

Chapter 1 — Decision Reached

Cold and black was the night. An icy rain fell, rivulets ran down Zoran's grey outer cloak, depositing even more water on his already soaked boots. The eighteen year old's pace was rapid, all thoughts were on the Coddle Inn, its warm fire, its warm ale, and his two friends. Well, okay, his thoughts also drifted more than once onto the barmaid Beta and her golden hair and intense blue eyes. The cobblestone street sloped to either side, draining water into the sewers beneath the city. He passed Flagstone Hall, only two more blocks and he'd be out of this miserable early spring rain.

Out of nowhere, his inner sense blasted his full attention on this instant of time, forcing his head to look upwards. His eyes focused on a large stone block that was falling directly towards his head! Instant reactions from his youthful training kicked in, he dove to his left, and rolled as his shoulder hit the cold, wet, unforgiving cobblestones. High atop Flagstone Hall through the opening made by the falling stone, he saw a cloaked, hooded figure suddenly vanish. Crash! The three foot by one foot chunk of polished granite smashed into the street, crushing cobblestones and shattering the block itself, missing his leg by mere inches.

One quick fighter movement and Zoran was on his feet, his sword drawn. His eyes darted in all directions, but the street was deserted. No one was venturing out on a night like tonight, unless they had urgent business. "Damn!" he cursed. He shook more water off of himself, his pants were now soaked as well. A minute later, he entered the Coddle Inn, shaking off his cloak and clothes at the door. Stale pipe smoke and spirits assailed his nostrils, along with that of burning pine logs.

"Hey, over here, Vladislov," the cheery, but slightly drunk voice of his friend Miklos called out to him, using his surname. "Come over and warm up by the fire. Ale's awaiting!" Miklos and Kornel had the table closest to the inn's large fireplace, perfect for nights like tonight, Zoran thought and joined them.

"Hey, what happened to you? Fall into a puddle did we?" Kornel joked, noticing that his friend was rather drenched.

"Gimme an ale! Someone just tried to kill me again," Zoran replied angrily, downing one mug in a single guzzle.

"What? Did you see who it was this time?" Kornel suddenly came to attention, struggling to fight off the effects of the three ales that he had already consumed.

"Are you all right?" Miklos added, also becoming alert, his eyes scanning everyone in the inn as if they might be an assassin as well.

“Gonna have a sore shoulder in the morning. No harm done, missed me.” Zoran related his narrow escape with death minutes before.

“Damn, you sure are the luckiest guy I know,” Kornel stated. “Incredible of you to just happen to look up when you did! Grey cloak and hood — not much to go on this time either.” He refilled Zoran’s mug.

Zoran was the youngest child of Baron Kazimir and Baroness Katerina Vladislov, the rulers of the main continent of the planet Adapazan. His twenty-one year older brother, Radek, was already named by Baron Kazimir to be his heir to the throne. Like peas, Zoran always said, ruthless tyrants, controlling the planet with an iron glove. In stark contrast to their harshness, his twin, nineteen year old sisters, Rayna and Lida, were like gentle flowers in the spring. Yet they were not without power, they chose to use it wisely, from Zoran’s point of view. Baron Kazimir ruled from this huge city of Dorum and his giant stone castle Dorumova, in which Zoran had his own room.

While the fire began to warm him on the outside and the ale on the inside, he and his two friends chatted about this new attempt on his life. Zoran’s mind could not help but drift back to the previous two attempts. Three weeks ago, at dinner, he took a chunk of bread that was on the table before him. However, his inner senses had warned him something was not right. So startled by the suddenness of his surprise warning, he had dropped the bread on the floor. His old pet dog had eaten it and immediately began vomiting and died within two minutes. Someone had tried to poison him at his own dinner table!

Baron Kazimir laughed off the whole incident, but did at least investigate. He found nothing of significance, even though the Baroness insisted that he leave no stone unturned to find the assassin. Assassinations were commonplace within the Federation of Planets.

