



Crossroads



The
Thieves' Guild

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Chapter One

27th day of Darkember, 34SC

The citizens of the grandest of all Krynns cities, Palanthas, City of Seven Circles, hurried along her lamp-hung streets, glancing worriedly above their heads as they rushed homeward from the markets and plazas, another day of bustling commerce at an end. Thoughts of supper and bed competed with worries about the weather and the prospects of arriving home soaked to the bone, for an ugly snarl of clouds hung over the city's rooftops, mumbling with thunder and crackling with lightning. Such violent, early-winter storms had become an all-too-common occurrence in the first years since the Chaos War, but this particular storm seemed to promise fresh surprises of fury and destruction.

The light glowing from the city's many thousands of lamps and lighted windows painted the lower tatters of the storm a leprous yellow-gray, while directly above the center of the city, almost touched by the spires of the Lord's Palace, a great

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swirling wall of cloud had lowered threateningly from the base of the huge storm. An eerie, warm, moist wind rose from all circles of the city and began tumbling litter, dust, and sand down her centrally radiating, emptying streets. Into this rising wind stepped a lone figure, swathed in a heavy cloak despite the unseasonable warmth of the evening.

Though his back was bent and his face slanted away from the biting dust-laden breeze, he walked with something of a sailorly swagger, like a man more used to the rolling deck of a ship than the cobbles of a city street. In his right hand, he swung a gnarled black cane, marking time with it on the cobbles with a light tap at each step. As he strode across the street called Temple Row, passing before its gates into the Old City, he tugged his deep hood close over his brow.

A pair of dark-armored Knights of Takhisis huddled in the lee of a guardhouse beside the gate, gazing expectantly at the sky. With a start, they noticed his appearance, but as he simply crossed the street and entered the notoriously loathsome Smith's Alley, they let him pass without question. Instead, one rapped on the wall of the guardhouse, bringing a third Knight to the doorway. The three exchanged a few words. The third guard scratched something with a quill onto a slip of paper, and nodded.

The cloaked figure ignored them. As he entered the alley, the wind lessened somewhat. The buildings here, some of them almost as ancient the city itself, crowded close upon the narrow alleyway, shutting out all light and air. The center of the alley was worn into a deep track by two thousand years of weary treading, and down it trickled a slow noisome sump of sewage, rotting rinds of vegetables, grease, and offal. The resultant odor was stirred, albeit with some difficulty, by the rising wind, but not enough to rake the air clean of its offensive smell. No mere storm, no matter how furious, could cleanse this particular backwash of humanity. Only the sea rising in flood might hope to purge these cobbles of their ages of filth.

The man splashed across the alley with little more care than if it were a mountain brook. He muttered to himself, but not about what the alley's muck was doing to his boots, which were shoddy and heel-worn.

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"A fine night," he grumbled to no one.

Smith's Alley was eerily quiet. No doubt a hundred watchful eyes, and perhaps even a few arrows, daggers, and sling stones, were trained upon his bent back. This was no place for the careless traveler. Few in the city of Palanthas, even its dreaded Knights of Takhisis, dared walked this street alone at night. Better to enter a dragon's yawning maw than turn your steps down Smith's Alley after dark. However, the man seemed to know exactly where he was going, and it was entirely possible that he belonged there. Certainly, the tattered condition of his cloak and the confidence in his stride marked him as a likely denizen of this place. As no knife winged its silent way from the shadows to quiver in his back, as had happened to so many intruders before him, the unseen watchers appeared willing to let him pass for the moment. He continued on his way as though heedless or unaware of any danger.

Perhaps the unseen watchers stayed their swift violent retribution because they thought him mad. "A fine night indeed!" he muttered again from beneath his hood.

He jerked to a stop, tilted an ear to listen, and gripped the cane tightly in his fist. Somewhere to his left, a long, low, moaning howl arose. Perhaps it was only the wind roaring through the alleyways of Palanthas, perhaps a dog crying in fright. "A bad omen," he snarled. "Nay! A good omen! A good omen for tonight's work."

As the howling rose to a quavering shriek, he continued on his way, the cane tapping out an eerie cadence in the long echoing alleyway. Somewhere behind him, a door slammed shut, while to his front a pair of ragged mongrels scurried from his path, snarling over their shoulders.

He stopped before a low, stout door set deeply into a wall of crumbling stone. He approached it, and with the gnarled cane he hammered on the door in a curious series of knocks—four, three rapid, two slow, then one as heavy as a hammer blow.

Without a sound, the door opened a crack, revealing only darkness beyond. "Who is it?" a harsh voice barked from within.

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"A traveler from afar," the man said.

"Welcome, Avaril," the voice answered, this time more pleasantly. The door swung wide, and a lantern was uncovered, revealing a short figure with a long white beard poking through a green hood. "You are late. The goblin is afoot, they say."

