

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

UNBROKEN CHAIN

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CHAPTER ONE

18 NIGHTAL, THE YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

THE SHADOW HOUNDS CHASED ASHOK ACROSS THE PLAIN TO THE base of the Aloran Tor.

In the lee of the towering mountain grew a solitary tree, a gnarled mass of trunk and trident fork branches covered in black needles that were sharp to the touch and could cut if raked over tender skin. It cast a discomfiting shadow. Ashok's people, the shadar-kai, called it a kindling tree, for its wood was only good to burn.

The Aloran Tor, always a thumbprint of distance on his longest journeys. The plain yawned wide and hazy for miles, a colorless patchwork of scrub grass and cracked soil. Overhead, clouds hung oppressively low in the sky.

In the perpetual half-light of the Shadowfell, there was no day and no night, only a long stretch of sameness broken by dust storms or stinging rain.

He'd walked through both, and the hounds had followed.

Ashok clutched a dagger in his left hand and a spiked chain in his right. He used the former to draw a rough circle around the kindling tree. The eroded soil parted easily for his blade.

When he was done he pressed two fingers into the oozing bite wound in his thigh. Pain ran slick knots up his spine, and Ashok shuddered with pleasure. The pain sharpened him. He was aware

of everything, every sound in the private wilderness: the wind, his heartbeat and ragged breathing, the wing rush of a raven landing in the tree.

Ashok looked up at the bird. Its attention was fixed on the blood coating his fingers. Blood was the brightest color for miles. Ashok smiled.

“Not yet,” he said.

He put a knee to the plain. “For your feast, pups,” he said, tracing the circle in blood. “Take this blood, but come no farther.”

Still crouched, Ashok gazed across the plain to the west. Amid the howling winds he detected another sound, one he’d been waiting for: the baying of hounds. They’d run their prey to ground at last.

Four immense shadow mastiffs charged the Tor, their bodies drawing in what little light suffused the Shadowfell, until all Ashok could see were the creatures’ eyes—metallic silver points buried in rolls of obsidian flesh.

“Come ahead!” Fierce, defiant laughter exploded in Ashok’s throat. He pounded his chest with his fists and sprang to his feet. His wound was on fire. He reveled in the pain and the blood oozing down his leg.

So alive . . .

Ashok sheathed his dagger and whipped the chain above his head, launching one end into the kindling tree. The shadow raven cried out in deep-throated alarm and took flight. The chain’s spikes looped around a thick branch and caught. Ashok held the other end of the chain and braced his good leg against the tree trunk.

Two of the hounds vanished as they reached Ashok’s bloody perimeter. The others pressed their drooling muzzles into the ground, their teeth bared and craving, starved for Ashok’s blood. The distraction bought Ashok a few breaths more to live.

The other two hounds reappeared in a shadowy vortex directly in front of Ashok. Their muscled hindquarters tensed, and the creatures

sprang at him. Ashok used the tree trunk to push off and swung on the chain. His momentum carried him past the first hound and into the second. The force of impact was like kicking a stone wall.

Ashok let go of the chain and fell on top of the hound. Snapping teeth clipped his chin and neck, barely missing the tender veins. Ashok rolled with the beast, over and over, until he could grab his dagger from its sheath. He buried the curved blade in the hound's neck.

Howling, the hound teleported several feet away to die, leaving Ashok with a bloody dagger and the second hound bearing down on him.

The beast hit him in the back and drove Ashok flat to his stomach, his face pressed into the dirt. He could smell the gamey hound and his own blood from the circle. The hound bit him in the shoulder, its fangs tearing through clothing and armor and flesh. Ashok felt the pain explode down his arm. His vision went white around the edges, and his left arm was suddenly numb.

He forced his body into a crouch, spilling the beast off his back before it could tear his arm off. The other two hounds shook off their blood frenzy and charged.

Ashok lunged to his feet and vanished.

