

THE PENULTIMATE DAWN CYCLE
BOOK 1

FREE SAMPLE - CHAPTER ONE

THE
HUNGER

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CHAPTER ONE

A Malevolent Guest

They call this place the Twilight Library, and though I'm uncertain as to the original origin of the name, it seems quite fitting now. The world wallows in darkness and ignorance, except for this place, which contains barely enough light to offer hope. Certainly, twilight is preferable to no light at all. A long night stands between the twilight and the dawn.

"What now is bound must be undone, and only then is victory won." This couplet was inscribed at the entrance when I arrived. It looked newer than the other faded inscriptions but provided no additional evidence of its author or meaning. This will be the first of many riddles I must solve alone at the top of the world.

I am still determining as to where to begin my search and wish that I had brought Azil for company. Though he is my oldest friend, I doubt the trek through the mountains would have agreed with him. As it is, I shall jump at every shadow, for the fate of the Library's former inhabitants also remains a mystery.

- From the Journal of Jamith, Scholar of the Scarlatti Court, Day 1

Azil felt a brilliant inner glow—the sure sign his body had converted the magical Sustenance into Essence. He was thrilled at the thought of the wonders he could now perform—feats of sight, swiftness, and strength that made his regular abilities look feeble. He might run with the swiftness of a Mage Beast, discern the differently colored outlier in a mound of sand, or fell a towering tree with a single blow. Now, however, his first thought was for protection.

He imagined impenetrable walls forming around himself, using the Essence to weave a spell of silence. He couldn't be overheard while talking to someone who hadn't entered his room from outside.

Before speaking with his oldest and dearest friend, he looked in the full-length mirror to check his appearance. He couldn't give Jamith the impression he was letting himself go. His fine scarlet coat and cravat were still impeccable, but his dark, wavy hair had gone slightly askew. Taking a band from his pocket, he tied his hair back in a more orderly fashion. Now, he was ready.

After allowing the spell to solidify for a few seconds, he sat in the cushioned chair in front of his polished wooden desk. All around him stood bookshelves, full of manuscripts and musical scrolls from his favorite operas. An ornate rug covered most of the floor, and a full-body mirror with a simple frame graced the wall opposite the desk so he could check the condition of his wardrobe at any time.

With a motion that felt second nature, he removed the golden amulet from around his neck and placed it on a square of black silk that lay on the desk.

The amulet contained a trio of concentric rings, each inlaid with a single jewel of a different color. The outermost ring bore a red jewel, the next a blue, and the final a gold one. To calibrate the device to his friend's, he formed an equilateral triangle by twisting the circles, using the jewels as points.

The jewels glowed as a familiar face materialized above the amulet. Suspended in mid-air, the image approximated his oldest and dearest friend, a title he didn't bestow lightly. Jamith had a kindly, round face with a few wrinkles, thinning brown hair, and eyes so gemstone blue they made Azil a bit envious.

It pained Azil a little every time he switched the device on, like a sliver in his foot that he couldn't dislodge. The images underscored the reality that he'd probably never see his friend in person again.

"Well, Azil," Jamith said. "After hundreds of days apart, it's now only two days until your little ball. Have you seen to your attire?"

Azil gave a tense smile. "Jamith, how long have you known me? My attire was the very first consideration I made. It's a Scarlatti function, so it's a bit more red than I usually allow myself, but at least it's for a good cause."

Jamith nodded. "And will you submit to skin conditioning? I hear the process grows more and more expensive."

"Absolutely not," Azil said. "They all look like living dralial fruit, which is bad enough. Besides, the one time I attempted the process, it greatly upset my Reserve—worse indigestion than I've ever gotten from ingestion of regular food. You know how much worse a magical meal can feel when coming back up. I wouldn't want to be caught unawares simply because I swapped out my usual magical meals for a bunch of skin-conditioning materials, even if they make me look like a noble."

There was, of course, the fact that spending more on Sustenance would mean spending less on his clothing, a situation with which he simply couldn't abide. He wouldn't have spent the money at all if missing a magical meal didn't have a price worse than death. He had seen others undergo the awful process of becoming a Mal, and he had no desire to experience that firsthand.

The face over the amulet bobbed and laughed. "Very well, then, no conditioning for you. At least now I know that your vanity has a limit. I suppose you have summoned me for the last piece of the puzzle."

Azil's hand flew to his chest as he rose from his chair. "Old friend, must we assign such ulterior motives to every communication? I'll have you know it provides me no small pleasure to gaze upon this approximation of your face. I'm glad we can only converse in this manner. The sight of your actual face might cause me to swoon with rapture." He mimicked the act of swooning and then fell back into his chair, legs and arms akimbo.

"Don't count on seeing my face soon," Jamith said. "The snow piles deeper and deeper on these mountains. Even if I only consumed brimwort for a year, I couldn't generate enough fire to melt an escape route. For now, it will just be me and the books. And my writing. I am carefully documenting everything I find up here in a journal."