Then, last week, as he was practicing his combat skills, going hand to hand with the Baron’s sword master, Josef, once again, his inner sense kicked in; he reacted by making a rolling dive into the dirt. Just in time, an arrow thudded into the ground where he had been standing. Josef called out the guards, but the archer simply vanished. Other than the arrow, no trace of the assassin could be found. Well, that was to be expected of an assassin, if they knew their craft. Now tonight, the unknown assassin had tried it again and almost succeeded. Zoran was now more than a little annoyed and upset, he bordered on hostility. Who could possibly want him dead?

“Probably Radek’s behind it,” Kornel was speculating, as Zoran’s mind finally rejoined his friends. “Everyone knows that Zoran is just the opposite of him and the Baron.”

“Why? I am not in line to be heir to the throne,” Zoran pointed out for the tenth time to his friends. Look, the Baron,” he had long since stopped referring to Kazimir as his father, “has already named Radek as his heir. Even if something happens to him, more than likely it would

fall to Rayna or Lida. I'm fourth in line at best, if the Baroness doesn't claim it before it comes to me. I can't see any reason for Radek to want me dead. Sorry fellows, I don't buy it."

"Well, someone sure does, Zoran. This is the third attempt! Sooner or later, they are going to succeed. What the devil are you going to do about it?" Miklos asked, concerned for his childhood friend.

Perhaps it was the ale talking. Zoran found himself saying, "Perhaps I ought to just disappear for a while, until I can figure out who is after my head."

"Say, that's not a bad idea," Kornel replied, then hiccupping loudly from the ale. "Go undercover and all that. I like it."

"Yes, but he is Duska. He can just go anywhere in the Federation just by magic. We sure can't go with him and protect him, now can we, Kornel," Miklos replied, rather annoyed that Zoran was suggesting what sounded like a grand adventure and that the two of them, being only Adepts, that is beginning wizards, could not follow. Not unless Zoran chose to magically bring them along. He was hoping his slight hint would register with Zoran, who would then offer to take them with him.

"Sorry fellows, if I go, I have to go by myself. If out there something happens to me, you both would be stranded! I could never live with that, sorry. I must do this alone," Zoran replied to his friend's subtle hint. They knew that he was right. Zoran was Duska, they were not. Four years ago, he'd come of age and had been given the Ceremony of Ascension, during which his special gland at the base of his body's brain activated. Through the guidance of the Priestess, he'd been initiated into the Shadow Walk, which allowed one to walk through space to any of the sixteen planets within the Federation. His first trip was nauseating, but by the last walk, he had mastered his fears and was now a true Duska, a Shadow Walker, which was his birthright. All those who ruled throughout the Federation were Duska.

Duska were special, multi-talented, different human beings, gifted by birth with an oversized gland, which, upon puberty, set them apart with special powers and abilities. Perhaps the greatest of these was their ability to Shadow Walk, in which they could transport themselves and others, if they chose, from one planet to another within the sixteen in the Federation of Planets. Their reaction times were phenomenal, and males usually made use of this by becoming master swordsmen. All male Duskas were given standard fighter training from about the age of six onwards.

Magic was also prevalent throughout the Federation, though it took many shapes and forms. Although no one ever made an accurate assessment, popular opinion held that one in ten of every inhabitant had some latent magical skill, though often this amounted to little more than having a spoon stir a cooking pot, starting a fire in the fireplace — little useful sort of things. From among those with magical skills, a relatively few had gotten some magical training and

were able to cast limited formal spells, these were called the Adepts. Often, they made their living by trading their spells for room and board or gold coins. Here on Adapazan, a heavily forested and mountainous planet, forest fires were a common hazard and Adepts could make a good living by using their spells to help douse fires.

Even fewer still had the funds or backers to make a full time study of magic. These were called Mages. Armed with an array of spells, often power spells such as Ball of Fire, Lightning Bolt, and Killing Vapors, these men and women frequently found lucrative employment within the ruling Baron's army of enforcers or even their armies proper. Those who did not, were often employed by the many warlords who controlled lands currently beyond the dominion of the Barons and Baronesses.

