

# DUNGEONS OF DARKNESS

## KARAZAN

The Second

V. M. JONES



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PUFFIN

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## PROLOGUE

**T**he little cream cat crouched in the warm sunshine, her golden eyes fixed unblinkingly on the bare stone floor in front of her. She was absolutely still except for the very tip of her tail, which gave an occasional twitch.

Suddenly, as if in response to some signal only she could hear, she sat up, blinked, yawned and stretched luxuriously. She looked round the circular chamber, almost as if she was looking for something, or someone; but it was empty and utterly silent.

She trotted purposefully over to a doorway in the curved wall. It gave on to a steep stairway, leading upwards. She hopped nimbly up the steps until she reached the top. It was almost dark here, but in the dim light even a human could have made out the blank wall: a wall with no suggestion of a doorway, or an opening of any kind.

To the little cat, it was light as day. Delicately, she put out one velvet paw and patted the wall. She stretched up, in much the same way as she might have reached up a tree trunk to sharpen her claws, and scratched at the stone with both front paws.

Then she sat down, very tidily, with her tail curled neatly round her, and looked up at the wall, unblinkingly, her eyes very wide and dark . . . almost as if she was waiting for something, or someone.

At last, her mouth opened in a little *mew*. It wasn't a loud miaow; it had never needed to be. It was followed by another; then another, more insistent.

Without warning, an explosion of sound crashed through the stone like a battering ram, sending her streaking back down the steps, every hair of her body on end, her tail like a bottlebrush. In the room below, she pressed herself into the deepest shadow, heart hammering like a tiny drum, every sense raw.

Gradually, the echoes died away.

But something about the little cat was different. It was as if the barrage of sound had stripped away her tameness . . . as if some deep instinct had warned her that somehow – between the silence that went before and the echoing emptiness that came after – everything had changed.

Slowly the sleek fur between her shoulder blades began to rise. She sensed it long before any human could have, ears straining to catch the tiniest whisper of sound, whiskers sensitive as radar, tuned to detect the faintest tremble of air. She could hear them clearly now. Voices below . . . and footsteps. Coming closer.

More clearly than the voices – more distinctly than the footsteps – the little cat could sense something else. A greyness; a shadow; an eclipse of light, like darkness falling over the face of the sun. The

wild instincts of her ancestors knew it instantly, in a chilling second of recognition.

*Evil.* It swelled up from below like a tide. Adrenaline surged through her blood. Her pupils dilated. In absolute silence, she crept away from it, her terror of the gong forgotten. Softly as a shadow she drifted back to the doorway and melted up the stairs.

She reached the top. The dead end. Her heightened senses told her instantly there was nothing for her beyond the wall – not now. She turned her back to it and waited in the darkness, eyes gleaming: a wildcat at bay.

They were coming.

Night blanketed the city like soft velvet, unbroken by the sound of cars or the barking of dogs, by electric lights or the cosy murmur of television sets behind curtained windows. The only light came from the stars.

It was that time of night when sleep is deepest and daybreak seems most distant. The little loft above the stable was warm and snug. The uneven pane of glass over the single small window was thick enough to keep out the chill of pre-dawn; the heavy wooden door held in the warmth that rose through the floor from the slumbering beasts below.

On the low pallet in the corner of the room the boy muttered in his sleep and rolled onto his back. His rough brown hair was damp and tousled from a night of disturbed, fragmented dreams, a cow's-lick standing up at a comical angle. Something glinted in



his curled fist – something smooth and metallic-looking, gleaming red as blood in the darkness.

A light sheen of sweat filmed his skin. His eyelids flickered. He tossed and moaned, then muttered again, a single word: *friends*, perhaps, or *fiends*. But there was no one to hear him. Not yet.

Below, the animals were restless. Their horny hooves scraped on the stone floor; their ears twitched. One by one, they woke. Their eyes rolled, the whites luminous in the darkness. The foals pressed closer to their mothers.

Outside, a shadow separated itself from the deeper shadow of the stable wall and drifted to the foot of the rough stairway leading to the attic door. It was joined by another, and another. No words passed between them. The only sound was the faintest sniffing of an indrawn breath, questing, seeking . . . catching with a rattling snuffle on something loose or rotten deep within the dark hood.

The leader reached the attic door – a sturdy door studded with rusty rivets. On the inside, where the boy lay sleeping, a stout bar rested on heavy brackets. The door was latched . . . from the inside.

What had once been two hands emerged from the folds of the cloak and groped their way across the pitted surface of the door. At last they felt what they were seeking, and were still. Long moments passed.

