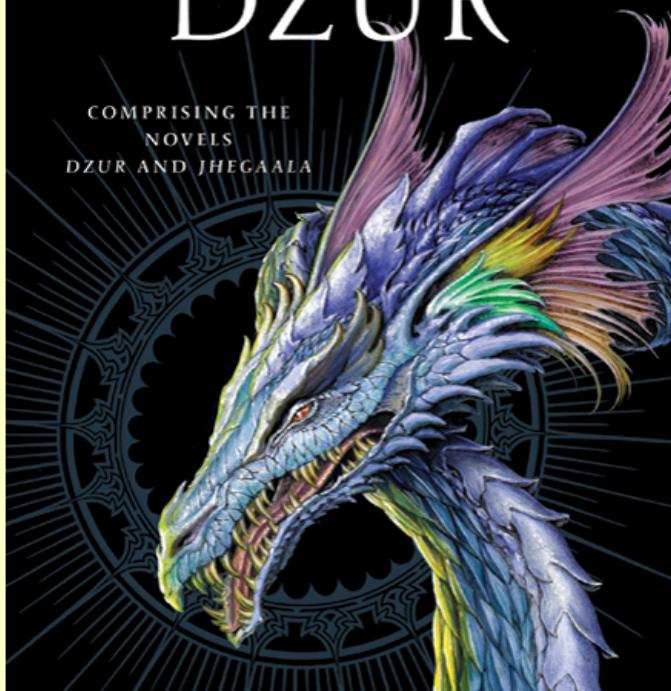


READ IT FIRST

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STEVEN BRUST
THE BOOK OF
DZUR

COMPRISING THE
NOVELS
DZUR AND JHEGAALA



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Dry Red Wine

When Mario was gone I was able to concentrate on the wine. I will deny being any sort of wine expert, but I liked it. It was dry, of course, because sweet wines are for dessert, but it had all these hints underneath that made me think of grassy hills with orchards and wind blowing through them and poetical stuff like that. Knowing what was coming later in the meal, the wine was setting me up, trying to tell me my mouth was safe, and that I shouldn't worry. Nasty, evil wine. I don't know what Telnan thought about it; he didn't say anything at that point, and I wasn't interested in conversation.

I had told Mario that he could find me at Dzur Mountain; now I considered that. Did I have any other options? My grandfather was no longer in the city, and I wouldn't have wanted to stay there anyway, with the whole Jhereg after me. I'd been right about Castle Black. And the idea of clapping at Cawti's door and saying, "Mind if I sleep on the couch for a few weeks?" made my skin crawl. No, Dzur Mountain was my only option.

Dzur Mountain.

Home of Sethra Lavode, the Enchantress, the Dark Lady. I don't know, we'd always gotten along pretty well; she likely wouldn't mind. And Telnan hadn't responded when I'd suggested it. It would at least give me a safe place to stay while I figured out what to do.

I'd do what I always did: figure out what was going on, come up with a plan, and carry it out. No problem.

Nasty, evil wine.

Some hours later, I got up from the table feeling pleased. More than that, satiated, the way only an exceptional dinner, where all the pieces come together, and each piece by itself is a work of art, can make you feel. As I remarked to Loiosh, if they got to me now, at least I'd managed to get in one good last meal. A very good last meal. Loiosh suggested that that was just as well, as I was too slow at the moment to save myself from an infant who attacked me with a perambulator. Uphill. I suggested he shut up.

Besides, Telnan was there to protect me, if he wasn't in the same state.

I sent Loiosh and Rocza out the door ahead of me, to make sure no perambulators were waiting. None were, so, after giving and receiving warm good-byes from several of the staff and after I paid the shot, including Telnan's, we stepped outside.

Nope, no one tried to kill me.

I looked around. It was late afternoon, and the world was quiet and peaceful. Telnan said, "You're going to Dzur Mountain?"

I nodded.

"Shall I—?"

"Please."

