



THE CITADELS

Sentinelspire



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prologue

2 Mirtul, the Year of the Sword (1365 DR)
The Yuirwood

They had come not long after midnight. With the moon and stars drowned in a sea of cloud, the darkness beneath the trees had become absolute. How such a large force had penetrated the depths of the Yuirwood, no one yet knew. It was unheard of. Unprecedented. But to strike so near one of the Circle's holiest sites, to murder the Masters of the Yuirwood and bring fire to the trees, that was sacrilege. Such a crime demanded blood.

Chereth followed the ranger through the wood. Aeryll was the man's name. Man? No, Aeryll was the youngest member of their band, scarcely more than a boy, not even a year out of his *Jalesh Rudra*. Aeryll held aloft a thin chain, a starstone dangling from it. The stone's soft silver glow gave the ranger enough light to guide them to a small clearing, a place where massive slabs of stone broke out of the earth. Little grew here—tufts of tall, sharp grass from the fissures of rock, and mosses in the recesses of stone that saw little sunlight. Chereth and the ranger emerged from the forest just as the clouds let loose a soft rain.

The Masters of the Yuirwood—Triem and the seven of his band who had survived—stood in the lee of a tall boulder.

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Someone had bound two starstone necklaces to the long tufts of summer grass that sprouted from crevices in the rock. Just enough light for the humans to see. Another figure, his dark clothes torn and streaked with blood, huddled at their feet, his elbows bound behind his back, his knees and ankles tied before him.

Triem, his hood pulled down on his shoulders, turned at Chereth and Aeryll's approach. "Master Chereth," he said, and bowed.

"This is the only one captured?" asked Chereth.

"Mandel's band is pursuing the others eastward. We've heard nothing so far."

"It took nine of you to apprehend this one?"

A moment's silence before Triem answered, but there was no apology in his tone. "You saw him, Master. What he did. Yes, it took nine of us."

Chereth looked down on the man huddled in the grass. He walked around Triem, and two of the other rangers stepped back to allow him to approach the captive.

"You are Kheil," said Chereth.

The man looked up, his eyes bright in a face masked by blood. A slight gash near his scalp had bled freely, soaking his visage.

"How did you find us?" said Chereth. "How did you come undetected so deep into our sacred wood?"

The man said nothing. His glare did not falter.

"Why did you come? Why bring murder to our Circle?"

The man's back stiffened, pride and arrogance entering his countenance. "No one thwarts the Old Man of the Mountain and lives to tell about it."

Chereth leaned upon his staff and looked Kheil in the eye. "We have much the same rule." He straightened and turned to Triem. "Kill him."



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Triem and his rangers dragged Kheil through the woods. The soft rain turned to a torrent as the warm winds off the Sea of Fallen Stars met the cooler air coming down from the Tannath Mountains, creating a thunderstorm that rattled the early summer leaves and shook the hills. Lightning flashed, making the wood a mass of flickering light and shadow. Triem wore his hood down so as not to impede his ears and eyes, and when the band left the woods to cross clearings or crest a hill, the rain hit him like nails, stinging his skin.

They reached the hilltop. There, shuddering in the fury of the storm, stood the Tree of Dhaerow. The tree had died many years before, but its leafless corpse still stood, gray and hard like some withered old sentinel on the hill. It had a foul air about it that made Triem want to walk away and not look back. Perhaps it was the lingering of ghosts or the scent of death upon the grass. Here, the Masters of the Yuirwood hanged the most vile criminals—murderers, rapists, and worshipers of the dark gods. But Triem had long feared that the tree had a presence of its own. Dead it might be, but the old oak had an awareness about it that he had never liked.

“You’re going to hang me, then?” said Kheil. He looked up at the Tree of Dhaerow. The hard rain had opened his head wound again, and blood and water soaked him from his scalp down to his boots. “I’m disappointed. I’d heard you Yuir rangers had more imagination.”

Aeryll stepped forward, his smile cold in the lightning flashes. “You’ll—”

“Enough,” said Triem. “Aeryll, say nothing.”