The lantern in the dwarf's hand showed a small, low-ceilinged room half-filled with people. Many bore large heavy sacks or crates or chests, and as the dwarf stepped back to allow the man called Avaril to enter, some sighed visibly, while others returned blades to their sheaths. He surveyed the room as though looking for someone.

"Come in. Why are you standing out there?" the dwarf asked as he stepped into the alley and glanced quickly in both directions. "Strange things are moving, whispers of danger. It isn't safe. We are moving."

"Yes, I know my old friend," Avaril affirmed as the dwarf, finding the alleyway empty, turned back to the door. Perhaps some tingling premonition of danger warned the dwarf, for without even raising his eyes he ducked aside. The big man adjusted his swing and splintered the knobby cane over the dwarf's skull. Avaril snatched the lantern from the fallen dwarf's hand, spun, and flung it into through the doorway. As glass shattered and the lurid glare of flames leaped up, a kender sprang from the surprised crowd within the room and slammed the door shut before Avaril could jam it open with his broken cudgel. Shouts of anger, pain and surprise battled with the roaring of flames to fill the tiny room behind the door, while Avaril flung the cane at the door.

Seven Dark Knights rushed past Avaril. The black armored leader carried in his massive fists a huge iron hammer, which he used to smash the door to kindling. Behind him came six Knights of Takhisis with crossbows cocked and leveled. As the leader strode into the flames, the other six paused to loose their bolts into the room before drawing their swords and following.

Inside the chamber, the people dropped their bags, boxes, and crates and poured through every exit, up stairs, through windows. Archers waiting in the darkness outside murdered those who fled into the alley. The others were pursued and cut

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down from behind. More Knights rushed in from the alley to join the chase and the slaughter, while others quickly gathered up the assorted boxes and crates and bags and carried them outside into the alley. What they couldn't move or didn't want, they smashed with hammers. The night was filled with the sounds of shattering glass and dying screams. Somewhere, an iron bell began to toll.

Meanwhile, Avaril dragged the dwarf across the alley and flung him on a heap of wet sawdust. He then settled himself onto one of the crates and watched the carnage. For a while, the screams of the dying continued. Knights rushed in and out of the building, and the pile of loot in the alley grew taller. Already, scribes and clerks of the Knights of Takhisis had gathered and begun to sort, count, and record the take, referring occasionally to Avaril about some item before adding it to their tally sheets. Teams of bearers, each heavily guarded by still more Knights, carted away the spoils as soon as each item was cleared by the clerks. Above the city, the storm had not yet broken, but every moment it promised to unleash its full fury.



The dwarf opened his eyes, blinking through the blood that had streamed from his cracked skull down across his face and soaked his beard. Across the alley from where he lay, weary Knights, gore up to their elbows, staggered from the blazing building that had once belonged to the Thieves' Guild of Palanthas. The upper floors were already consumed, but they had stamped out the fires on the lower floors in order to haul away the things stored there. Now, as the last two Knights exited the building, they paused at the doorway to fling their torches back into the room. Soon flames were licking around the door and windows. By the angry glow upon the clouds swirling overhead, it seemed that fires had sprung up all over the city.

By this light, the dwarf watched a peculiar conference take place near the loot pile. The bearers had already carried away most of the night's take, but a few choice selections had been

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left behind, carefully covered by a black tarp. Around this now lingered three men, their heads gathered close in whispered confidences.

The largest of the three was a good head taller than the smallest, but he wore a long, black cloak of the thickest wool, with a deep heavy cowl hiding his face. The next tallest of the three was a man easily recognized in any part of the city—a man with a face graven in stone, eyes like blue agates that shone even in the darkness of the alley. He was Sir Kinsaid, Knight of Takhisis and Lord Knight of the City of Palanthas. Though nominally a military advisor, he was the true ruler of the city. The third was a small man, dressed in wizard's robes of somber gray. His face was sharp, with an inquisitive nose and small eyes like chips of coal pressed into dough-colored flesh.

For a few moments the three were left alone, without their guards and clerks. The large figure knelt beside the pile of loot and, casting a surreptitious glance around, drew back one of the black coverings. The other two huddled over what he revealed. From his vantage, the dwarf couldn't see what so fascinated the three. Not that he much cared. He felt soft darkness closing in about him once again. He relaxed, and gazed at the sky above him.

The wall of the building beside him towered four stories into the Palanthian sky, and in its great age and dilapidation it seemed to lean perilously, as though about to fall. A few dark windows glowered over the alleyway, but most had long since been boarded up. However, from one of these empty windows the dwarf watched a coil of rope suddenly appear. Though dyed as black as sable, its silhouette stood out against the low, fire lit clouds. Silently, it unwound as it descended to the alley below, stretching to its full length a few inches from the dwarf's nose. He cursed in surprise, throwing up his arms to ward off the rope.