Rare were those in the third category, the Archmage. These individuals had gone far beyond the mundane use of magical powers and spells, extending their knowledge of arcana to unknown limits. Wherever possible, every Baron had one Archmage in their employ. Baron Kazimir's Archmage was Milos, now in his seventies, a tight lipped man with a nasty temper and zero tolerance for mistakes. Milos also detested all those without any latent magical skills and thus fit in with the Baron's subjugation plans for Adapazan.

The court's Archmage, Milos in this case, had several official duties, one of which was to train the royal children of the ruling family. Indeed, Archmage Milos had trained Radek, Rayna, Lida, and had just begun training Zoran. Radek rapidly picked up the power spells, which would aid him in battles with warlords and their rabbles. His sisters, while they could cast such spells should they one day find themselves rulers, excelled in other forms of spells, beneficial ones which would help others. Zoran also tended to favor the same spells that his sisters had, much to the annoyance of Archmage Milos. Yet to say that Zoran's training was complete would be an utter falsehood. No, he'd only learned a few spells to date. "Another five years, Zoran, and you will be skilled as a Mage," Milos had drilled this into his head only three days ago.

Around one in the morning, Zoran left the inn, heading home. The rain had stopped now, but the cold night now ushered in a thin layer of ice over the cobblestones, making walking treacherous. He slipped his way along to the entrance gates of Dorumova Castle, flashed his Duke ring to the guard, entered and walked the halls and stairs that led to his private room on the third floor west wing. Magically enchanted torches illuminated his way. As he pushed his door open, he felt the presence of another. His nose caught the scent of lilacs, Rayna quietly tiptoed up to him.

Dressed in her white cotton nightgown, Rayna had long brown hair and blue eyes. She put her finger to her lips and caught his attention. Zoran motioned her inside and she silently slipped past him. "You've been to the inn, it's on your breath, Zoran," she whispered, once they were inside and the door shut.

"You would too if someone just tried to kill you tonight," he grumbled.

“Oh no! Not again! Are you hurt? Ought we tell dad?” her voice changing from one of antagonism to that of deep sisterly concern. Both she and Lida loved their little brother, but mostly despised the rest of their family. Zoran repeated the short story of this latest assassination attempt.

“Oh Zoran! What are we going to do?” Rayna whispered, her voice showing a deep worry for her brother’s safety.

“You aren’t going to do anything, sis. I’ve made up my mind, I’m going away for a while. Just disappear completely,” he said determinedly. It was not the ale talking, she observed.

“But your magic training isn’t done? Where will you go? What will you do? Oh Zoran! I don’t think this is such a good idea,” she pleaded. Noticing it didn’t get the response she’d desired, tried another approach. “You know as well as I that you absolutely must finish your magic training. Lida and I still have a couple years to go before we are finished. We must have all the power we can possibly acquire, you even more so.”

“What good will magic do me if I’m dead?” he countered. She resorted to tears since this didn’t work. Zoran finally melted, taking his sister in his arms. “Please don’t cry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I know I have to learn all the magic I can. At least you and Lida have a good chance of marrying off planet and getting out from under Kazimir’s thumb. Look, no matter where I go, you can contact me. Use your Mind Join spell, sis. Keep me informed of the happenings here around the court. Just tell them I ran away because I was afraid the assassin would kill me. After tonight’s narrow escape, they ought to believe me.” Zoran cleverly gave her a job to do and she stopped crying.

“When are you leaving?” she finally asked, as he wiped away her tears with his handkerchief.

“Got to pack first, then I’ll go — an hour or so,” he replied.

“You’ve got to have food. I’ll sneak down to the pantry and pack you something,” she volunteered. She cast a spell to make sure that the hallway outside this room was empty, then left. Hastily, Zoran began packing, knowing that if he sat around thinking about it, he might lose his nerve. He had no idea where he was going or really what he would need. He changed into his traveling leather pants and shirt, stuffing a dagger down each boot leg. He strapped a pair of throwing daggers onto his back and laid out his pair of short swords. Zoran had defied his father’s wishes and had taken up using two short swords instead of the traditional bastard sword, for which his father was famous. Radek had followed in his father’s footsteps. Just to defy them both, he’d taken up the two short swords — a thief’s or brigand’s choice.

