

FORGOTTEN REALMS

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SANDSTORM



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CHAPTER

ONE

*In the name of the most holy Great Scrivener,
I declare my tales to be true.*

—Mualak yn Dulah yn Abbas
Scribe to Qysar Amahl Shoon IV

EVEN IN LATE SPRING, THE ONLY COLORS VISIBLE ON THE upland wall of the remote canyon of the Omlarandin Mountains were shades of red and brown. The vines that grew from cracks in the rock would flower soon, but then the petals would be a red so dark as to be nearly black, the color of blood drying on sand.

The enormous rocky fastness floating in midair out in the canyon was hewn from the same rock as the steep walls and was just as red. The goblins, bandits, and slaves swarming over it were dressed in leathers or rough hemp robes, so there was no color amid the rabble to distract the eye, either.

Nevertheless, from the deep cleft where he lay, spying on the earthmote, the old man took in everything with his blue eyes.

Seeing that nothing had changed out in the canyon since the last time he risked an observation, he closed his

eyes to narrow slits again. This slight movement was the only motion he allowed himself.

The old man was confident that no one in the hidden floating village had the slightest inkling they were under his watch. He flattered himself that his stealth and quiet were such that he might as well have been invisible. He doubted, even, that he could have tracked himself, and Mattias Far-seer was one of the finest trackers on the continent.

“Lovely perch you’ve found for yourself, old friend,” said a voice from behind him.

Mattias’s arm moved with the speed of thought, seeking the hilt of the broadsword concealed in the vines beside him on the ledge. His fingers brushed an empty scabbard, and he loosed a silent curse. But by then, he knew he was in no danger.

Gathering his heavy yew canes and slowly rolling up from his prone position to a crouch, Mattias turned his back on the earthmote hanging in the canyon for the first time in almost a month. Even if he wasn’t confident that the bandit freedmen were too busy making arrangements for their evening’s barbaric entertainment, his partner’s seeming nonchalance would have told him there was no risk of discovery.

Seem, Mattias thought, was no word for a hunter.

For an assassin, like the leather-armored figure slipping from the shadows in the cliff wall recess, “seem” was a very apt word. One of the ebony-feathered, crow-headed people known as kenku, Corvus Nightfeather seemed like a creature out of a fanciful picture in a children’s primer. His uncanny ability to move from shadow to shadow made him seem like a ghost. When he wished to, the kenku could even *seem* harmless.

Corvus extended his hand, Mattias’s sword held casually in the black talons extending from the shorn fingertips

of his gloves. “Couldn’t risk falling victim to your reflexes, Mattias. They’re still sharp—even if your wits have grown addled in your dotage.”

The hunter had traveled the South with Corvus Nightfeather for decades, but the kenku race remained as mysterious to him as it did to most of the civilized world. Mattias had no idea whether he would be considered old among the crow people, and, indeed, he had no idea how many years Corvus had stalked the world. He *did* know when he was being mocked.

“You found one of the message cairns I left for you on the rim,” Mattias said. “How long have you been looking for me?”

The kenku shrugged his narrow shoulders. “Three days,” he said. “I was on the verge of sending for Trill.”

“It’s good you didn’t,” said Mattias. “Stealth is not exactly her strong suit, and you haven’t yet even heard my report on this Jazeerijah.”

The kenku turned his head sharply, the setting sun catching the oiled feathers around his eyes in such a way that they briefly reflected the dark green of his armor. “Jazeerijah, hah!” The high-pitched caw of Corvus’s laughter could still make Mattias shudder. “Is that what they call it?”

“It’s from an Alzhedo dialect, I gather,” said Mattias, “though they speak the common tongue to their slaves and the scum that visit them. I don’t know what it means, but I’d be willing to bet you do.”

“Jazeerijah. ‘Island of the Free,’ ” Corvus said. “It’s from one of the Founding Stories of Calimshan. ‘Helpful Janna Stops the Sea from Draining,’ I think.”

“Well, by their dress and ways, the folk in charge out on that floating rock are definitely Calishites. And it’s odd you mention those stories, because—”

A shout out in the canyon echoed through the air. Most of the population of the ramshackle village of huts and tents had clustered on the rim of the floating island of rock, human bandits mixing freely with tribal goblins. A knot of these sallow-skinned visitors pushed a primitively constructed crate toward the edge, following the directions of a chanting shaman. They stopped only when the wooden box was teetering on the rim.

