



THE DUNGEONS
THE HOWLING
DELVE
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CHAPTER ONE

Esmeltaran, Amn

12 Eleasias, the Year of the Sword (1365 DR)

Kall swung the staff high, angling it at his best friend's head. Kall's fourteen-year-old limbs were all bone and wire, but the sapling was light and made a whistling sound as it cut the air above the waters of Lake Esmel.

Aazen ducked, crouched, and sprang to an adjacent rock, losing only briefly the rhythm of the violin he had tucked under his chin. The feint at his head didn't seem to faze the boy or affect his balance in the slightest.

Undeterred, Kall matched his friend's path stone for stone, taking them farther from the shore. The water turned deep blue, marking the shelf where the bottom dropped away.

"Too light," Aazen commented as the music—wire screeching, to Kall's ears—died away. He pointed to the staff. "Needs proper balance."

Kall rattled the makeshift weapon, watching its ends bounce. "It doesn't need a 'proper' anything—it's a stick."

"Heavier would give you more control." Aazen picked up a livelier tune now that he no longer had to fend off attacks.

"If I'd chosen a stouter branch, I might have hurt you," Kall pointed out, snickering. "Or broken that pretty stick of yours."

This time Aazen's music did falter under an inelegant snort. "My thanks, but I'm secure where I am."

"Oh? And you with no more rocks to flit to?" Kall asked innocently.

Still playing, Aazen turned, and Kall swung as he did so, this time aiming for the ankles with a broom-sweep that would send his friend into the water.

The staff whistled through empty air as Aazen jumped, tucked his legs into his stomach, and—damned if he didn't make it look simple—landed gracefully on the same rock he had just been standing on. He flashed a rare grin at Kall and finished the tune with an enthusiastic flourish.

"Well played," Kall was forced to admit. He regarded his friend while the flames of Highsun beat down on their necks. Aazen stared back. Both contemplated another round of the game.

The steady trickle of sweat running down Kall's back decided him. He stripped off his tunic and the padded armor his father insisted he wear outside the Morel estate. The staff he laid carefully across the rock, and saw Aazen doing the same with his instrument as he too stripped down, then they both plunged into the calm waters.

"How much time, do you think?" Aazen asked when he resurfaced.

"Before they miss us?" Kall glanced at the sun. "Enough to get back, I think. If I'm wrong . . ." Concern flooded his smooth features. "Maybe we ought to go. This was my idea. I don't want there to be trouble for you."

The boys exchanged glances. "Trouble" bore a very different meaning for Aazen where their fathers were concerned. Kall could see the scars on his friend's bare back, though neither ever spoke of where they came from.

"You promised me a swim," said Aazen, shrugging off Kall's concern. "That's the only reason I let you drag me out here."

"Hah. I didn't hear you arguing very loud." Kall leaned over to splash his friend and saw movement on the beach.

Kall looked over Aazen's shoulder, squinting. Standing along the shoreline, like dark diamonds against the sun, was a line of men. He recognized them immediately. They were his father's guard, nothing less than his personal retinue. The boys' afternoon of play was over. Guiltily, Kall raised a hand to call them.

A loud whistle cut the air, beating sharply against Kall's eardrums. He never saw the missile's flight, but he heard its impact. The arrowhead and a bit of shaft were just visible through a muscle in Aazen's shoulder.

Dencer's arrow, Kall realized, shocked. He and Aazen had watched and occasionally helped the man fashion the arrowheads into that signature, barbed shape. At the time, Dencer had explained how painful a wound such tips would make, and warned them never to use the weapons for hunting, for it was cruel to cause an animal undue pain.

The cry that burst from Aazen was certainly animal-like, and the impact of the arrow drove him back into Kall's chest.



Footsteps stirred Dhairr Morel from the drawings in front of him.

Three small, open arches behind his desk overlooked the central garden of his Esmeltaran estate. Visitors approaching his private office had to pass through the garden on stone walkways or wade among dense ferns and orange trees. He made sure he could always hear them coming. While dust gathered on a sketch of a peridot and opal ring, Dhairr listened, hearing every subtle alteration in the rhythm of that outside world.

"Balram," he said as the man entered the office without knocking. "Well?"

"The house remains secure, my lord," Balram Kortrun replied.

"I am always assured of that, Captain. Was that the task I set for you?"

"No, my lord."

Dhairr smiled faintly. "Then let us come to the point."

"My sources tell me someone plots your death," said Balram.