On the other side, in the darkness, the heavy latch twitched. Slowly, it lifted and the door swung open. There was the faintest hiss as the hands pulled away, leaving fragments of rotten skin on the rough wood.

The three dark shapes loomed over the bed, their shadows falling on the sleeping boy. His next breath breathed them in: the sweet, cloying odour of the open grave. His blood turned to ice and his heart froze, lurching in his chest like a stone. His eyes flew open. He flung up his bare arms in an instinctive attempt to shield himself; his mouth opened like a dark wound in one single, hopeless cry. Then the boy's eyes rolled back in their sockets, his head lolling uselessly against the bolster. His face was grey as death.

The three shadows melted together over the bed; groped; snuffled. The faintest gurgle; then they floated back to the open doorway and were gone.

The bed was empty.

Somewhere far away, a rooster crowed.

Somewhere far away, a rooster crowed.

The four poster bed floated like an island on a sea of golden light, drifting towards morning on a tide of dreams. The little girl stirred and smiled in her sleep. One arm, thin and fragile under her pyjama sleeve, reached blindly for something . . . but all it found was the emptiness of the cotton sheets.

The man in the armchair beside the bed bent down and picked up a battered, one-eyed teddy from the floor. Gently, taking care not to wake her, he placed the teddy within easy reach. He considered, then repositioned it closer still, to rest against her hand.

The faintest dimple dented the pale cheek. The hand groped; the arm curled round the teddy and pulled it close. The cheek snuggled against it, the hand

stroking the nubbly, threadbare fur. The stroking stopped abruptly. The man watched intently, as he had watched all night, pain and love etched on his face.

The little girl's eyes opened and flew straight to the teddy. A curiously adult expression settled over her face. Her voice, when she spoke, was the thread of a whisper. 'Oh, Teddy - it's you.'

Her eyes moved to the man. She reached out a hand.

'Hello there, Chatterbot.'

'Open the curtains, Q. I want to see the morning.'

Obediently, he crossed to the bay window and drew the curtains wide. Rose-coloured light flooded the room. The sky was streaked with indigo and copper, magenta and gold, and the child's face was lit with a rosy glow. Her eyes feasted on the lustrous sky, and for a moment her thin face reflected its radiance. She sighed, and scrunched down again into the pillows. The teddy lay on the rumpled sheet beside her, forlorn and forgotten.

The man crossed to the bed and took her hand. 'How does breakfast sound, sweetheart? Nanny could make you a boiled egg, perhaps . . . with soldiers. Would you like that?'

Her eyes, shadowed and sunken from gazing so closely into the face of death, looked beyond his words into his heart. The words that neither could speak hung between them like a sword. Her lip trembled. 'Q . . .'

Instantly, he was beside her on the bed, cradling her

frail body in his arms. 'Sweetheart – don't think about it now – you need to rest, to gather your strength . . .'

Her eyes burnt into him, anguished, remorseless. 'Q – *I need to know.*'

He looked down. Then, with a colossal effort of will, he told her. 'She didn't come home, Chatterbot. She's still there – in Karazan.'

'Is she . . . dead?'

'No, not dead. She stayed with them, almost to the very end. She was brave – she was a hero. Adam will tell you later, if you feel strong enough. But then, at the very end, they were . . . separated. There was no way Adam could get to her. The children came home – they had to. There was no other way.'

He bent his head close to hear her. 'Where . . . where was she?'

'They were in the Temple – the Temple of Arakesh.'

'Are there priests there, like in the game?'

'Yes, there are priests.'

'Do you think one of them will find her? And take care of her?'

'Perhaps, Chatterbot. Yes, I'm sure they will.' He couldn't meet her eyes. 'Don't worry about her. I'm sure she'll be safe. And maybe . . . maybe one day soon, when you're better . . . we'll go and choose you a little kitten – not to take her place – no one could ever do that, I know – but to . . . well, to fill the space. Maybe. What do you think?'

She tilted her head and looked her father full in the face. Though she was only five, she read all that was

written there with an accuracy that sent a bolt like an arrow into her heart. Her face didn't change, but tears filled her eyes, brimmed over, and rolled slowly in twin tracks down her thin cheeks.

Her lips moved, but no sound came out. 'Maybe.'



## THE NEW BOY

I took one look and knew he was trouble.

I could tell from the way he hopped down from the unmarked welfare van and smirked at us all – standing on the red concrete porch in a silent, watchful huddle – as if he owned the place.