I removed the chain from around my neck (long story), slid it into a small box I carry just for that purpose, and nodded to the Dzur. He nodded back, and then there was a slight tingle at the base of my spine, accompanied by the odd sensation you always get when, in the space of a blink, the world looks different around you. I stumbled a bit as the chill hit my skin and the scent of evergreens filled my nose. Dzur Mountain was all about me. A few years earlier, I wouldn't have been able to have that spell performed on me without undoing everything that I'd just accomplished in Valabar's. But now—nothing but a bit of a stumble and a twitch. I replaced the chain around my neck, and when the stone lay against my skin pulsing in time to my heartbeat, I relaxed a bit. Safe.

Relatively safe.

Comparatively safe.

Safer.

"No one's around, Boss."

"Okay. Thanks, Loiosh. I guess Telnan didn't accompany us."

"I guess not. Uh, I know we're safe, Boss, but let's get inside anyway."

There was a slight coating of snow on the ground, so I left footprints leading up to the door. My friend Morrolan had doors that opened as you approached them. It was very impressive. I've never figured out about Sethra's doors: sometimes they opened, sometimes you had to clap, sometimes you had to search just to find them. On one occasion, I'd waited outside like an idiot for an hour and a half. I had intended to make some comment to Sethra on the subject, but somehow I never got around to it.

This time, the door didn't open, but neither was it locked. I walked in. I had been there just often enough to make me think I could find my way in without getting lost, but not often enough to actually do so. Loiosh, fortunately, had a better head for such things, and after a few twists and turns and smart-ass remarks from my guide of the moment, we were in one of Sethra's sitting rooms; the one where I'd first met her, in fact. It was a dark-painted, narrow room, remarkably bare, with comfortable chairs set at odd angles, as if Sethra preferred her guests not to look directly at each other. As I was coming

in, I heard what sounded like bare feet running away, and I almost thought I heard a giggle, but I didn't give it too much of a thought. This was Dzur Mountain, where anything might happen and you could hurt your brain trying to figure out the little mysteries, let alone the big ones. I picked a chair and settled into it with a sigh.

Sethra's servant, whose name was Tukko, showed up, glanced at me with an expression that fell somewhere between disdain and disinterest, and said, "Would you like something, Lord Taltos?"

"No," I said. In the first place, I had the feeling that I would neither eat nor move again as long as I lived. And in the second, I wanted nothing to interfere with what was still lingering on my tongue. "But can you tell me if Sethra is about?"

He grunted. "She'll be along presently."

Tukko shuffled off, fingers twitching, without giving any sign that he cared either way. He was slightly bent as he walked, and there was a twitch in his right shoulder as well as his fingers. Every once in a while I wondered if it was all an act; if the old bastard was actually in perfect health. I'd never seen any indications of it, but I wondered from time to time. I closed my eyes and spent a while in happy reverie, recalling all of what Valabar's had just done for me.

I heard Sethra's footsteps, but didn't open my eyes. I knew what she looked like well enough that the only question would be the expression on her face, and if I guessed somewhere between sardonic amusement and mild surprise I'd probably have that down, too.

"Hello, Vlad, I hadn't expected to see you back so soon."

"I hope it isn't a problem," I said.

"Not in the least. How was Valabar's?"

"You can't improve upon perfection."

"And you made good decisions?"

"Easy decisions, all of them."

"I take it you decided to honor me with your presence while you recuperated?"

"Not exactly." I hesitated, not sure quite what I wanted to say. I opened my eyes. Sethra was in front of me, looking like Sethra. I was right about the expression, too. "You sent me protection."

"Yes. I hope you aren't offended."

"You know me better than that."

She nodded. "I trust he was a good dinner companion."

"An interesting one, certainly."

"Oh?"

"Dzurlords are more complex than I'd thought they were."

"Vlad, everyone—"

"Yeah, I know. But still."

“What did you talk about?”

“Many things. The food, for one. But also . . . Sethra, you know Dzurlords.”

“I would say so, yes.”

“What I didn’t get is, I don’t know, how much work goes into it all.”

“Yes. Don’t feel bad, though. That confuses almost everyone who isn’t a Dzur. They think the Dzurlord only wishes for the excitement, or for the chance of a glorious death against impossible odds. As you say, it’s more complex.”

“Can you unravel the complexities?”

“Why the interest?”

“I don’t know. Your friend, or rather, student, Telnan—he interested me.”

