

FORGOTTEN REALMS

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KEY OF  
STARS



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## CHAPTER ONE

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*Eleven Years after the Spellplague  
The Year of the Secret (1396 DR)  
Candlekeep*

The door shuddered in its frame.

The scribe's hand jerked, flicking a blob of ink from his quill. The ink splattered on the parchment stretched across the composition table.

"Mystra's corpse!" the scribe said.

Several heavy bumps thudded down the hallway outside the door, followed by laughter.

"What the hell is going on out there?" the scribe yelled.

He waited a few heartbeats for a response. Nothing but silence.

"Damn apprentices, playing when they should be reshelving," he muttered.

The scribe sighed and returned to his work. The

splatter hadn't ruined the report, but the tiny spills made the page appear untidy and common—not up to his standards. At least it was salvageable. He dipped his quill in the pot once more.

The door shattered in a blast of expanding white vapor.

The scribe, bent-backed and stiff from a lifetime of copying, fell off his stool. Bits of broken door rained down on him. The inkpot shattered, painting jagged black lines on the floor.

Memories of the disaster more than a decade before spidered through him—the Year of Blue Fire. Was it happening again? A jolt of panic lent him strength. He pulled himself up and leaned unsteadily on the writing table.

A woman wearing a dark gown and cape stalked through the empty doorway. Her skin glowed like moonlight, and her eyes like coal. Was she some kind of eladrin?

A bald man followed her into the room. Blood flecked his otherwise impeccably black formalwear. When he smiled at the scribe, canines protruded. He also had something of the fey to him, but he was certainly no eladrin.

Behind them strolled a massive black hound that seemed more shadow than flesh; but its barred teeth were as white as snow.

“Who are . . . What’s going on?” said the scribe. “Where are the apprentices? They should have . . .” He realized the distracting noises probably hadn’t been the librarian trainees roughhousing, as he’d assumed.

“The apprentices?” said the woman. “Hmm, is this one?” She pointed to something outside the door.

The scribe leaned to the left and looked into the hallway.

What was left of a youthful librarian was embedded in the wall, his blood rayed like ejecta from a falling star.

Nausea bent the scribe over the writing table. His last meal came up. A useless voice in his head noted his report was almost certainly ruined.

“They did not accord me the proper respect,” the eladrin said. “Don’t make the same mistake.”

The scribe coughed and wiped his mouth. “No, um . . . my lady,” he forced out.

“I require your aid,” she said.

“Uh, yes!” the scribe replied. “But I doubt I, a simple scribe, can assist you. It is—”

The man laughed. The sound was high-pitched, its piercing note somehow horrifying. “If you aim to avoid ending up like your friends, try again, mortal,” he said.

“Wh . . . What do you want?” the scribe asked.

“We require access to a collection here in your wonderful fortress of lore,” said the woman. “Surely you can aid us with that.”

The scribe wondered why Candlekeep’s defenses hadn’t already converged on the invaders. He wished, not for the first time, that the defensive spellmantle of old hadn’t unraveled. It would have provided instant warning to everyone in the keep, and . . . He suddenly understood the invaders might have slipped into the heart of Candlekeep without the Castellan or the Keeper of Tomes being the wiser. Perhaps only *he* knew Candlekeep hosted uninvited guests. He had to get word out!

Should he send a message immediately? That would risk the invaders’ ire if they noticed his arcane twiddling. It might be better to go along with whatever they wanted for the moment, and survive long enough to try later. Sweat broke on his forehead.

“Have we scared you dumb?” said the man.

“Ah, no!” the scribe said. “I mean, what can I help you with? I only have access to certain specialty collections. Lore of ancient fey groups that died out long ago . . .”

“Perfect,” said the woman. “Show us to the Democene Reading Room.”

The scribe swallowed. “How . . . How did you know about that collection?” he said.

“Stop wasting time, human,” the woman replied. “I wonder, if I remove your hand, will it serve as the reading room key without your body attached?”

Slick dread churned the scribe’s guts. He pushed away from his table, toward the back wall. “This way!” he said.

Shelves heavy with books framed a door of dull iron. The door lacked a handle, but a plate set flush to the wall next to the door would serve.

The scribe placed one trembling hand to the plate and muttered the pass phrase. A spark was born, bit his palm, and died in an instant. He rubbed his hand as a series of knocks, bangs, and whines issued from the wall.