“What am I seeing here, Mattias?” asked Corvus.

Mechanical sounds rang across the canyon, as chains turned through geared teeth and an enormous field of sailcloth was swiftly stretched between rocky outcrops on the earthmote and on the canyon rims.

“You’re seeing that we’re not the only showmen in these mountains tonight, Ringmaster,” Mattias answered. “You’re seeing that when those Calishites escaped their former owners, they brought their deadly games out of the desert with them.”

The kenku’s face was incapable of rendering anything like a human expression, but Mattias knew the soft clicking deep in Corvus’s beak indicated contemplation.

“They escaped the gladiatorial slave pits and decided to be enslaving gamemasters themselves? Humans never fail to impress me with their . . . humanity. What of the man I sent you to find?”

The old hunter indicated an open-faced shed perched at the very edge of the earthmote. Calishites armed with spears prodded a tall young man with a smooth scalp into a swinging leather net hung from a tautly wound catapult. His bronzed skin was traced with the distinctive gold lines that marked him as *genasi*. His muscles showed through piecemeal scale, and his gauntleted hands held an enormous double-headed flail.

“If the odds hold that the goblin bookmakers are chalking on their board,” Mattias told Corvus, “we’re about to watch him die.”

Cephas imagined that freedom must feel something similar to the way he did when he spun through the air above the Canvas Arena. Only in those times, in the scant few heartbeats that passed between the moment the freedmen forced him into the sling and the moment he hit the canvas to face whatever fresh nightmare they’d found to torment him with, did this lightness and calm fill him.

It filled him only in those times, or when he made one of his endless attempts to escape.

He always had to abandon the feeling, whichever kind of flight brought it—abandon it or die.

He had even less time to savor the feeling than usual, since the freedman manning the catapult had aimed it so that he would fall precisely atop the mysterious crate the warriors of the Bloody Moon goblin tribe had rolled onto the canvas. It burst apart as he fell, and the contents were a mystery no longer.

Up in the gamemaster’s box, the master of Jazeerijah, Azad the Free, took his usual place. “The omlarcat!” the Calishite called, his magically amplified voice drowning out even the challenging scream of the beast. “Deadliest predator in these mountains, never faced in the arena before today! By authority of the sages, it is untouchable by blades and invulnerable to arrows.”

The old orc woman who preceded Cephas as the mightiest fighter in the Calishites’ slave pens, Grinta the Pike, had warned him about omlarcats.

“Like a black panther,” she said, “but worse.” She said that in other parts of the world the great predators such as the one on the canvas before him were called “displacer beasts.” The omlarcat was the particular breed that hunted the deepest parts of these Omlarandin Mountains. Cephas had never seen a black panther, but he suspected they did not have pairs of spiked tentacles dancing from their shoulders. He also suspected that panthers were not nearly as canny as omlarcats, and that they did not shimmer with a fey magic that made it difficult to tell where they crouched, even when bent over some hapless victim.

The outfitters had given Cephas his choice of weapon for the night’s games. As ever, he’d picked the blacksmelt double flail they kept under lock and key between bouts. Falling through the air, he trusted his feel for the weapon’s balance and began a brutal blow even before he hit the canvas.

His timing was perfect.

The weight of one spiked sphere struck the cat’s skull with a sick thud, and even as he twisted to take the impact of his fall on his back, Cephas whipped the other end of the flail around, opening a crimson line across the bottom of his foe’s jaw. The cat howled at the vicious, unexpected assault.

The impact of his crash against the canvas drove the breath from Cephas’s lungs, but he had expected that. He dug the cleats of his boots into the weave of the billowing sailcloth battleground and came to his feet.

The cat’s glowing eyes dimmed, and the staggering lunge it made at Cephas told the gladiator his blow had dazed the creature, at least for the moment. The goblins cheered when Cephas let forth a deep howl, believing his battle cry was in response to a blow the cat had managed to land unseen.

“The deadly omlarcat, brought here tonight through the primal might of the Bloody Moons!” Azad the Free roared into the night air, bringing the goblins to their feet. The tribe must have decamped in its entirety to Jazeerijah, because every row carved in the stone amphitheater overflowed with shouting, stomping goblins.

Cephas cursed. It was always better to have the crowd with him. If the match was held before the usual assemblage of bandits, miners, merchants, and assorted travelers, he might have a chance to draw them onto his side. But tonight Azad had orchestrated a crowd with a vested interest in seeing him lose.