Dhairr eased back in his chair at the blunt pronouncement, but he was not, in truth, surprised. The surge in his blood came from excitement, not fear. He had always known they would try again.

His hand strayed involuntarily to his throat, where a cordlike ridge of flesh had healed the slash the assassin had given him. Like the carved ivory reliefs adorning the walls of his office, his body told the story of how close he'd come to death.

He looked his captain in the eyes. "Who?"

That was the question that haunted him. His assailants had been faceless walking shadows. To kill them, he'd been forced to sit patiently, awaiting their next strike. Dhairr had waited almost twelve years for this day, but he had not idled in that time. He was well prepared.

He repeated his question, slow and deliberate. "Who comes for me?"

Balram hesitated. "We do not know, my friend," he said, but hastened to add, "Your men stand with you. They surround the house and await any call for aid. No one who enters this house will escape masked . . . or alive."

"They are well trained. I have no doubt. Thank you, Kortrun," Dhairr said. A new thought struck him. "What of Kall?"

Balram shifted, and Dhairr's eyes narrowed. "We believe he and my son are outside the estate, my lord."

Dhairr thrust himself to his feet, his chair scraping stone, but Balram locked a restraining hand on his friend's arm. He ignored the blazing look in the lord's eyes. "Do *not*. I have sent whatever men could be spared to retrieve them, but if the attack comes soon, the lake and environs are the safest places."

Dhairr jerked his arm free and turned away, a clear sign Balram would win the argument. He seldom lost. "However it ends, you will see to him?" Dhairr asked.

“Yes. As you will see to Aazen, if the reverse is true,” said Balram.

Dhairr nodded and sank back into his chair, staring at nothing. “Kall has always been defiant—like his mother. There are days . . . nights more than morns,” he said, and paused. Another memory flitted before his eyes, but the scars this time were invisible specters. “I should not have sent her away.”

“Alytia was a wizard,” Balram said flatly.

Dhairr chuckled. His friend—the whole of Amn—predictably reviled the Art. His mirth quickly died. “You have also raised a motherless child. Was it so simple for you, Captain?”

Balram’s lips tightened. “My son has never wanted for anything, my lord, and neither has yours.” The remark held an edge of bitterness that Dhairr failed to notice. “By removing your wife, you have taken all magic, and the danger that inherently follows such power, from your house and from your son’s eyes. Is that not worth whatever deprivation he may have suffered?”

“Yes,” Dhairr said, but the familiar conviction did not come. Perhaps it was because he again faced his own mortality.

When he had first known her, nothing about Alytia seemed to matter—not her magic, her defiance, or even her association with the great meddlers of Faerûn. He’d hardly cared about anything save her beauty, her breath feathering his chest in the night, and the child they conceived after a year of such blissful ignorance.

While his son lay wailing in his crib, assassins laid open Dhairr’s throat and left him bleeding on the floor of his bedchamber. He’d survived, but his eyes had been brutally opened.

He never learned the identities of the assassins, never knew for certain whether it was hatred of his wife’s magic or her dangerous alliances that drove them, but he had taken no chances.

“Leave one alive,” Dhairr said, turning his attention back to Balram, “to question.”

“I will tell Meraik—”

“No.” Dhairr cut him off. “I’ll tell them myself. I’m going down.”

“Is that wise?”

The lord of Morel house smiled grimly, but his face possessed a gray tinge, a wasted look enhanced by the scar at his throat. “I tire of waiting.”

Balram half-bowed as Dhairr swept from the room. He watched through the windows as his lord crossed the garden, heading for the broad arcade that fringed the outer wall.

Stationed along the courtyard and beyond were the house guards, most handpicked and trained by Balram. They nodded respectfully as their lord passed.

The guard captain raised an open palm, surprised at the sweat he felt beneath his leather glove. The slight tremble to his fingers was even more distressing, but he dismissed it as heightened awareness, anticipation of the battle to come.

“You make for a fascinating study, Kortrun. Were you not, I believe I would have abandoned you and your little project long ago.”

Balram did not turn at the voice. Soril Angildaen—Daen to those who knew him as a killer—would remain in his presence as long as Daen saw fit, whether Balram acknowledged the man or not.

“Lord Morel prefers soft wine to stronger drink, as the latter leaves his senses dull,” Daen continued, unaffected by his companion’s silence. He strolled into the room, his fur-capped boots making no sound as he moved to stand next to Balram. “Chessenta’s finest fruit-white, as I recall you saying. I believe he keeps several bottles locked beneath an insultingly simple false bottom in this chest.” He tapped the box sitting behind Morel’s desk with his heel. “You might have shared a bottle, just now.”