Azil leaned toward the picture. "Which I shall look forward to reading someday." He straightened himself up again, displaying his impeccable posture. "All right, we shall proceed as planned. With the ball just two days away, I decided to uncover the... stash. I think I can keep it safe for two days."

Azil's hand found his heart. "Are you following Evelet's visions or acting on your own accord? I wish she'd share more of the content of these prophecies. Perhaps she could reveal the outfits of the other nobles, so I can be the most impressive."

Jamith chuckled, shaking his head. "It doesn't work that way, I'm afraid. I cannot share her visions, but I trust her gifts. If she claims attending the ball is part of the plan, it's prudent for you to go."

Azil pursed his lips, trying hard to muster his confidence to go along with his friend's. "Then I swear by Rahim that it shall be so. I prefer not to procrastinate with this. As my mother once said, 'Hasty work's a grave mistake—it doth in clothes a wrinkle make.'"

"Your mother was a wise woman," Jamith said. He paused for a few moments and sighed. "I suppose we should get down to business as much as I would love to chat. If you want to retrieve the stash, go back to the tavern where we first met as young men, some fifteen years ago. Approach the bartender and ask him for a drink from Jamith's Jug. He will offer you a drink, which you must immediately consume. Exit through the back door. The path will be clear. Good luck, old friend."

"Old friend? I must protest," Azil said. "I'm still a young man. I've not yet reached my 32nd year! Simply being a hermit doesn't make you an old man, either, even if you're a few years my senior. I'll do as you say, old friend."

Jamith jumped in. "Then why do you keep referring to me as 'old friend'? I suppose this is just as much your fault as mine. You—"

Azil raised a hand for silence, hearing something from outside his room. The silence barrier stopped all sounds from escaping, but not from getting in. Jamith fell silent as well, which was about as much as he could do.

Only the constant drip from his water-based timepiece sounded in the room. Azil didn't let down his guard. He reached with one hand into his pocket and withdrew a handful of red powder, which he pressed into an irregular pellet and then consumed.

It would take a few moments for him to process the material and bring its Essence into his Reserve. He remembered his father's training. He could cast the spell immediately, but it was safer to wait for his body to process the Sustenance fully. It was as prudent as wearing a different-colored waistcoat under your first choice, just in case someone else at the event was wearing the same color.

Azil heard a loud thud against his door and whirled toward the sound. The door to his study flew off its hinges, revealing the largest Mal Azil had ever seen. The grotesque creature had once been a man and now wore sections of leather armor over its rough, gray skin. It stood two heads taller than Azil and possessed multiple extra pairs of arms. Its hacked-off hands had been replaced with blades of various lengths. Drool hung from its misshapen mouth, which was full of jagged teeth, and the left side of its face was so swollen that it could barely open its left eye. Its stench alone—a putrid combination of rotting meat and an unclean stable—was enough to make his eyes water.

Unless this abomination moonlighted as a hedge trimmer, it served no other purpose than to butcher.

“I say,” Azil said, pointing to the fallen door. “That door cost me a great deal in bribes to smuggle it out of the Azuran Keep. It’s quite valuable and could conceivably be reused. If you’re going to slaughter me, kindly refrain from getting blood all over the door. Can we find an alternative solution?”

Though many Mals could speak, this one snarled at him like a beast.

Azil grinned sardonically, his heart racing. True, he was a mage, but foremost, he was a scholar. How could he possibly best such a vicious opponent? If he could survive long enough for the Sustenance to process, he’d likely only get in a spell or two. He’d have to make them count.

“I have no quarrel with you, nor do I wish to—”

The creature opened its jaws so wide and bellowed that Azil could see far down its throat. Dread pooled in his chest as he studied the malformed face and realized this creature could never be reasoned with. He clenched his hands into fists to keep them from trembling.

“My, my, aren’t you a piteous creature? It brings me no pleasure to fight you, but I suppose you might consider death an act of mercy.”

Ignoring Azil’s words, the Mal lumbered forward, blades swinging. Perhaps Jamith was correct about his age. A younger man would have a faster magical metabolism. He couldn’t risk taking too much Sustenance at once, as that would bloat his Reserve with too much Essence.

Regular indigestion had nothing on the magical variety.

Azil’s body tensed as the Mal closed the space between them, and he considered his meager options.

The Mal swung all its right arms at once, and Azil hit the floor to avoid them. Crawling on all fours, he hurried around the circular room, relying on speed to make up for his weakness. His breath came in shallow gasps, and a cold sweat dripped from his brow.

The Mal twisted its face into a grotesque approximation of a grin. It licked its cracked lips with a malformed tongue that looked more serpentine than human. Azil backed away, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

“I don’t suppose I could tempt you with more suitable clothing,” Azil said. “I know just the tailor who—”

Azil stopped just in time to avoid the Mal’s slicing blades. The edge of his fine scarlet robe took the full brunt of the attack and tore away from Azil’s body.