The cat shook its heavy head, and focus returned to its eyes. The gigantic beast did not leap, though, and in fact took a step back, making a tentative, probing swipe with its clawed forepaw that Cephas easily blocked with his flail.

It’s testing my defenses, Cephas thought. It’s *planning*.

Cephas retreated a few steps himself, thinking quickly.

I will not run from this beast, he thought, setting the spikes of the flail heads in a blood-seeking sweep. I will run *with* it. We will escape together.

As long as it does not kill me first.

The goblins shouted as the Calishites began tapping out rhythmic beats with carved rods of stone on the chains holding the canvas. Azad directed his men to time the blows so that the rods triggered an enchantment in the works of the arena, and the canvas began to ripple and roil.

Cephas was so adept at predicting the ebb and flow of the canvas waves that he could use the motion to herd a foe to wherever on the arena suited him, even so canny a foe as the omlarcat.

The cat was testing the limits of its environment. Cephas did not doubt that the beast was capable of a prodigious

leap if it needed to make one, but Azad had clearly deployed the canvas to guard against any such attempt. Broad gulfs of empty space separated every edge of the arena from the curving mote and from the canyon wall. The enspelled chains also allowed Azad to vary the elevation of his killing floor, and he had arranged the canvas so that it draped low enough that even if the cat could jump the horizontal distance to mote or canyon, it would have no place to land. The lower faces of the mote sloped inward at sharp angles, and the upland canyon wall was featureless at that point, offering no purchase that Cephass could see.

The cat appeared to be learning these things for itself, as it played a deadly game with Cephass. Man and cat—which was predator and which was prey was impossible to say—leaped and struck, twisted, and ducked, landing blows that wounded but did not yet cripple or kill.

Cephass's efforts to discover a way to escape dovetailed with the crowd's bloodthirsty desire to see a competitive and skillfully managed combat.

I'd wager Azad regrets this night's crowd is not a wealthier one than mountain goblins, he thought. This was the kind of match that saw coin consistently changing hands, as the audience laid bets on which fighter would stumble next, on which would land a blow, even on how long a time the gamemaster would allow to pass before he threw some new complication into the mix.

Not long.

One of the chains extending from beneath the stands retracted at whip speed, and a full third of the canvas fell away, leaving what remained hanging loose and twisting.

The omlarcat had a mind possessed of more than simple canniness and leaped back just in time. Cephass, having faced hundreds of opponents, recognized that this beast was more calculating than most of the men and women he

had fought. He began to worry that it would turn out to be cleverer than he was himself. Cephas was confident of his tactics, but he needed a *strategy*. He had to find a way to use the cat's natural desire to survive.

"Now!" Azad the Free bellowed.

This time Cephas anticipated the twist designed to keep the crowd on their feet before it came. Bracing himself, he was proved right.

The chainmen on the upland redoubt released the tension on their side of the canvas, leaving the surprised cat in a bad position. Its rear legs fell away with the sailcloth, and it was forced to abandon a furious attack with tentacles and claws to avoid falling into the chasm.

Cephas struck, spinning the chains of his flail in opposing circles, timing a blow that would smash one of the cat's tentacles into uselessness. But the canvas hung so slack that one of the flail heads grazed an unlucky ripple in the material, ruining a devastating strike.

Or so it appeared to the crowd, who hooted and jeered, glad of the reprieve their captured champion was granted.

Scrambling back onto even footing with Cephas, the cat spit. What Cephas shouted next, unheard on the mote in the noise of the crowd, was not another war cry. "I could have hurt you then," he said, "perhaps even forced you over the edge!"

Again the cat spit, and the writhing motions of its spiked tentacles quickened, matching the spins Cephas made with the flail. "I am not toying with you, cat," he said. "Those over there, they are toying with us. They are not hunters—just killers."

The cat's answer was to hurl itself forward, engaging the flail with its tentacles as it extended its sinuous neck, seeking Cephas's throat with its teeth. Cephas fell back, pushing off the cat's twin blows with no time to spare. The

cat's bite came so near to closing on his flesh that Cephias felt moisture; whether it was his blood or the cat's spittle, he could not have said. He maneuvered for a counterblow, only to notice that the beast's tentacles were wrapped around the chains of the flails, far from the weapon's shaft, decreasing the reach of its lunge.