“We might have,” Balram agreed, “and have, many times in the past.”

“A noteworthy indication of friendship from Lord Morel, a man who, for the whole of twelve years, has demanded his food

tasted for him, and scouts every door for a dagger point. Yet he drinks, uncaring, with you.”

“He trusts me.”

“Without question. Enlighten me, then; why *is* your esteemed lord and friend not dead?”

“He will be, very soon,” Balram assured him.

Daen crossed his arms over a barrel stomach. Balram had no idea how the rogue managed to move so silently while lugging such a gut. He wore a yards-long, gray silk vest tucked snugly into a sash of the same color embroidered in silver threads. His shirt lay open at the neck, exposing pale hairs and a square-cut onyx gem clasped in a silver claw. Balram often wondered if the necklace didn’t contain some form of magic. Unlike the rest of Amn, the Shadow Thieves were not known to shy from employing wizards.

“You could have slain him painlessly just then—a quick poison, a mark of mercy. Easier still, you could leave him alive—take his men and join us now, your conscience unfettered by the murder of a friend. Yet you plan this assassination in the same bloody manner as almost caused your friend’s downfall twelve years ago. I applaud the irony and your enthusiasm, of course, but you risk much.”

With much to gain, thought Balram. Like Morel, he had used his years wisely. “The men I have trained, the men who, if this attempt succeeds, will be assets to your organization,” he added pointedly, “have not been tested.”

“Ah, unfortunate,” Daen agreed. “Men loyal to Balram but not yet weaned from Morel’s purse. You have no idea if they will actually be able to betray the man who feeds and shelters them. Which brings up a point close to my heart,” he added, as if the thought had only just occurred to him, “and those of my colleagues. How will you be able to survive without Morel’s considerable income, should you succeed? The gem road connects his doorstep to Keczulla, and his fortunes look only to increase with the growth of that city. Forgive me, but financially, the jewel-lord of Esmeltaran is a more favorable

prospect for the Shadow Thieves than the mercenary, Balram Kortrun.”

“I have served Morel a decade this winter. I am not without assets.”

“Oh, splendid,” Daen chortled. “You have been hoarding the pearls, so to speak. No doubt Morel was willing to pay his guard captain a satisfactory price to keep his family and fortune safe from assassins.”

A larger price than Daen would ever conceive, Balram agreed silently. Twelve years of looking over his shoulder had wrought more taints in Dhairr than just paranoia, but that condition had helped Balram’s cause the most. Morel had been more than willing to offer his captain the coin and latitude to do as he desired.

More than willing to open his home to a coinless mercenary and his starving son.

The trembling sensation returned to his hands. Balram fisted one on the naked blade of his sword until he felt flesh give. Like the severing of a wire, the tension inside him eased.

You have outgrown Lord Morel, he reminded himself. The Shadow Thieves could offer him more than a life of servitude. They would take him and Aazen into their protection, allowing Balram to expand on the foundation he’d built. In quieter days, he would allow himself to regret killing Morel and his son, even to grieve for them—but not now. Now, he could afford no feeling, no compassion, for the Shadow Thieves—despite Daen’s jovial bluster—permitted neither.

If the plan failed . . . no, it would not, not as long as secrecy prevailed. He had warned Dhairr to avoid drawing suspicion, but even on his guard, Morel could not stand against so many. His men would use all caution.

From the window, he had a clear view of the west tower of the estate, its aviary alive with the cries of hawks and other raptors. A guard stepped into view at one of the arched openings. Balram raised a hand.

The guard caught the gesture and slipped into the shadows

of the tower. A breath passed, and the bird cries intensified. When the guard re-emerged, his sword lay bare in his hand, and his face was covered by a dark hood that obscured all but his eyes. In his other hand, he held a flaming scrap of cloth stuffed into a green glass bottle.

Without hesitating, the guard threw the concoction of fire down into the central courtyard, where it smashed against a lattice of wood and climbing roses.

Shouts and smoke immediately filled the courtyard. Balram stepped away from the window. He slid his uninjured hand inside a carefully sewn pocket at the breast of his tunic. His fingers closed around a hard, circular object that seemed to pulse under leather and flesh.

All caution. He repeated the mantra. And if that wasn't enough, well, Daen wasn't the only one who possessed magic.