

Chapter One

Crouching low in the snow, ignoring the wetness clinging to the soles of her boots, Jenur Takren, former member of the Dark Tigers' Guild of Ruwa, drew her white coat more tightly around her body as a freezing cold wind blew through the valley. Her stomach growled, but she ignored it as she peered out from the boulder which she hid behind. Her prey was not yet here, but she had studied the habits of this particular pale deer for days and had only set up the perfect trap to capture it when she was confident that she memorized its habits.

Of course, if this fails, Dad and I will go hungry again, Jenur thought. *For the third time this week.*

Jenur tried not to think too much about that. Ever since she and her adoptive father, Quro, who was also a former member of the Dark Tigers' Guild, had come to the Great Berg—a massive cold land located far to the north of the much more temperate Northern Isles—they had struggled to meet their basic daily needs. There was only one town here on Urma, one of the very few islands in the Great Berg that was capable of supporting human life, and the town—known as Yurima—was miles away from where Jenur and Quro had set up their home, which was why they had to rely on hunting and fishing to feed themselves.

Maybe we should have rethought asking Skimif to send us to the Great Berg, Jenur thought, rubbing her gloved hands together to generate warmth. *About the only good thing about this place is that the Dark Tigers don't ever come here. Still, would it really be so hard for Skimif to give us a warm summer every now and then?*

Of course, Jenur knew that Skimif was too busy in his new role as the God of Martir to cater to her and her father's every need, no matter how pressing it may have been. Jenur had long ago learned that you couldn't rely on the gods for everything, that if you wanted anything in this life, then you had to get it yourself.

Which was why Jenur was out here, in the middle of a steep valley known for its avalanches, keeping as quiet as possible, waiting for the pale deer she had been stalking for the past few days to show itself. Any minute now, she knew, the pale deer would appear at the west end of the valley and walk down to the valley floor, where it would attempt to get a drink of water from a small stream that flowed through the place. Once it stopped by the stream—and always in the same spot, as pale deer were creatures of habit and predictability, rarely ever straying from routine except in dire circumstances—it would step on the wooden trap that Jenur had devised.

Though the device was currently covered under a thick layer of snow—which Jenur had done herself, to prevent the pale deer from seeing it—she had no trouble remembering what it looked like. She had modeled it after the jaw of a baba raga, wide and strong, though she had to make the two sharp, wooden stakes that would cut straight through the pale deer's neck short in order to hide them under the snow. Assuming it all worked out correctly, the pale deer would die in an instant, Jenur could clean its body, and she and Dad would be eating well that night. As this particular deer was rather fat in comparison to its fellow deer, it might even give them enough meat to last two days.

At that moment, the pale deer—her prey and future dinner—appeared on the ridge to the west.

Trying to keep her mouth from watering, Jenur remained as still as she could, watching the pale deer walk down the valley. To her knowledge, this pale deer was a loner, which was unusual as most pale deer tended to travel in packs. She suspected it may have been the lone survivor of a pack of pale deer that had been slaughtered by a group of baba raga a while ago, as the first time Jenur had seen this deer, it had been sleeping among the corpses of several other deer. This deer may have been traumatized by the attack and so had never tried to join up with any other deer pack, even though there were plenty around and most were generally willing to accept new deer into the fold.

Why am I analyzing a pale deer's psychology? Jenur thought. *None of this will matter when he steps into my trap and, later, into my stomach.*

The pale deer made its way down the slope easily enough and walked directly to the stream of water, which shone in the sunlight. The pale deer didn't even look around at its surroundings, which meant it must have been very thirsty. It licked its lips, its eyes focused solely on the stream flowing before it.

Jenur rested her hand on her knife. The pale deer was only feet away from the trap now. Once it unknowingly rested its two front hooves on the pressure-sensitive trap, the trap would shut around its neck and kill it. The crunching of the snow under its hooves as it walked just made Jenur all the more impatient to eat.

Then a smell like fried fish entered her nostrils. It was a familiar scent, one that stirred Jenur's memories. The smell reminded her of Ruwa, her home island and the headquarters of the Dark Tigers. The Dark Tigers had almost always had fried fish for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but that didn't explain why she suddenly smelled it now. Was she so hungry that she was beginning to imagine the scent of fried fish?

