

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

ED GREENWOOD
P R E S E N T S
WATER DEEP

BLACKSTAFF TOWER

STEVEN E. SCHEND



CHAPTER 1

The Watch is for our people's safety, not solely his Lordship's security or whims, and should be used thusly.

Open Lord Piergeiron Paladinson to a Masked Lord,
Lords' Court Transcripts,
21 Uktar, Year of the Helm (1362 DR)

8 NIGHTAL, YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

The tavern was hardly his first choice of venues, but it had grown on him after Faxhal first dragged him here last month. Renaer Neverember liked that the usual hateful, conceited social climbers and all-but-nobles that constantly badgered him for his attentions and his friendship rarely came here. This tavern at the edge of Sea and Castle Wards was well-kept and honest, and its patrons were a wide array of Waterdhavians, not just one group or social stratum. Renaer appreciated that, as he did its dark brew and its night black loaves. Atop all that, another small part of it made Renaer agree to meet his friends here repeatedly. Tucked back in the eastern corner away from the doors was a small sheltered nook with shelves on the back wall. Mostly empty, the shelves held a random assortment of broadsheets at all times, though often a few days out of date. Renaer managed to read a few of the more recent issues of *The Vigilant Citizen* and *The Blue Unicorn* before his first friend arrived.

Lord Torlyn Wands tossed a heavy oilskin-wrapped bundle on the table in front of Renaer. “The weather’s getting that winter sting to it,” he growled as he tugged off his soaked half-cloak. The

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clasp on his cloak snagged his light gray linen shirt, pulling it out of his belt and exposing his slender yet exceedingly hairy chest.

A few patrons whistled at the young noble, while a passing serving maid ran her fingers across his chest, making him blush. When she looked up and locked eyes with him, she blushed even brighter and stammered, “My apologies, Milord Wands,” and rushed away.

Torlyn turned his attention back to Renaer as he tucked his shirt back into his breeches. “Damned shirt! My sister keeps replacing my functional clothes with these ‘things that are in style,’ and they drive me mad!” He slumped into the seat opposite Renaer and put his boots up on another chair. “Look at these soaked boots! All the trouble to dye the calfskin blue, but they didn’t bother to waterproof the blasted things!”

“Ah, the costs of noble fashions and the maintenance of social airs.” Renaer smiled, tipping his flagon toward Lord Wands in mock salute. “You have my sympathies, milord. Bad form, really, to not treat the leather well, I agree. I can suggest a few cobblers who can fix those up for you or make you better ones right away.”

Torlyn laughed, his irritation at fashion forgotten. “Speaking of better leatherworking, I’m amazed you didn’t dive on that parcel the moment it left my hands. I wanted to show you my latest acquisition, since few appreciate a good book more than you.” Lord Wands’s broad grin was not concealed in the least by his long mahogany locks or full beard. He whispered thanks to the still-blushing tavern maid who brought him a large tankard of the tavern’s dark ale, and then Renaer’s attention shifted from his companion to the parcel. Two sharp tugs undid the leather lacings and he opened the oilskin wraps around a large book.

Renaer ran his fingers over the ornate leatherworked cover and the bindings, his eyebrows rising in appreciation. He gingerly opened the volume to its initial page and let out a low whistle.

“*The Compleat Dragonhunter?*” Renaer asked, looking up at Torlyn without letting go of the page or the book.

His companion laughed. “Had it for two days now, along with *Gold Amid Dragonfire*. They were hidden among a lot of dross I picked up when I absorbed the last remnants of the Estelmer and Melshimber collections last month.”

Renaer chuckled. “You and your dragon books, Torlyn. Are you rebuilding your family’s library or gathering a hoard?” Renaer flipped through a few pages, nodded at the good workmanship and calligraphy, and rewrapped the book to protect it.

“Very funny, Ren.” Torlyn smiled, swallowed some ale, and asked, “You’re one to talk, he who snaps up every book on Waterdeep’s past that’s been written. Say, did you find *Folk of Renown* yet?”

“No. Well . . . yes and no,” Renaer replied. “I found a copy on the market up in Longsaddle last month, but I bought something else.”