He reappeared crouched in the kindling tree's boughs, his insubstantial form a hovering storm cloud, his cloak fanned over the branches like a veil. The remaining hounds surrounded the tree, leaping straight into the air, their fangs shredding bark and needles.

Ashok waited. In his weightless form, he felt nothing—not his wounds, not the bone scales of the armor pressed against his chest, or the branches caressing his face with needles. He longed to feel them. With the pain gone he was an empty shell, adrift on the barren plain. He waited impatiently to get back in the battle while the hounds tore apart the tree.

Slowly, it seemed to Ashok—when only a few breaths had passed—he felt his flesh solidify on his bones. His weight pressed down on the kindling branches—creaking, straining, but they held him. The needle branches opened small wounds on his cheeks. The pain in his shoulder and bent leg had reached a peak. Then dizziness engulfed him, and Ashok knew the fight was almost over. His body had reached its limits at last. Soon the pain would give way to oblivion.

But he would enjoy every breath he had left.

Ashok grabbed the dangling chain still buried in the branches. He unwrapped the other end, jerking it free of bark and needles.

“Time to eat, pups,” he said, and jumped.



Uwan nodded to the guard as he passed and entered into the temple. It was lit only by a row of candelabra behind the altar. He saw Natan kneeling before the massive sword of Tempus carved into the concave wall; its blade absorbed the candles' glow and sank the light into the shadows.

The vestments of Tempus hung loose and shapeless on the thin body of the cleric. His head was shaved, and behind his ear was a small tattoo of a bird's wing. Uwan knew that beneath the vestments, a much larger tattoo of a sword stretched from Natan's shoulder blades to the small of his back. Uwan's back bore a similar marking. He noticed with dismay how Natan's gray flesh looked sickly even in the candles' glow. The cleric's cheekbones and the lines of his jaw were sharply defined.

“How long has he been here?” Uwan asked the guard.

“Since the Pendron bell, my Lord,” the guard said. He stayed at rigid attention, with his eyes fixed unflinchingly on Uwan.

“I see.” replied Uwan. “Stand outside the door, if you would.”

When the guard had left, Uwan crossed the room in a straight line toward Natan. There were no benches in the temple to impede movement—services were conducted with the crowd standing, their collective gazes focused on Tempus’s sword.

Uwan stopped a few feet away from his friend. “Have you slept?” he asked.

Natan raised his bald head stiffly. He shifted to look at Uwan but stayed on his knees. “I was dreaming about hounds,” he said. His eyes were black like Uwan’s own.

Uwan nodded. “I hear them too sometimes.” he replied. “The echoes from the caverns—”

“No,” Natan said. “My Lord, I saw something.”

Uwan felt a surge of excitement in his blood. “Tempus has spoken to you?” he exclaimed.

“At last,” Natan replied.

A soft breeze stirred the candle flames. Uwan told himself it was the natural air currents moving through the tower, but the sword carving glowed in the sudden movement of the candles’ light.

My Lord, I feel you, Uwan thought as he swallowed. “What was the vision?” he asked.

“A person, my Lord,” Natan said, “a shadar-kai, but not of this city.”

“You’re certain?”

“He has never touched Ikemmu’s soil.”

Uwan nodded. “One of Tempus’s agents, then,” he said. “What of him?”

“An ephemeral image,” Natan said. “Not enough to tell whom he serves.”

“What is your feeling—fair or foul?” Uwan asked.

“I don’t know. My Lord, I urge you to be cautious,” Natan said as he rose up on his knees with his head bowed to lay his hand on

Uwan's gauntlet. Uwan got on his own knees, impatient with such gestures.

"My Lord!" Natan exclaimed.

"Tell me," Uwan hissed as he clutched the cleric's thin shoulders. He was strong; his arms were thick and encased in shadowmail and a greatsword was strapped to his side. His white hair hung past his shoulders, the strands so thin and pale as to be colorless against his gray skin.

