.”

“And if he’s a fool or a lout, sir?”

“He wouldn’t be the first soldier with those afflictions that I’ve met,” she replied. “We’ll work around it.”

The Maquar were two bowshots away, still locked in their battle-ready arrow formation. Adeenya swallowed and smoothed her short, ruddy hair slick with sweat and nodded to Marlke to prepare the troops to meet the Maquar. The soldiers fell in behind her like dead leaves following a gust of wind and Adeenya strode forward to meet the Maquar, a weak smile on her face. Maquar or no, Adeenya was used to being in charge of herself and her own people. She often thought it was for the best she had never been able to join the Maquar. Subordination was not a talent she’d grown into.

“Orir Adeenya Jamaluddat,” she said with a salute to a dark-skinned man at the front of the Maquar lines. She stood nearly a head taller than him but was half his width. His broad shoulders were straight and strong without seeming rigid or tense. His broad nose hovered over full lips that showed no smile or frown.

“Greetings,” the man said. “I am Urir Jhoqo Valshu. This is Taennen Tamoor, my durir, and Loraica Hazshad, my terir,” he said, indicating a tall, thin, much younger man to his right and an enormous woman to his left.

Taennen stood with his shoulders rolled back tight,

his chin straight, and his hands folded behind his back. Cropped black hair covered his head but his clean, smooth face, which had never seen a razor, showed his youth. His armor and clothing were cleaner than even his commander's, no small feat while on the road.

The woman beside him, Loraica, was the largest Adeenya had ever seen. Most men did not compare in stature with the towering, muscled figure. Tight, dark curls crowned Loraica's head, forming a loose braid that drifted to her shoulder. Her square jaw gave her face an unfeminine but not unattractive visage. The two Maquar stood close together as only those who are completely comfortable with one another can.

Jhoqo's eyes scanned her troops, though Adeenya never felt them leave their scrutiny of her. She inwardly scowled. She had heard the Estagundian dialect before and the pronunciation differences it caused. Be he in charge or not, she was Orir Jamaluddat, not Urir.

The Maquar leader nudged his chin toward the dwarf. "And this?"

"My dorir, Marlke Stoutgut," she said. The dwarf stared straight ahead, his eyes focused on nothing, the same attitude as the durir and terir across from him. Proper subordinates, all. Adeenya was pleased.

Jhoqo nodded again, and a long silence passed between the five of them. "And your third?" he asked.

"None, sir," Adeenya said.

Jhoqo eyed her for a moment. "I'd heard the Durpari didn't have extensive command successions. How do you find that works for you, Orir?" the man said, his tongue catching hard on the final word.

"Fine, sir," Adeenya replied, her forehead wrinkled.

"Well, that's what matters, isn't it?" Jhoqo said, waving a

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dismissive hand for everyone to stand at ease.

“This is Khatib, our resident intellect,” Jhoqo said, indicating a stocky man in a peacock blue robe who approached from within the ranks. He wore no armor and carried no shield.

“With your permission, Khatib will quickly examine your men,” Jhoqo said. “Just as a precaution.”

Adeenya nodded, keeping her mouth tightly shut. Caution was always merited, but the line between prudence and insult was a thin one, she knew. If her superiors hadn't advised her to keep her forces small and leave the spellcasters behind, she would have been sorely tempted to send one over to examine the Maquar.

The wizard bowed again. “If you could simply ask them to form a line, single-file?”

Adeenya nodded to Marlke, adding a significant glance for her second alone. The dwarf saluted with a curt, short snap of his hand and began barking orders. The soldiers from Durpar fell quickly into line and submitted as one to the wizard's examination. Adeenya knew Marlke would understand her implicit order to watch the wizard carefully.

“They seem to be good soldiers, Orir. You are to be commended,” Jhoqo said to Adeenya. He motioned for her to join him as he began to walk.

“Thank you, sir. I have found them loyal, brave, and resourceful in my time as their commander,” Adeenya replied.

“How long has that been?” Taennen asked from his position behind them.

“Durir,” Jhoqo said without looking at the younger man.

Taennen flinched but continued to walk. His dark eyes

were locked on his commander, his lips were pursed and his stance rigid. The breeze had mussed his cropped black hair.

“My apologies for my second’s manners,” Jhoqo said to Adeenya.

“No need, sir,” she said. “I have led most of these men for nearly two years. A few, my dorir included, have been with us for a little over six months.”

“Your previous second died?” Jhoqo asked. His gaze lingered on the distant Curna Mountains as he spoke.

“No, sir. She was transferred. Promoted, actually. She now leads her own regiment,” Adeenya said. She wondered at the life of conflict the man must have led to assume her second had died. In that moment, the glorious shine of the Maquar seemed a little scuffed to her.

“Ahh . . . I see the pride you feel for her,” Jhoqo said. “It is a wonderful feeling, isn’t it? And it speaks highly of your skills in teaching her how to lead, daughter.”

She nodded. “Yes, sir. May I ask a question, sir?”

“Of course. Everything begins with a question,” he replied.

“When will I learn why my troops and I have been called here, sir?”

Jhoqo stopped and turned to face her. “Straight to the point. A fine quality, I suppose, Orir.”