Azil shot to his feet. “Do you know what you’ve done? I was going to wear that to the next Scarlatti Ball! Now, I’ll have to start over completely.”

As he finished his speech, he felt the Sustenance becoming part of his Reserve. A pleasant tingling spread throughout his chest, and he smirked in relief. Dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief, he squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. “Oh, and one more thing, as my mother used to say, ‘When a mage nods—kneel.’”

With intense, concentrated thought, Azil exerted his will, turning the Essence into a poison rain that fell in torrents on the Mal. The creature barely cried out before the toxic magic dissolved him, leaving only a noxious pile of sludge.

When he was sure that everything had settled, Azil approached the pile, sniffed, and shook his head. He didn't want to damage the plush rug depicting a dark background with bright specks that formed constellations. He was thankful that the door was undamaged and that he could reattach it.

"Who's doing this?" he muttered. He didn't get along with many at court, but he couldn't think of anyone who wanted him dead. Their enmity toward him for his overly inquisitive nature had always seemed abstract. This threat, however, had been terrifyingly real.

His pulse pounded in his ears, and it was a few moments before he registered Jamith's voice coming from the direction of his desk where he had left the communication amulet. The amulet lay face down on the floor, further inhibiting Jamith's ability to be heard.

Azil flipped him right side up in his palm and grinned.

"What was that?" Jamith asked, his voice higher than usual. "It sounded like the wrath of Rahim himself descending upon your study."

Azil lifted both eyebrows. "A Mal assassin, unbelievably ugly. But all brawn and no brains. Frankly, I'm insulted that whoever tried to kill me didn't make a more earnest attempt. If that was Rahim, I'm in significant trouble on multiple counts. First, I reduced the attacker to a pile of unsightly sludge, for which I'd be guilty of decide or whatever killing a god is called. Second, if that's what he looks like, I've lost all faith in him. What good is wielding cosmic power if you cannot be bothered to dress presentably?" He hoped the humor would hide the tremor in his voice.

"I imagine you're guilty of nothing more than ruining a fine rug," Jamith said. "Though I'm sure you made quick work of it, I'm still happy to see you with your head still attached to your shoulders. Now, go and retrieve the stash so that you can bring it to the gala. Whoever tried to kill you will probably try again when they discover their failure. Stay close to Evelet, and you'll be safe. She'll be able to help you with the next steps."

Azil nodded, amazed at how well his friend still knew him. Knowing it was a long shot, he asked. "Spot on, old friend. In this stash of yours, did you happen to have the foresight to include a rug?"

Jamith laughed and shook his head. "Perhaps next time, my friend. I trust we'll speak again soon."

Jamith's face faded, and Azil rested his elbows on the table and put his head in his hands. A tremor started in one hand and shot to the other, but he was relieved he hadn't shown his friend how close he had come to dying. The sender would try again, and eventually, one of the abominations would succeed. What good were fine rugs and fine clothing if you didn't have a head to enjoy them?

Azil rose, trying to steady his nerves by moving around. He needed to escape this place, away from reminders of what had happened. His chest felt tight, his breathing constricted, and sweat soaked his body.

"Fresh air," he muttered. "That would be just the thing. Fresh air and a stiff drink."

Feed the Hunger.

The first chapter is only the beginning.

Continue with Azil, Jamith, Kaval, Evelet, and a realm where magical Sustenance is the difference between power and ruin. Discover why an assassin has come for Azil - and what waits beyond the walls of the world he knows.

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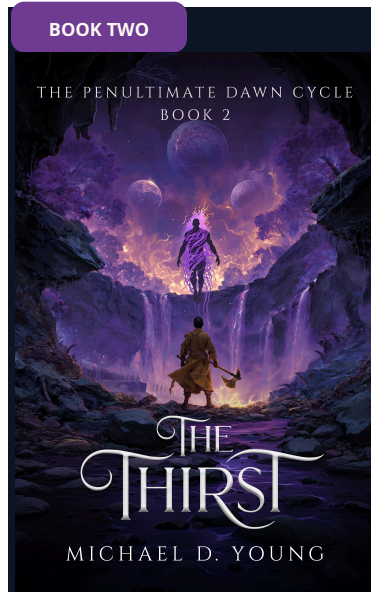
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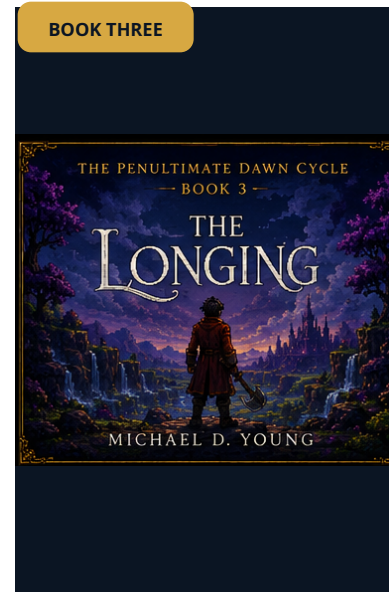
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