His mouth stretched into a thin slit of a smile, his lips disappearing like a toad's as his eyes darted from one face to the next, clever and calculating. They were a strangely dark, opaque brown, like mud.

He twitched the welfare lady's hand – a hand you could tell was meant to be kind – off his arm as if she had some kind of infectious disease. Shouldered his grubby bag and walked over to the bottom of the steps. Stood there waiting as if he had all the time in the world – like already he knew he'd be calling all the shots.

He looked about my age, I guess, but shorter than me and runtier, with a pale, ratty-looking face. Looking at that face, you knew right off that here was a person who'd been kicked in the teeth once too often . . . and who'd decided the only way to handle

that was to kick back – harder, sneakier, and preferably below the belt.

I recognised that look because I'd seen it before, once or twice, when I looked in the mirror. Not that I was proud of that now.

Matron, brisk and businesslike as ever, signed the papers, handed them back to the welfare lady with a terse nod, and joined the new boy at the foot of the steps. Behind me, I heard Cookie make a little *tut-tut*-ing sound. She'd seen enough trouble walk through the door of Highgate to recognise it up front, no problem.

'Children, I'd like you to join me in welcoming Willie Weaver to our little family,' said Matron.

An uncertain chorus of *Good morning, Willie*, along with a couple of ragged *Welcome, Willies*, went up from some of the little ones. There was a snicker and a mocking *Willie Weaver!* from Geoffrey – too soft for Matron to hear, of course.

The boy looked up at us. It didn't seem like the welcome had made much of an impression. 'Weevil,' he said flatly. Just that. *Weevil*.

He walked up the steps, past us all without so much as another glance, and disappeared into the shadows of the hallway as if he'd lived at Highgate – or somewhere exactly like it – all his life.

My heart sank. Cookie wasn't the only one who could recognise trouble when she saw it – and it was the last thing I wanted.

Things had changed for me in the two months since

I came back from Quested Court – since I came back from Karazan. Not so much changed *for* me, as changed *in* me. Highgate was still the same – always would be, I reckoned. Matron was the same – nothing would ever change *her*, worse luck.

But me . . . I was different. Before, I'd thought of myself as this dumb, hopeless waste of space – bad at school work, stupid at spelling, always in trouble, angry with everyone. Especially myself. I'd felt trapped – not just by where I was, but *who* I was. And there'd been no way out that I could see.

Then along came the little reply-paid card that changed everything. More than just an entry form to a competition: a passport to a truckload of things I'd never dreamed existed for someone like me.

My first real friend: Cameron Harrow.

Luck – that went *my* way, for the first time in my life.

Quentin Quested – Q – and his feisty little daughter Hannah . . . people who actually liked me, and believed in me. And, in Hannah's case, *needed* me, more than I'd ever been needed before.

More friends. Rich, Jamie, Kenta, Gen.

An adventure so bizarre – so impossible – that I struggled to believe it had actually happened.

Tiger Lily. But I couldn't bear to think about that.

I'd come back from Quested Court feeling like a conquering hero. Suddenly, here was Adam Equinox – same guy who'd never brought back anything more exciting than a dud report or a detention slip – breezing in decked out in designer clothes, with



Quentin Quested's personal bodyguard staggering along behind him under a mountain of boxes full of state-of-the-art computer equipment that would be my escape route from Highgate – in my imagination, at any rate – any time I wanted.

Here was Matron, sweet as sugar, offering Shaw a cup of tea and a squashed-fly biscuit, and asking me whether I'd *had a good time, dear!*

Then the door slammed behind Shaw, and reality slugged me in the gut. The computer was hedged around with more rules and regulations than Fort Knox. The *Collector's Set of Quest Fantasy Adventure Software* was advertised in the *Buy and Sell*, and disappeared without a trace. A new DVD player appeared in Matron's private sitting room (though of course we weren't supposed to know about that), along with a super-flash flat-screen TV with digital stereo sound.

One afternoon when we arrived back from school there was a brand new shiny red car parked in the garage, and the rusted-up old Highgate mini-van had shifted to a bare patch of garden off to the side.

As for Q's 'strategic donation' to Highgate . . . well, that was simply never mentioned again.

A new look appeared on Matron's face when she looked at me, and a new note in her voice when she spoke to me. It was as if she'd thought she had me all figured out and pretty much pegged down . . . and now she wasn't so sure. I needed to be watched.

It came from the knowledge that once – just once – I'd gotten the better of her. That was one thing I knew