The three men spun round, startled from their gloating. A sword flashed in the mailed fist of Sir Kinsaid, while a cocked crossbow appeared in the hands of the gray-robed man. The third drew no weapon, but stared from beneath his hood.

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"Who goes there?" Sir Kinsaid challenged.

The short man lowered his crossbow. "It is only the door-warden," he laughed. "He is still alive. Dwarven skulls are notoriously thick."

No one seemed to notice the black rope dangling just above the dwarf's head.

"I'll soon mend that, Sir Arach," the man in the black robes said to his small companion. "He can identify me."

At these words, the dwarf came fully and starkly awake. He struggled to move, but found that his legs would not move. He clawed desperately at the sawdust, a strangled cry of rage choking him.

"You dog!" he wept impotently into his beard. "You betrayed us!" He crawled free of the sawdust mound and dragged his frail, broken frame over the slimy cobbles, unaware of the dark figure that had slid down the rope behind him. The three ignored his cries. "You betrayed us!" the dwarf screamed.

"Captain Avaril has betrayed many in his time," snarled the figure behind him.

Again, Sir Kinsaid spun, his gleaming steel blade leaping in his hand. Sir Arach Jannon produced his crossbow. The black-robed Captain Avaril rose, his hands clenched into ham-sized fists.

A dark figure dropped from a window across the alley, a third appeared from behind a pile of empty crates, two others crawled from a sewer grate that appeared barely wide enough to admit a rat. More advanced from the shadows from either end of the alley. They wore uniforms of black cloth, loosely woven and stitched to allow full range of movement and maximum capacity for secreting tools and weapons. Their faces were hidden by swaths of a similar dark material, but above these masks dark eyes gleamed with hatred.

Soon, a black ring of death, a ring edged with gleaming steel, surrounded the three men. Like warriors long accustomed to battle, they placed themselves back to back, facing the opponents who edged closer every moment. The raging inferno behind them lit the scene in a lurid glare, which was augmented startlingly by frequent flashes of lightning. The dwarf

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lay within the closing circle of foes, confused, fainting with pain, burning with frustration.

"Daavyd Nelgard," Sir Kinsaid growled. "Master of the Thieves' Guild of Palanthas. Here is a prized fish your nets failed to catch, Sir Arach."

"Nay, my lord. The net draws round them even as we speak. This was not unforeseen," the gray-robed man said, a sly smile twisting his narrow face.

The dark figure that had dropped behind the dwarf stepped into the light of the fire. He jerked the mask from his face and the hood from his head, revealing an unruly mane of matted black hair surrounding a dark face made darker by his rage.

"Aye," he growled. "The net draws tight. You are caught in it." He flung back his short cloak and swept out a scimitar that caught the light of the inferno and sent it back in an arc of red fire.

"The Thieves' Guild is at an end," the Lord Knight said. "Surrender and we'll give you an execution worthy of an enemy of the Knights of Takhisis. You and your followers shall not die like criminals."

Grim laughter flowed around the circle of black-clad assassins.

"Shall we die like sheep, as did our companions whose burning flesh reeks in our nostrils even now?" the Guildmaster asked his fellows.

No one answered. They continued to close, silently, tightening the ring. They stepped over the dwarf, leaving him outside their circle.

"We may die this night, but first we shall see those who brought our Guild low ground into the dust," the Guildmaster said as he leaped, his scimitar flashing out to decapitate Captain Avaril. Sir Kinsaid's long sword met the Guildmaster's curved blade in a flash of sparks.

With a roar, the others closed, blades darting, licking, probing. Sir Arach fired his crossbow, dropping the closest of the assassins, then tossed aside his weapon and lifted a hand, palm outward. A shimmering shield of force appeared before him, stopping the dagger winging toward his heart in mid flight. It fell with a clatter to the cobbles.

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"Magic user!" someone shouted. In response, Sir Arach whipped an obsidian-tipped wand from some hidden pocket in his robes. His lips moved, an arcane word crackled on the air, and a sheet of flame erupted from the wand, engulfing the thief trying to skewer him with a short sword. The man became a living pillar of fire. He staggered away, screaming among his fellows, disrupting their attacks, forcing them to dodge the flaming torches that were his flailing arms.

Meanwhile, the skill of the Dark Knight took its toll upon his attackers. His sword licked out, a man fell, his head cloven to his teeth. Another dropped, clutching the ropes of his intestines as they spilled out on the ground. A third lunged low, slashing with a dagger, and leaped back, holding the fountain-stump of his wrist.

With a crack of bone and a spray of blood and teeth, Captain Avaril sent one man sailing backwards, unconscious before he hit the cobbles. He lifted his fingers to his lips and blew a long, quavering call, like the cry of a curlew. A moment later, a deep bellowing roar some distance down the alley answered it.