“A clunky sort of magery,” said the bald man.

“Access to the reading room the lady named is coming into alignment,” said the scribe. “Some collections are too dangerous to reside in the general stacks.”

With a final muffled clunk, the iron door scraped aside. A narrow track of descending stairs was revealed.

The scribe motioned the two invaders to enter.

“No, after you, my friend,” said the man. “Prudence and all that.”

The scribe nodded and preceded the invaders into the stairwell.

A similar iron door sealed the landing at the stairwell’s foot. The scribe opened it as he had the first. Beyond lay the Democene Reading Room.

Painted stars glowed on the ceiling, providing just enough light to read by. Crumbling tomes, scrolls, knickknacks, and drawings littered a single leaning shelf. A basalt table and seat nestled in one corner. A few unshelved books lay open upon it from the scribe’s last visit.

The woman breezed into the room. The glowing stars brightened, and a haze of dancing light enshrouded her. It hurt the scribe's eyes to look at the eladrin.

"Something recognizes you, Malyanna," said the man.

"Give the bat a sweet," she replied. "He's so perceptive."

A dangerous expression briefly touched the man's pale features. Then he chuckled and entered the reading room to stand at Malyanna's side.

Malyanna extended a finger and began to trace the titles on the shelf.

"What you've still failed to adequately explain, my lovely," the man said, "is why this side trek is necessary in the first place?"

The woman, apparently called Malyanna, sniffed. "You saw me attempt the ritual again, and fail, Neifion," she said. "The Eldest is caught between waking and sleeping. Your pet warlock skimmed just enough power from the Dreamheart to prevent it from reaching full awareness."

She said something else, but the scribe had stopped paying attention—the man and the woman stood in the room, ignoring him completely! The Democene Reading Room could confine more than dangerous tomes . . .

The scribe's stomach dropped, and his limbs shook, but he placed his hand on the ceramic locking plate. He whispered the pass phrase.

The door clanked. Malyanna and Neifion glanced back, alarm clear in their expressions.

The door slammed shut, sealing them inside.

The scribe grinned in triumph. Time to warn the Keeper of—

He gasped as something sharp and wet grabbed his neck and pulled him into the air.

He'd forgotten about the shadow hound! The scribe shrieked, and the beast dropped him. It unleashed a growl that strained the scribe's ability to maintain bladder control.

He whimpered, and tried to crawl away, but the hound stepped on his leg, pinning him with an unholy weight. Its button-black eyes bored into his.

Why wasn't he already dead? The hound growled, shifted its gaze to the locking plate, then back to the scribe. It was clear the hound wanted him to open the door.

It howled again, its volume twice as loud as before. The beast would rend the scribe limb from limb if he did not comply. Fear filled his belly like rancid wine, and despite the scribe's resolve, fear won.

With another touch, the reading room door swung open.

His eyes found the eladrin's.

"That was stupid," the woman said.

She gestured. Cold air blew his hair straight back before a flurry of white engulfed him. Icy pinpricks multiplied across his skin like hundreds of tiny mouths. He screamed, and the cold found entry.



Tamur the shadow hound licked at the twisted remains of the Candlekeep scribe. The icy death stroke had left a sour taste on the corpse. Tamur was used to the flavor. It was a taste it had learned to relish.

"I was hoping to sup a little on that one," said the Lord of Bats. He glanced at the dead body, and his nose crinkled. "Now you've ruined him."

"Too bad," said Malyanna as she pulled a crumbling codex from the shelf. "Ah, yes," she continued. "This looks promising."

"Is it a way to reinvigorate the Dreamheart, so you can try the ritual yet a third time?" asked Neifion.

"No," she replied.

The bald man waited with arched eyebrows. His frown grew thunderous before the woman finally added, “Despite Xxiphu’s rise, I doubt waking the Eldest is possible while the warlock breathes.”

“Perfect!” Neifion said. “Let us go after Japheth immediately! You can reclaim the energy he stole, while I claim his soul for past debts.” The Lord of Bats smacked his lips.

“In good time,” replied Malyanna. “He is linked to the Dreamheart now; I can find your unwilling prodigal whenever I wish. But my study here takes precedence.”