"Yes! You see it! We do not need to kill each other. We both want to escape. We need to help each other!"

Again, the cat's response came as a terrifying series of slashes, bites, and blows. Again, Cephias came as close to death as he had at any time during the match. The goblins howled. They felt the momentum shifting against Cephias.

Momentum, thought Cephias, and wondered whether he had imagined the intelligence he saw in the cat. "We have to go over the side," he shouted, retreating under strike after strike from the cat's tentacles. "They won't expect that!"

Whether it understood him or not, the beast's assault faltered enough for Cephias to regain the initiative. The gladiator drove the beast across what remained of the killing floor's breadth. Either by its design or happenstance, the cat was soon exactly where Cephias wanted it. For the first time since the battle began, the crowd silenced as it collectively drew in its breath.

Cephias lowered his head and charged the gigantic cat. The beast raised its tentacles and opened its maw, and the goblins were ecstatic to see it welcoming Cephias's suicidal move. The crowd watched as the cat misjudged its own position or the strength of its enemy, for both of them fell over the edge—

And twisted and clawed and grabbed at the dangling canvas until they found purchase—the cat by sinking its claws into the frayed edges of the cloth, and Cephias by hanging on to the closest thing to a lifeline he could

find—the viciously barbed appendages at the end of one of the cat’s tentacles.

Ignoring the pain, Cephas brought his legs together in the manner he had long ago learned gave him some control when he flew through the air after a trebuchet’s launch. The canvas hung far below the sight of those on the mote, and the cat snarled at its end. The force of their uncontrolled fall caused them to swing inward toward the underside of the mote, and Cephas stretched himself out as long as he could, the undulations of the cat’s tentacle ceasing so that the gladiator was a dead-weight at the end of a fantastic pendulum of arena, fighter, and foe.

“Come on, come on!” shouted Cephas as he felt them reaching the end of their arc against the mote. An out-cropping rose up in Cephas’s vision, and he angled his legs. Their movement came to a slow, almost lazy stop just as Cephas’s boots brushed the stone. He buckled his powerful legs, and, as their backward swing began, he kicked off with all his might.

This time, he could not ignore the pain in his hands. Cephas’s weight caused the razor-sharp cilia on the end of the tentacles to extend, shredding the calloused flesh of his palms. But he hung on, searching the far wall of the canyon as they swung down, then back up; if Cephas had wondered at the madness of his plan before, only at that last moment did he realize that everything did not depend on his strength or cleverness, or even on his desperate attempt to cajole a beastly opponent to help him in his attempt to escape the Island of the Free. At the final moment, everything depended on simple timing.

On the timing of a cat.

The omlarcat retracted its claws and Cephas’s stomach lurched.

Up, up, and out the combatants flew. They hurtled through space, clearing the canyon's edge. As they fell together, the cat wrenched its tentacle from Cephas's grasp and laid a long wound open across his back. Cephas took this as an indication that their temporary alliance had ended.

By comparison, the crash into a stand of thorny bushes felt almost comfortable. Cephas struck his head against a rock and blinked away the doubling in his vision to find the cat springing away into the hills. From where he lay bleeding on the ground, Cephas, bruised and broken in more than one place, heard something he never had in a life spent entirely on the floating world of Jazeerijah.

Cephas forgot his injuries, because of the singing.

A deep, wordless thrumming rose up from below. The ground itself sang to him.

He was still listening, coming to understand what the Calishites had spent two decades keeping from him, when Azad the Free and two guards armed with crossbows appeared above him. The tips of their bolts were smeared with brown paste.

The master of Jazeerijah gestured, and the bolts flew toward Cephas's chest.

Corvus's ebony beak pointed up to the blackening sky. The extraordinary escape had taken the combatants to a spot directly above his and Mattias's heads, where the pair had watched the Calishite leader running with guards even as the young gladiator began his impossible pendulum swing.

"They knew what he was doing," said the kenku. "The freedmen knew he would try to escape their arena in the sky and were ready for him."

“It wasn’t hard to predict,” Mattias said.

The kenku cocked his head sideways. “Why?”

Counting, Mattias thought back over his month spent studying the earthmote and its people. “I’ve watched that lad fight sixteen times now,” he said.

“And he’s used combat to launch an escape attempt once before?” asked Corvus.

Mattias shook his head. “No, old friend,” he said. “He’s used combat to launch escape attempts *fifteen* times before.”