Then the sound of a knife being drawn—its blade cutting slightly against its leather sheath—made Jenur whirl around just in time to see a long, silver blade come at her face. Jenur ducked her head to avoid getting stabbed in the face, but then another knife came at her, forcing her to jump back—awkwardly, due to the fact that she was still crouching—and roll backwards to avoid the second one.

Jenur shook her head and dusted the snow off her shoulders as she looked at her attacker, saying as she did so, “What the—”

Standing before her was a tall, bulky aquarian wearing the black robes and tiger mask that all Dark Tigers wore. The assassin carried two long, silver blades in her fishy hands, her yellow eyes glaring out from the eye holes in the mask. Jenur at first thought it might have been her father, Quro, playing a practical joke on her, but one glance at the assassin's prominent breasts told her that her attacker was indeed another Dark Tiger, which made no sense at all.

“How did you—” Jenur stopped mid-sentence when she heard the sound of hooves beating against the snow. A glance to the right told her that the pale deer had either seen or heard their fight because it was now sprinting back up the slope in an effort to escape the valley.

“Oops,” said the Dark Tiger, her gurgly-y aquarian accent making it difficult to understand her at first. “Did I scare off your dinner? Sorry. I didn't mean to.”

The Dark Tiger's voice was eerily familiar to Jenur, prompting Jenur to say, “Wait a minute ... Kura? Is that you?”

“So the child finally recognizes me,” said the Dark Tiger, immediately confirming her own iden-

tity. "I was wondering when you would show the intelligence of your father. Guess all those years of raising you finally paid off."

"How did you even find us?" Jenur said, drawing her own knife out of its sheath at her side as she spoke. "No one knows we're out here."

"A client hired me to kill you two," said Kura. She raised her blades. "Of course, I would have done it for free, seeing as you and Quro broke the Rules, but getting paid to do something you want to do is just as good as doing it for free."

Jenur's stomach growled, but again she ignored it. She knew just how vicious Kura could be. Back when Jenur had been a member of the Dark Tigers, Kura had gained a reputation among the others for the absolute cruelty she showed towards her assigned targets. Once Jenur had heard that Kura had drowned the baby of one of her targets simply for the fun of it, although she had never been able to confirm that rumor herself and really didn't want to.

Despite that, Jenur didn't feel frightened of Kura. Over the past six months, Jenur had faced beings far more powerful and vicious than Kura could ever hope to be. As long as Jenur was smart and didn't give Kura any openings, she figured she'd survive this.

So Jenur raised her serrated knife and said, "Wirm must be getting sloppy if he only sent you to kill us. As good as you are, Kura, you do realize you can't beat me and Dad, right?"

"Idiot," said Kura. "Of course I know that. Why else do you think I attacked you here, in the middle of nowhere, well away from that pitiful shack you and Quro call a house? Besides, I could never harm Quro. He's too handsome for that."

Jenur scowled. Now she remembered the real reason she had always disliked Kura. For whatever unholy reason known only to the Powers, Kura had taken a liking to Quro. As far as Jenur knew, Kura had always had a thing for her adoptive father, but the assassin had refused to show any of that same affection toward Jenur. Not that Jenur particularly wanted it, but it had sometimes felt like Kura considered Jenur competition, which was as ridiculous a thought as any.

Then again, who said Kura was rational? Jenur thought.

"Well, if you can't harm Dad, then I guess Wirm must have been an idiot for sending you after us," said Jenur. "Is that coot getting senile in his old age or is he a lot more incompetent than I remember?"

Kura shook her head. "Oh, I didn't come alone. Wirm himself came with me. He wanted to make absolutely sure that Quro and you were dead. Right now, he should be driving a knife into Quro's throat; regrettable, but as much as I love Quro, I know better than to cross the Grand Tiger's path."

Jenur's eyes widened. Though Nijok Wirm, the Grand Tiger of the Dark Tigers, the organization's founder and leader, was an older man and rarely took on any assignments himself, Jenur had grown up hearing all kinds of legends about Wirm's legendary assassination skills. Supposedly, Wirm had slain over 100 major political figures from various human and aquarian nations in the Northern Isles over his lifetime, and the bounty on his head was said to be so high that it exceeded the combined wealth of the entire Northern Isles twice over. Not to mention that Jenur herself had once run afoul of his temper, earning a beating she still tried to block out from her memory to this day.