She pulled one of her inscrutable Sethra smiles out of her pocket and put it on.

“So,” I said, “if it isn’t the excitement, or a chance for a glorious death, what is it?”

“Depends on the person. Some enjoy the righteous feeling of being in a small minority.”

“Yeah. Those are the ones I want to smack.”

“And some just want to do the right thing.”

“Lots of people want to do the right thing, Sethra. I try not to let them bother me too much.”

“Dzurlords won’t bother with the right thing unless everyone else is against it.”

“Hmmm. I’m surprised I didn’t see one or two defending the Easterners during the excitement a few years ago.”

“In fact, it wouldn’t have been impossible. What’s so funny?”

“The idea of the Dzur hero defending the Teckla. The Empire would have hated it, the Guards would have hated it, the House of the Dzur would have hated it, and the Teckla would have hated it.”

“Yes,” said Sethra. “That’s why it could have happened.”

I mulled that over, then, “So,” I said, “how is everyone else handling the aftermath of the excitement?”

“Who in particular?”

“Morrolan.”

“Living, breathing, and returned to Castle Black.”

“How did he take the news?”

“About Lady Teldra? Not well, Vlad.”

I nodded and touched my fingers to the hilt again. And again I felt something—a presence that was at once comforting and distant.

“And Aliera?”

“She left with Morrolan.”

I cleared my throat. “And the Empress?”

Sethra frowned. “What of her?”

“I was just wondering if she wanted to give me an Imperial dukedom for my heroic—”

“None of this is what you returned here for, Vlad.”

“Yeah.” Eventually I managed, “Something has come up.”

“Oh? Tell me.”

“I’m not certain I can.”

She nodded. “The Northwestern tongue—that is, what we are at present speaking—is a head-last uninflected language, not perfectly capable of expressing all the nuances of emotion and familial connection that, for example, Seriolaa is; yet it can express fine distinctions in its own right, and, with time, a skilled speaker can usually convey the sense of his intention.”

It took me a moment to realize that she was turning my bait; I suppose the meal had slowed my thinking some. Eventually, I said, “It’s a Jhereg matter, and a personal matter.”

Living as long as she had, she had somewhere learned the value of silence. I thought I had, too, but she was better at it than I was.

At last I said, “Cawti. South Adrilankha.”

“Ah,” she said. “Yes. I think, with what my sources in the Jhereg tell me, I can start to put it together.”

I didn’t make any remarks about what her “sources in the Jhereg” might be. She said, “How did you hear of it?”

“Mario,” I said.

She gave me an eyebrow. “I see.”

Of course, she must have made the same connection I did: Mario to Alieria to Norathar to Cawti; but she saw no reason to mention it. “What are you going to do?”

“I’d ask for your advice, except I don’t think you’d give me any, and I’m probably too stubborn to take it even if you did.”

“Correct on both counts. Have you been in touch with any of your people?”

“Sethra, you *are* my people now. You, and Morrolan, and Alieria. And Kiera, of course.”

Sethra Lavode looked vaguely uncomfortable for a moment. This doesn’t happen every day. “You must have some contacts in the Jhereg who are still willing to talk to you.”

“The ones I could trust are the ones I wouldn’t do that to.”

“Do what to?”

“Put in an awkward position by asking them to help me.”

“Even with information?”

I grunted. “I’ll think about it. Where did you find the Dzur?”

“Telnan? Iceflame found him.”

“Oh.”

“Or, rather, Iceflame found his weapon.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to tell you.”

“What if I torture it out of you?”

“That isn’t as funny as you think it is.”

“But you are resurrecting the Lavodes, it seems?”

“Slowly, yes. Why? Think they might be useful for your problem?”

I gave her a short laugh. Loiosh was strangely silent; I guess he knew what was going on better than I did. So did Sethra. Chances are, so did the owner of the pawnshop on Taarna Road.

“So, how are you, Sethra?”

She said, “Vlad, I’ve been alive for a long, long time, however you choose to measure time.”

“Well, yes.”

“I have learned patience.”

“I imagine so.”

“I can sit here as long as necessary, but don’t you want to get around to asking about whatever it is that’s on your mind?”

I sighed and nodded.

“Tell me about Cawti,” I said.