“Yes, sir,” Adeenya said. She could hardly imagine what urgent need demanded that she lead her forty soldiers to the middle of the wilds at the northern end of the Curna Mountains.

“A reconnaissance mission,” her superiors had said. “Nothing to worry about.”

Which did not explain why they had met the Maquar—or, more importantly, why they were expected to be

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subordinate to the almost equal force.

“Have you spent any time in Veldorn, Orir?” Jhoqo asked, resuming his stroll once again.

“I’ve passed through a few times, sir. Never very deep into those lands, though,” Adeenya said.

“Why is that, do you think?” Jhoqo asked.

Adeenya chose her words carefully and said, “Between business interests and the Durpari government, many campaigns have been launched with the intention of clearing Veldorn of the monster tribes. They’ve all failed. It is not our custom to throw good money after bad. The few civilized folks who do choose to live there are on their own.”

Jhoqo nodded. “I appreciate your honesty, Orir.”

“Sir—we’re to go to Veldorn, then?” she asked.

Jhoqo seemed to gauge her carefully. “We travel to the one place that might eventually solve many of the problems we in the South have in Veldorn,” Jhoqo said. “To Neversfall.”

Adeenya did not speak for several moments. “For what purpose, sir?”

“You’ve heard of Neversfall?” Jhoqo said, watching her.

“Aye, sir. My father mentioned it a few times,” she said. She remembered how casually her father had talked of his interest in the citadel when the proposal had first come to him. She knew then that he was interested. Her father only responded so coolly when he was excited about a proposition.

The urir raised his eyebrows. “He is Yaviz Jamaluddat,” she added reluctantly.

“Ah! Of course,” Jhoqo said. “Such a wealthy merchant would certainly know of it. No doubt he invested in it.”

His tone made it clear that his last words were not a question so Adeenya did not address it as such and forged ahead. “What is the mission at Neversfall, sir?”

Jhoqo stopped walking and faced Adeenya and both of his subordinates. “To secure it.”

“Sir?” Taennen asked.

“The conditions at the citadel of Neversfall are currently unknown,” Jhoqo said. “The last report from the commander assigned to Neversfall is three days overdue.”

“Three days? By the One,” Taennen said.

“Yes, the councils are quite concerned,” Jhoqo said. “Estagund and Durpar have invested too much time, coin, and mutual respect into this endeavor for anything to go wrong.”

Adeenya puzzled at the man’s notion of respect as an investment. Though, she supposed, respect often yielded the finest returns. “Yes, sir. Do we have any theories as to what might have happened to the troops stationed there?”

“Yes, sir, how many were there?” Taennen added.

“The citadel was held by nearly forty combined Maquar and Durpari troops,” Jhoqo said.

Adeenya reeled at the number. What could possibly overcome forty well-trained soldiers with a strong fortress as their line of defense?

“Sir, are there more reinforcements on the way?” she asked.

Jhoqo shook his head. “Not yet. We’re to scout the situation and call in more if needed.”

Adeenya quelled her immediate reaction and offered a measured response. “Sir, we could be dealing with a huge enemy force here if they overwhelmed that many troops. We aren’t prepared for anything larger than a clean-up effort. We need battlemages, clerics—the safety of our two nations could be at stake.”

Jhoqo nodded. “Or perhaps it’s nothing serious at all,” he said. “That’s what we’re going to find out. No need for

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expensive magic-users then. It's best not to jump to conclusions, Orir. Try to remember that."

Adeenyā restrained herself. "Yes, sir."

"Our first goal is to make sure the men and women at the citadel are safe."

"Of course, sir," Adeenyā said. "I'm just trying to keep the bigger issues in mind."

"I believe in the Adama, Orir. Do you?" Jhoqo said.

"I'm not sure I see the relevance, sir," Adeenyā said.

"If all is one, if everyone and everything are connected as that thinking would have us believe, then we should treat one another with great care, don't you think?"

Adeenyā nodded, though the relevance still eluded her. "The wholeness of the All is a fine and good concept, sir."

Jhoqo nodded. "The Adama is a wise formula that benefits us all. Too often, we hurry through life without thinking about the small connections and opportunities we pass up every day. Those small things cannot be sacrificed for the bigger issues. Details, Orir."

Adeenyā said nothing but nodded again. The Maquar were known for their devotion to the ways of the Adama, the belief system of most inhabitants of the Shining South. Never one to give the matter much thought, Adeenyā usually just smiled and nodded when the topic was broached in conversation—especially when the person doing the broaching was also her commander.

"When do we move out, sir?" Adeenyā asked, hoping to leave the previous conversation behind. She had used the word 'sir' more times in the few moments she'd known the Maquar commander than she had in the previous two weeks. It didn't fit well in her mouth.

"I want to address the troops before we go, but we will move out immediately after," Jhoqo said.

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“Yes, sir. My people will have our camp broken down in two bells,” Adeenya replied.

Jhoqo gave her a hard look and said, “No, Orir. You’ll be ready to move before next bell.” With that the man offered a nod and moved toward the rest of the Maquar soldiers who still stood in perfect formation, awaiting their next command. Adeenya held back a sigh, hoping she had never come across to her subordinates as Jhoqo just had to her.