Thus, real fear entered Jenur's soul as the thought of Wirm himself killing Dad dominated her

mind. She had to get back home fast, but then she remembered that Kura was in her way and that the only way she could have any hope of rescuing Dad was if she killed or defeated Kura.

“Wirm can't be here,” said Jenur. “You're just saying that to scare me.”

“No, it's true,” said Kura. “The Grand Tiger himself is on the hunt. We even used his personal boat to get here. He is quite serious about making sure you and Quro sleep on the ocean floor tonight.”

The hunger pains in Jenur's stomach were too distracting, but Jenur once again ignored them. “Wirm never leaves Ruwa, not even to take on paid jobs. You're lying.”

“You broke the Rules,” said Kura. “I know you have a hard time wrapping your mind around that simple concept, but breaking the Rules has consequences. Didn't you learn that when Wirm beat you senseless for being a lazy slob?”

For a moment, Jenur only saw Nijok Wirm—a large, muscular human man, with long, thin white hair, his brass knuckles shining in the candlelight—before her, beating her face in with his fists. She could feel his brass knuckles shattering her nose, bruising her cheeks, and smashing her forehead and making it bleed, as though it was happening right now.

It had been a long time since she last thought about the beating. The thought itself was enough to send fear pumping through her veins, fear unlike any she had felt before. All she wanted to do now was run from Urma and get away from Wirm before he found her again.

Then Jenur shook her head and beat down her fear. Running would not help. She needed to stand her ground. Dad needed her and she couldn't just abandon him, even if she did fear Wirm more than all of the southern gods combined.

So Jenur said, “If what you say is true, then all I need to do is kick your ass and go after Wirm myself.”

“You're a lot braver now,” Kura said. She crossed her arms, the blades of her knives facing toward Jenur. “I thought you were going to run away when I mentioned that Wirm was here.”

“I'm not going to abandon Dad,” said Jenur. “Especially not to someone like you.”

“I'm hurt,” said Kura with the most sarcastic voice possible. “Not. But I'm genuinely glad you're not running this time, you little witch. I've wanted to teach you a lesson for a long time now about respect.”

“This isn't school,” said Jenur. “So you can forget teaching me anything.”

“Idiot,” said Kura. Then she shook her head. “It doesn't matter. You'll be dead soon anyway, which is what you always should have been.”

With her blades flashing, Kura charged at Jenur. As Kura ran at Jenur, she kicked up the snow in front of her, sending it flying toward Jenur. Ducking to avoid the snow, Jenur ran at Kura and slashed at her with her own knife.

Jenur's blade met Kura's twin blades in midair and for a moment the two women struggled against each other. Though Jenur was in good shape, Kura was stronger due to her aquarian body and she was succeeding in pushing Jenur down, despite Jenur's best efforts to hold her back.

Biting her lower lip, Jenur lashed out with her right foot, striking Kura's legs and knocking the Dark Tiger's feet out from under her. Kura fell to the snow flat on her back, giving Jenur time to bring down her knife directly on Kura's chest.

But Kura rolled out of the way just in time, causing Jenur's knife to impale the snowy ground

underneath. Jenur had no time to pull it back out, however, because Kura had rolled to her feet and lashed out with both of her knives. Jenur was forced to leave her knife in the snow as she jumped back to avoid getting her hand cut off, causing her to skitter backwards in the snow as she did so.

“Dropped your weapon?” said Kura as she stood up, her chest heaving up and down. “That’s not good. I guess I’ll just have to add it to my own collection when I’m done with you here.”

Jenur scowled but didn’t say anything. Her knife was her best weapon, but it wasn’t like she was totally unarmed. Dad had once given Jenur a bag of pepper powder pellets, pellets that exploded into a red powder when thrown into the target’s eyes. Kura probably didn’t know about it, which was why Jenur said nothing about it.