Neifion watched the hound at its messy repast for several heartbeats. Then he said, “What takes precedence, if not waking the Eldest, as you’ve been so intent on doing since you approached me? The time has come for you to explain yourself.”

Malyanna looked up from her tome. “Do you think so?”

The Lord of Bats narrowed his eyes. “Yes.”

Tamur’s hackles rose.

“Then pay attention,” said Malyanna. “I’ve dropped enough hints. But since you seem too thick to put things together . . .”

The man motioned for her to continue.

“I thought I had to rouse the Eldest so he could take up the Key of Stars,” she continued. “You remember?”

“I believe you said it was something the Sovereignty made,” Neifion replied.

“The Key of Stars was a relic forged when the Abolethic Sovereignty fell into the world. When the Eldest finds and takes up the Key, it can travel to the Temple of the Outer Void. There, with Key in hand, the Eldest can usher in an age of wonder and glory unlike Toril has ever seen.” Her eyes sparkled like the light of a dying star.

“But you can’t rouse the Eldest—,” said Neifion.

“And I may not *need* to,” replied Malyanna. “I’ve had an



insight. I aim to bypass the craggy old aboleth. Let it sleep. I shall find the Key of Stars myself!”

“I see,” said Neifion. “I hope you’re not playing me for a fool. Because I get the impression there is much you’re still not telling me. For instance, what’s all this with temples and outer voids, and ages of wonder? You’ve never mentioned that before.”

“All I have said is true,” the woman said. She closed the book and smiled.

The hound judged its owner and Neifion would not immediately go for each other’s throats, and returned to its snacking. It kept one ear cocked just in case.

The room shuddered. A distant call of horns, high and pure, sounded somewhere overhead. Despite the stone and iron that encased the secluded reading room, the notes clearly penetrated.

“Better hurry,” said the Lord of Bats. “Something gathers against us above. I sense a force more potent than scribes and children in librarian’s garb.”

“I’m done,” Malyanna replied. “This tome has the answers I sought. Already it’s given me something to go on. The Key of Stars is in Faerûn! Or at least it lies in a splintered echo . . . And I know where.”

“Splintered echo?” the Lord of Bats said. He shook his head. “Never mind, because I just had a grand idea, if you’ll indulge me?”

Malyanna waited.

“Since you know where to find your Key,” continued Neifion, “let’s visit the warlock on the way. No, let me finish—If it turns out this crumbling book is out of date, and you can’t actually locate the Key of Stars, your original plan will return to the fore; with the Dreamheart rejuvenated, you’ll be able to rouse the Eldest with no time wasted.”

“You don’t care about the Sovereignty or the Key,” accused Malyanna.

“No. Why would I? You’ve kept too many secrets, my lovely. I suspect you hold close even more, none of which I’m likely to find comforting when they come to light.”

“You should show more reverence for what the Sovereignty offers,” the eladrin said.

“I am your ally; that’ll have to suffice,” Neifion replied. “Let us find Japheth, end his life, and we’ll both be the better for it. I’ll have a favorite new homunculus to play with, and you’ll be able to give the Sovereignty its lord, if necessary.”

Malyanna frowned. “Perhaps my pride has obscured my oaths,” she said. “If I, rather than the Eldest, open the Far Manifold, the benefits I shall reap would be unthinkable, compared to what I could expect as a simple intermediary. But . . . I am pledged to the Sovereignty. Your logic may be correct.”

“Of course it is.”

The eladrin tucked the codex into the crook of one arm. Her other arm shot up. A fingertip brushed Neifion’s forehead.

A smell of flash-cooked meat drew an instinctual growl of yearning from Tamur. The Lord of Bats also growled as claws ripped through the ends of his fingers. His voice dropped an octave as he said, “You dare!?”

“Your argument has convinced me,” said Malyanna. “I have given you the means to track Japheth. The mark will lead you to him. Now we can split our efforts. Better yet, you’ll no longer be underfoot. Your presence annoys me.”

Tamur edged closer, readying himself to spring between the half-transformed Lord of Bats and his mistress.

A greenish symbol writhed on Neifion’s forehead. He raised a clawed hand and rubbed at the mark. It squirmed away from direct contact.

“I’ll forgive this insult, Malyanna,” said Neifion. “Because . . . I can smell Japheth.”