“That’s right,” said Kheil. “Just—”

Dorren, a ranger so big that his brothers in the Circle often taunted him about being half giant, hit Kheil so hard that blood and water sprayed the rangers standing ten feet away.

“Quickly,” said Triem. “Before he comes to his senses. Let’s not make this any more of a struggle than we have to.”

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The rangers unbound Kheil, then tied his wrists in front of him. They secured a rope of braided leather over the new bindings, then threw the remaining length over the lowest, thickest branch of the old oak. Dorren hauled on the rope until the tips of Kheil's boots barely scraped the mud. The sudden pressure on his arms and the wind and rain in his face woke him.

Kheil swallowed and said, "Whuh . . . what—?"

Dorren drew his dagger, cut away Kheil's clothes, and tossed them into the mud while Aeryll pulled off the assassin's boots.

"What are you doing?" Kheil asked, his speech slurred. In the light from a distant flash of lightning, Triem saw something in Kheil's eyes. Fear.

"Relieving you of your disappointment," said Triem. "The Masters of the Yuirwood may lack many things. Imagination is not one of them."

The other rangers drew their knives. Cold steel flickered in the storm light.



The storm ravaged all of Aglarond that night. The Masters of the Yuirwood hunted the surviving assassins through their sacred wood, but none were ever found, save the dead.

As the storm passed, breaking itself against the Tannath Mountains and turning its spent fury over the UMBER Marshes to the east, Triem's band left the Tree of Dhaerow and the flayed corpse that hung from it. When the thunder had diminished to no more than a low rumble in the distance, and the stars and sinking moon began to peek through the clouds, a lone figure climbed the hill to the Tree of Dhaerow. No one saw the figure cut down the corpse of Kheil. No one watched as he bore Kheil's corpse far away.



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He heard singing. A voice, deep and rich, like cedar smoke, chanting in a tongue he could not understand. But the deeper meaning tugged at him, reaching through the pain to that part of him that still remembered a world where pain did not define him. Hope and life broke him like vibrant color breaking shadow. And that color was green. . . .

He gasped, his body taking in a great breath that burned his lungs.

Sounds filled his ears—water dripping from summer leaves, frogs and toads croaking like wet branches rubbing in the breeze, a cacophony of crickets. Beneath these sounds, like the accompanying harp to a bard's song, was the gurgle of water running sweet and clear. He found himself filled with a thirst such as he had never known.

“Easy,” said a voice.

He opened his eyes and saw a figure kneeling to one side of him. Sunlight broke through the ceiling of leaves, and a few beams played over the figure. Streaks of gray flecked his long brown hair, but the sunlight brought out a deep green, like moss peeking out from tree bark. His coppery skin was smooth, but his eyes gazed with the wisdom of years, and the ears protruding from his hair swooped up into a sharp tip. Too thick for an elf, yet not thick enough for most humans, this one had to be a half-elf, and with that knowledge, a name floated to the surface of his mind.

“Chereth?” he asked. “How . . . ?”

“How what?”

“How did I . . . ?” He searched his memory and found only broken bits and pieces. Chereth, a druid, one of the Masters of the Yuirwood, that ancient forest so far from . . . where? The mountain. A lone mountain rising to great height above miles of rolling grassland. Sentinelspire. That was the mountain's name. “How did I come here?”

“You would not say,” said the half-elf.

He sat up and looked down on his body. The pain—the memory of which made him flinch—was only a dull ache in

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his flesh, but the scars remained, crisscrossing his torso, his arms, his legs. Looking at them, he remembered—rain and wind, a gnarled tree, and through it all, cold knives glinting in the light of a storm.

“You do remember then,” said the half-elf. “I was not sure.”

“They . . . they killed me. Th-the knives, they—”

“Yes.”

“You told them to kill me.”

“Yes.”

“Then why . . . this? Why call me back?”

The old half-elf raised his hand, and Kheil saw something dangling from it—a leather cord tied to a knotwork of twisted vines, all braided round three small stones. As Chereth raised it into one of the sunbeams, the light caught in the stones, and Kheil saw that they were jewels of some sort.

“All your life you have dealt death. Now the god of life calls you. Time to answer.”