Natan's eyes lost focus as he recalled his vision. "The baying of hounds," he said, "I saw shadow ravens wheeling high above an open plain. They looked down on a circle of flame, my Lord. This shadar-kai was standing in the fire. He held the flames in his hands, wielded them like a weapon."

"A sword," Uwan said. "The sword of Tempus. He is sent by our god, Natan. He must be."

"My Lord, there is more," Natan said. "The fire . . . It was the city. Ikemmu was burning. There is danger here."

"From what threat?" Uwan demanded. Who would *dare?* he thought. "The drow or the surface world?"

"Tempus would not tell me."

"No, of course he wouldn't," Uwan said. Defending the city was his task. "Anything else?"

"No, my Lord," Natan said. Sorrow deepened the hollows of his face. It pained Uwan to see his friend in such a state.

"Natan, you must take hope from this vision," Uwan said. His heart beat rapidly, though he tried to assert control. It was difficult for Uwan to contain his emotions when his god spoke to him, as He did through Natan. "Don't you see? This is the sign we have been waiting for. This shadar-kai will bring the blessing we have sought. I am sure of it."

"I do have hope, my Lord. But still I beg you be wary," Natan

said. "We know nothing of this shadar-kai. If he comes here, he comes from the Shadowfell."

"You mean that he will not be like us," Uwan said, nodding. "I understand you. We will take precautions."

"Not only that, my Lord," Natan said. "Remember, when this shadar-kai comes, he will bring the fire. I have seen it."

"Perhaps," Uwan said. "Perhaps not. Trust Tempus, Natan. He will not lead us astray. Now, tell me this shadar-kai's face—draw it if you must. I'll send out patrols before Exeden chimes. We'll find him."

"Yes, my Lord," Natan answered.

"Blessed be Tempus's sword," Uwan said, touching his chest.

Natan mirrored the gesture. "Blessed be us all," he replied.



The shadar-kai patrol traveled across the plain of the Shadowfell above for a day and a night before they came upon the Aloran Tor and the kindling tree. Four shadow hound corpses lay sprawled beneath the needle branches like rotting fruit. Among them lay the body of a young shadar-kai man.

Cree moved swiftly from hound to hound, prodding with his katars to make certain they were all dead. Had he been his brother, Skagi, he would simply have chopped off their heads with his falchion. Blunt, Cree thought, and unnecessary.

When the patrol had secured the area, Cree sheathed his weapons. "Is he dead?" Cree asked Skagi, who was kneeling next to the prone shadar-kai.

Skagi bent over and looked for the rise and fall of the shadar-kai's breath. "He breathes," Skagi said, his gaze roving over the bites covering the shadar-kai's body. "I don't know how, but he lives."

Cree came up beside him. "That's him," he said. "See the scars on his neck? Three claw marks under the jaw, and part of the left earlobe missing too, exactly like Uwan said."

Skagi nodded. His muscular arms were relaxed at his sides, but his hands never strayed far from his falchion. He went bare-chested to show off a field of dark green tattoos covering the left half of his body like a shroud. He wore black breeches and unlike Cree, his head was shaved. His lower lip was slightly deformed from a dagger slash, the flesh crooked and jutting as if he had something lodged in his teeth.

"He's been out on the plain for days," Skagi said. "No telling how long he's been unconscious."

The shadar-kai's lips were cracked, and his face was swollen and chapped by the vicious winds. Thick braids of long gray hair were blood-matted. Cree thought the man looked about Skagi's age, not yet cresting his twenty-fifth winter.

Skagi picked up the shadar-kai's chain lying beside him. "He carries a reaping weapon. Looks like he cut the hounds up fine with it."

"Where do you think he came from?" Cree asked.

"Not our concern," Skagi said. "Make a litter," he added, instructing the rest of the patrol, and pointing at Cree. "Help me clog this bleeding. Our only job now is to get him back to Ikemmu alive. Uwan can deal with him."

"The Watching Blade sees all," Cree agreed, and they set to work.