At this noise, the Guildmaster urged his fellow thieves to redouble their efforts. A thunder of boots and clatter of hooves on the cobblestones echoed from both ends of the alleyway. Soldiers shouted that the Lord Knight was under attack. Officers blared orders. Sir Kinsaid staggered, clutching at a terrific gash in his mail, blood oozing between his fingers. Three thieves fell to the ground and began to snore loudly, victims of another of Sir Arach's magic spells. The knot of fighting wavered, shifted, flowed here and there. One moment, the dwarf, forgotten in the fray, had to lift his head to see the progress of the battle, the next he was in the midst of it. Someone stumbled over him, cursing, only to have his words cut short by Sir Kinsaid's sword. The dwarf tried to crawl away, only to be stomped on the fingers. Then, someone kicked him in the head. A dull pain thudded in his ears, bringing blackness and merciful oblivion.

When he awoke again, the battle had ended. Someone had rolled him over, and he lay now on his back, staring up into the sky. A steady, heavy downpour sent a plume of steam rising

from the burning building. It was as though, with the work of the Knights of Takhisis completed, the rain had come to douse the fires lest they spread throughout the city. The fallen rain flowed red with blood into the gutters of Smith's Alley.

The dwarf turned his head and met, face to face, the former master of the former Thieves' Guild of Palanthas. Daavyd Nलगard's head lay next to his, lusterless eyes, lids drooping, bruised lips in a death grimace revealing teeth clamped tightly on a bloated purple tongue. Already, a rat had been chewing on his nose. The dwarf recoiled in horror, only to bump into another body. He raised himself onto his elbows and found that he had been placed in a long row of corpses that stretched into the shadows in either direction. How many had died, he could not hope to count. Of those who lived, he recognized three.

Sir Kinsaid was being tended by a healer, having the wound in his side bound with strips of cloth while two Knights stretched a tarp overhead to shield him from the rain. Sir Arach Jannon was picking through the remaining pile of loot taken from the Guild house and directing the clerks and bearers where each item, crate, or box was to be taken. Meanwhile, Captain Avaril, his face once again hidden by the heavy cowl of his cloak, sat on a crate, his elbows resting on his knees, his head in his hands, exhausted. Rain spattered on his back and hood, but he paid it no mind. Knights and guards meandered about, searching the dead, cataloguing the booty, tending their own wounds or recounting their deeds of the night.

All over Palanthas, the same scene was being played out in a hundred other alleys. Towers of smoke and oily steam rose into the storm-wracked sky, while Knights of Takhisis, their officers and servants, sorted, recorded, and carted away the collected belongings of the Thieves' Guild of Palanthas. They counted and identified the dead according to a large book that each senior officer carried under his or her arm. This book, which would in after days come to be called the Book of the Damned, bore the names and descriptions of every member of the Guild as of 27 Darkember, 34 SC. Those who had not been slain were being hounded, hunted, and smoked out of every Guild house, safe house, and sewer in the entire city. Not a

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single secret of the Guild, not a member, not a sympathizer, not a rat hole or bolthole, nor even the lowliest treasure hole, though it contained but a pair of thin coppers, was overlooked or missed. The jails had been emptied hours before of their least-dangerous criminals, just to make room for the sudden influx of Guild thieves this night would bring. Old dungeon cells, which had not been inspected for centuries, had their doors pried open, their hinges oiled, their locks repaired. For weeks afterward, there was a notable shortage in chain and rope throughout the city. The price went through the roof, and ropemakers and blacksmiths found themselves the unexpected benefactors. Fortunes were hurriedly invested in fresh supplies of these commodities, only to be lost when the mass executions began and all that surplus chain and rope was reintroduced into the Palanthian markets. Meanwhile, a huge mass grave, a death pit, was dug into a mountain valley five miles south of the city. Though at first the gravediggers complained of the depth of the mass grave ordered by the Dark Knights, in a few weeks it was feared that it might prove too small.

This night, as the rain sluiced Smith's Alley of some of its refuse, the dwarf lay mere feet away from his most hated enemy in all of Krynn. A short sword, broken near the tip but otherwise serviceable, lay inches from his grasp. The old doorwarden of the Guild edged closer to the weapon, careful that he make no noise.

Rain and blood had made the sword's grip slick, and his hands were grown feeble, weak from pain and loss of blood. The sword slipped and scraped across the cobblestones as he lifted it. Captain Avaril glanced up but did not move. Lightning flashed, shadows leaped up, startled. One shadow in particular caught the dwarf's attention as he gripped the sword. It loomed over him like a tower. He looked up in time to see a boot lifted above his head. With a clap of thunder that shook the ground, he knew no more.