Kura dashed at Jenur, her blades once again flashing through the air like lightning bolts. Jenur stood her ground, however, remaining perfectly still, calculating the ever-closing distance between her and Kura as fast as she could. She had to make sure not to throw the pepper powder pellets too early or Kura would have time to dodge, but too late and Jenur would be dead.

Just as Kura got within five feet of her, Jenur stuffed her hand into her coat’s left pocket, grabbed a handful of pellets, and hurled them directly at Kura’s eyes. The pellets flew through the eye holes of Kura’s mask, causing Kura to screech to a halt, kicking up snow everywhere as red powder exploded from within the eye holes of her mask.

“My eyes!” Kura screamed, dropping her knives as her hands flew up to the mask. “Good gods! My eyes!”

Kura ripped her mask off her head and threw it into the snow, revealing her eel-like face as she rubbed her eyes. Jenur, seeing an opening, ran at Kura and slammed into her midsection with her shoulder, sending the assassin falling backwards onto the ground.

Kura crashed onto the ground with a shout, but Jenur didn’t give her time to react. She scooped up Kura’s knives and pinned the Dark Tiger to the ground, straddling her enemy’s body with both legs. Jenur then stabbed both knives directly into Kura’s hands, causing Kura to scream once more before Jenur slapped her in the face.

“Shut up,” Jenur said, her voice as low and threatening as she could make it. “Or I’ll jam those knives into your throat, you old witch.”

Kura had enough sense in her to listen to Jenur’s command, because she stopped struggling underneath her and went quiet. Kura now looked like a mess, with her hands bleeding and her eyes bloodshot from the powder. Jenur doubted she would live much longer.

“You ... evil ... whore,” Kura said, saying each word slowly and carefully. “Are you gonna kill me now? Finish me off? I know you want to. I can see it in your eyes.”

Jenur, deciding that Kura was not going anywhere, stood up and walked around the assassin to get her knife. It was still stuck in the ground; in fact, it must have been embedded in the earth quite deeply because it took a few seconds of tugging before Jenur succeeded in removing it.

After checking that the blade was still intact, Jenur turned and walked back over to Kura, who had not moved from her position. Not that she could, considering her condition, but Jenur knew that deception was one of the best weapons in any Dark Tiger’s arsenal. Combine that with sheer determination to see an assignment to the bitter end and Jenur was surprised that Kura had not already freed herself.

Kura's bloodshot eyes, the powder covering them like badly-applied makeup, looked up at Jenur as she walked back into her view.

"You didn't answer my question," said Kura. She winced and groaned, probably at the pain in her hands. "Kill me or not?"

"I'm not really into the whole 'killing my enemies' thing anymore," Jenur admitted as she flipped her knife in her hand. "But at the same time, if I let you live, you'll probably just come after me later. Unless Wirm gets me, but I doubt he will."

"Wirm will get you, even if I don't," said Kura. "Wirm always gets what he wants, no matter what it is."

Kura's words made Jenur realize that every minute she spent here, deciding whether or not to kill Kura, was another minute that she was not heading back home to save Dad. Killing Kura would probably take time, even if she did kill her instantly by slitting her throat in just the right spot. Jenur couldn't waste any time making sure Kura was dead, especially when Kura was in such a pathetic state as she was.

So Jenur sheathed her knife and said, "You know what? I'm just going to leave you here. I don't have time to waste killing you when I could be using that very same time saving my Dad."

"Coward," Kura hissed. "I swear by the gods that you will live long enough to regret this decision."

That seemed like a strange thing for someone in Kura's position to say, but Jenur knew that Kura was not a normal person. With gray, rumbling storm clouds rolling in overhead and a strong breeze picking up, Jenur didn't have time to question Kura's response. She did, however, kick Kura in the side once for good measure.

So Jenur turned and ran toward the eastern end of the valley, the part of the valley closest to her home. She would have to run with all of her might to even hope of getting there in time to stop Wirm.

And even if she did get there in time, a part of her feared that she wouldn't be able to stop Wirm at all, making her wonder if taking out Kura hadn't guaranteed her survival, but had instead only delayed the inevitable. Those thoughts didn't make her slow down, but they hardly helped her feel better about coming face to face with Wirm, either.