“Ahhh,” she said.

“You didn’t know what I was going to ask about?”

“I should have.”

I nodded.

“Well, what do you want to know, exactly?”

“Start with, how is her health?”

She frowned. “I don’t see her often. Fine, so far as I know.”

“Who does see her?”

“Norathar.”

“That’s all?”

“At least, among those I know.”

I nodded. “And who sees Norathar?”

“Alieria.”

“Okay. And I suppose, if I’m going to see Alieria, there’s no way to avoid Morrolan?”

“You wish to avoid Morrolan?”

I touched the hilt of Lady Teldra by way of explanation. As I did so, I felt something, like a pleasant breeze with a hint of the ocean blowing across the face of my soul. And, yes, I know how stupid that sounds. Well, *you* try getting that feeling and see if you can do a better job of describing it.

“If you’d like, I will ask the Lady Alieria if she is available to visit me.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

She nodded, and her face went blank for about a minute.

“Well?” I said when she looked at me once more.

She nodded.

About two minutes later Alera came floating into the room. Well, walking or floating or some combination; her gown, a silvery one with black lacing about the neck and shoulders, dragged along the ground, so I couldn't tell if her means of locomotion were a graceful walk or a jerky levitation. On her lips was a smile. At her side was Pathfinder. In her arms was a fluffy white cat.

She kissed Sethra on the cheek, then turned to me. “Hello, Vlad. How good to see you. How long has it been? Four, five hours?”

“Thanks for stopping by, Alera. Did she tell you what I wanted to ask you about?”

“No,” they both said at once.

I nodded. “I need to find my . . . I need to find Cawti.”

“Why?” said Alera. She was still smiling, but a bit of frost had crept into her voice.

“Jhereg trouble,” I said. “You don't want to know about it. You know, Dragon honor and all that.”

She ignored the barb and said, “Cawti is no longer involved with the Jhereg.”

“Actually, she is. That's the trouble. Or maybe she needs to be involved in them to keep from being involved with them; that might be a better way to put it.”

She frowned. “Vlad—”

“Here it comes, Boss. Her hands would be on her hips if she weren't holding that cat.”

“I know, I know.”

“You vanish for years, then suddenly show up, lose our friend's soul in a weapon, make my mother fear for her existence, threaten the very fabric of creation, and now you want to stir up trouble between the woman you walked out on and the gang of criminals she's managed to extricate herself from? Is that what I'm hearing?”

Well, I suppose some of that was partly true, from a certain perspective. From my perspective, of course, it was so far wrong that you couldn't find right on the same map.

“That's about it, yes,” I said.

“Okay. Just checking,” said Alera. She stroked her cat. Loiosh made some sort of remark in my head that didn't quite form itself into words.

I said, “Does that mean you'll tell me how I can reach Cawti?”

“No.”

I sighed.

“However,” she said. “I'll let her know you wish to speak with her.”

“When?”

“Is it urgent?”

I started to say something witty, tossed it away, and said, "I'm not sure. There are things going on, and, well, they could take forever, or blow up an hour from now. That's part of the problem; I don't know enough."

She nodded. "Very well. I'll be seeing her and Norathar later this evening. I'll mention it then. But how can she reach you when you're wearing that, that thing you wear?"

She was referring, of course, to my Phoenix Stone, hanging from the chain about my neck. "If Sethra doesn't mind, I'll just stay here, and she can let Sethra know."

Sethra nodded.

"Very well," said Alieria. Then she said, "Sethra, there are things we should discuss."

I moaned softly, and they both looked at me.

I said, "If you're implying I should move, I'm not certain I can."

Alieria frowned again; then her face cleared and she said, "Oh, Valabar's. How was it?"

"Beyond all praise."

"I should eat there sometime."

She had never . . . ? I stared at her, but words failed me. Maybe she was lying.

"Come, Alieria," said Sethra. "Let's take a walk."

They did, and I took a nap—one of those naps where you don't actually fall asleep, you just lie there, filled with food, a stupid smile on your face.

Yeah, sometimes I love life.

"Hello Vlad," said Cawti. "I'm sorry to wake you, but I was told you wished to speak with me."