He packed a change of clothes, burying several gems in his spare socks. He put a sack of gold coins in the pack as well and tied a simple money pouch around his waist. Zoran made a

bedroll from several warm blankets, stowing his few other possessions in his backpack as well. He didn't need a lantern or any fire starters, the few spells that he knew would handle any such physical needs. He took off his Duke ring, fastened it around a thong, and put it around his neck and beneath his shirt. No sense being recognized everywhere he went. Indeed, one glance at his finger would tell all that he was a Duke and a Duska.

Presently Rayna returned with a pile of bread and dried meats bundled in a dish towel. "I got this for you. Not much, but it should last you a couple of days. Do be careful, Zoran. I love you and . . ."

Zoran cut her off, "I know sis, we three are alone against our parent's tyranny, but I'll be careful. At least out there, no one will be trying to kill me. Has to be safer than staying around here. You keep me posted on events, okay. Be brave. Tell Lida I love her too." He gave Rayna a long hug. "You better get back to bed before you get discovered." She gave him another hug, fighting back her tears, and then quietly left.

"I'll miss you and Lida," he whispered after she was gone and he stood alone in his darkened room. Indeed, he knew that he would. Those two had helped him keep his sanity all these years. Now he had to make the decision on just where to go. Back at the inn, he'd suggested to his friends that he might go visit his Uncle Milan on the forest planet of Gladno. He'd always gotten along well with Uncle Milan, whom he respected. However, as he stood there in his room, he realized that as soon as Kazimir discovered he'd taken off, he'd certainly contact all of his relatives, searching for his son. No, he'd have to go somewhere where he would not be known nor recognized.

Ah, that was the key word, recognized. He couldn't go to any of the court cities; by now, everyone knew the youngest son of Baron Kazimir Vladislov. His freedom would be brief indeed. No, he would have to go to the Wild Lands somewhere. Wild Lands was their term for lands not yet under the control and rule of a Barron or Baroness. Yet, somehow he had to learn more magic, that was his uppermost worry. He just could not forsake further training.

Suddenly, an idea formed, as if by some magic, Zoran remembered that there was an independent Archmage Oldrich who controlled a section of the Wild Lands here on Adapazan! Brn, yes, that was the town, located in the mountains far, far from Dorum, at least a thousand miles. That ought to be enough distance to keep his father from finding him, he thought. However, Zoran knew that he would have to be cagier than to merely Shadow Walk to Brn!

No, any Duska worth their salt could easily track his Shadow Walk and they'd be on him in a day! There was only one way he could Shadow Walk without anyone being able to follow his magical energy trail, but that was terribly dangerous to his own life. He would have to trace the Circle of Ascension, much as he had done during his ceremonial rites that had activated his gland and make him a Duska. When walking the Circle of Ascension, shadow energy lines intertwined and mingled, leaving no trace of ones exit point. However, walking the Circle of

Ascension without a priest present to guide him may well leave him insane or dead, lost in the Shadows of the ether. Yet, it was a risk he would have to take. He took a deep breath and opened his mind, picturing the colorful Circle of Ascension located in the basement of Castle Dorumova. He stepped onto the Circle. His body flew through space and arrived there in the basement, dimly illuminated by a Continuous Light spell. Memories of his own Ascension six years ago swam through his mind. He forced them out, concentrated and began his Shadow Walk.

Space seemed to blur into a dizzying whirl of places, castles, mountains, lakes, hills, plains, swamps, towns and villages all mingled into one giant mass on top of each other as he gradually traversed the Circle of Ascension. To the uninitiated, nausea would certainly follow intense dizziness and then madness. After making several rounds, he concentrated on Brn and stepped out onto that place. Snow capped mountains rose around him on all sides. Before him was the orange granite outer walls of the city of Brn. Being the middle of the night, Zoran knew that he could not gain entrance.

Some distance from the gates, a dense patch of forest grew. It beckoned to him and he quietly walked among the tall pine trees. He found the forest floor thick with an accumulation of years of pine needles. Here he made camp. Actually, he wrapped himself in his blankets and dozed, leaning against a tree. His magical instincts would wake him if trouble found him. In the morning he would enter the city and seek his fortune.