"I wasn't sleeping," I said.

"Of course not."

She looked good. She'd gained a few pounds here and there, but they were pleasing pounds. She was wearing a gray shirt with long, sharp collars, and maroon trousers that tapered down to her pointed black boots. She carried a dagger with a plain leather-wrapped hilt, but no other weapons that I could spot. And I'm good at spotting weapons.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Uh, I hadn't known you needed my permission."

Loiosh and Rocza were both twitching.

"Go ahead."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

He flew over to her hand and rubbed his face on hers. She smiled and said hello to him. After a moment, Rocza flew over and landed on her shoulder. She scratched and cooed at them. It was obvious she'd missed them. I could have felt good and sorry for myself if I'd wanted to.

She said, "I heard about your hand."

I glanced at it. "From?"

"Kiera."

I nodded. "Nice to know you're still in touch with her."

She nodded. "How did it happen, exactly?"

"Kiera?"

"The finger," she said, without cracking a smile.

"I went back East for a visit, and forgot to pack it when I returned."

"Have you actually been back East again?"

I nodded. "I learned to ride a horse, but not to enjoy doing so."

That got a bit of smile. Then she said, "So, what's on your mind?"

"South Adrilankha."

"You've heard about that?"

"Yeah."

"From Alieria, no doubt."

"Indirectly."

"So, let me guess, you're going to come into town and save me like a Dzur rescuing a helpless maiden."

"That isn't exactly what I had in mind." Actually, it had been pretty much spot-on, damn her. "Are you going to claim that everything is fine, and you don't need any help?"

"Just what help can you offer, Vlad? And I don't mean that rhetorically."

She called me "Vlad." She used to call me "Vladimir."

"I know people. Some of them will still be willing to do things for me."

"Like what? Kill you? You know how much of a price the Jhereg has on your head?"

"Uh . . . no. How much?" Odd that it hadn't occurred to me to wonder at the exact amount.

"Well, I'm not sure, actually. A lot though."

"I suppose. But, yeah, there are people I can ask questions of, at least." Before she could answer, I said, "So, how are things with you?"

"Well enough. And you?"

I made a sort of non-committal sound. She nodded, and said, "Have I grown a wart?"

"Hm?"

"You keep looking at me, and then looking away."

"Oh."

Loiash flew back to me. Cawti scratched Rocza behind the head.

"You're in trouble," I said.

She nodded.

"I can help."

"I hate that. What?"

"Nothing. I thought you'd been about to say . . . never mind. The fact is, I *can* help."

"I don't hate you, Vlad."

"Good. Does that mean I should go ahead?"

Tukko came in then, and asked if we wanted anything. We both said, "Klava," and Cawti said, "Extra cream in his, but not much honey. You know how I take mine."

Tukko grunted as if to say either he knew how we both took ours, or that we'd take them as he made them and be happy.

"I hate it that I need your help," she said.

"You said that already. I understand."

I got up and paced, because I think better that way. She said, "What is it, worried, or unhappy?"

"Because I'm pacing?"

"Because your shoulders are hunched forward, and you're slouching. That means worried or miserable."

"Oh." I sat down again. But she could probably tell things about how I sat, too. "Both, I guess. Worried about whether you'll let me help you, unhappy that you don't want me to."

"I don't suppose I could convince you to charge me for the service?"

I started to laugh, then stopped. "Actually, yes. There is a fee I could suggest."

She gave me the look someone gives you who knows you very well, and she waited.

"A piece of information," I said.

"And that is?"

"Tell me what that look meant."

"What look?"

"When I mentioned South Adrilankha."

She frowned. "I can't imagine what look I could have given you."

"It looked like relief."

"Relief?"

"Yes. Like you were afraid I was going to mention something else."

"Oh," she said.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

Tukko returned with our klava. Once, long ago, I had asked Sethra how old he was, and she'd said, "Younger than me."

He set the klava down and turned away. I said, "Tell me, Tukko, how old is Sethra, exactly?"

"Younger than me," he said, and shuffled out again.

I should have predicted that.

Cawti drank some of her klava.

"Do you wish payment in advance?" she said at last.

"It doesn't matter."

She bit her lip. "What if I say it's too much?"

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