Torlyn shifted his blue boots off the chair, then stood. From the way Torlyn tugged at the bootcuffs and then shifted how he sat, Renaer could tell Torlyn’s clothes and boots were too new and uncomfortable. He noticed Renaer’s attention, shrugged, and cleared his throat before sitting down again and asking, “Why? For Oghma’s sake, you’ve wanted that book forever, Ren.”

“I know, I know,” he answered, amused to see his audience taking the bait. “Instead, I discovered the final pieces for my Savengriff collection.”

“You found a complete copy of *A Palace Life?*” The young lord slammed his tankard down in disbelief. The dark-stained table shined with the newest sluice of spilled ale, though neither man cared, save to move the wrapped book to a drier, safer spot.

Renaer leaned back. “I bought all three volumes with an identically bound copy of *Piergeiron as I Remember Him* thrown in for good measure!”

“Nice. ’Tis no wonder you’re the new sage of local obscure lore.”

“Sage?” Renaer asked. “I’m a mere dabbler and an inveterate reader, ’tis all.”

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“Still, I’m impressed. The only known library with every mundane work of Aleena Paladinstar and her wizardly husband Savengriff.” Torlyn Wands looked down in dismay, then raised his eyes with a smile. “At least my collection still has the only full set of nonmagical books by the Seven Sisters—or at least it will when you return my copy of *Lifelong with Regrets* to me.”

“Soon, Torlyn, soon. It’s a fascinating read, and I’m grateful for the loan. Laeral’s handwriting and her inscription to your great-great-grandfather add a whole new understanding to her.” Renaer drank and waved a servant over to their table. “Another round, please, Arlanna.” He flipped a taol toward the tavernmaid, and turned back to Torlyn. “When are Faxhal and Vharem due to join us?”

“Patience, Renaer, patience,” Torlyn said. “I hear Vharem spent most of his day chaperoning the youngest Phullbrinter sisters in their shopping for the Gralleth feast.”

“Ah, what that man does for his coins,” Renaer said. “He’ll need stronger drink than this, then.”

The door to the tavern opened, and two of his oldest friends entered. Renaer stood and waved them over to the table. Faxhal smirked a perfect mimicry of Renaer’s own grin back at him. Faxhal resembled Renaer in many ways—broad-shouldered and brawny, clean-shaven, shoulder-length brown hair, square-jawed with chiseled features—but his claim that he was the better-looking of the two urged Renaer to remind him he was shorter and had thus concentrated Renaer’s charisma. Vharem wore an expensively tailored night blue cloak in contrast with his unkempt blond beard and scuffed brown boots.

“The Watch is hunting for you again, Renaer. We had to shake a patrol on our way here.” Vharem rolled his eyes along with Renaer as he related the news. The tall blond man signaled Arlanna to bring two more tankards as he shrugged his dark cloak open and sat down next to Torlyn. The two men traded nods as greetings.

“What have I allegedly done this time to displease his Open

Lordship, my father?" Renaer sighed, rising to let Faxhal get past him to a seat.

The shorter of the two men shook his head, then rushed forward and vaulted over the table, using one hand to catapult himself onto the bench in the corner of the tavern. Renaer grinned and muttered, "Show-off," as he sat down again.

Faxhal said, "Not a thing, so far as we know. It's just a few new shieldlars and their patrols trying to impress their new captain and tonight's valabrar—and unfortunately, tonight's overseer for the Watch in Castle and Sea Wards is Kahlem Ralnarth."

Torlyn choked on his drink and coughed. "How did *that* inbred noble idiot get promoted? What have I missed the past two tendays?"

"Only a marvelous chase across Field and Sea Wards not three nights ago," Vharem said with a snicker. "A dash across the Northbeach is not something I want to repeat before spring."

"Yeah," Faxhal said. "You'd think he'd be grateful we led them right to those smugglers at the Lancecove. Capturing a septet of forgers and smugglers was shine on his sword, to be sure. His promotion from aumarr should have made him more grateful."

Renaer looked up, dropping his sly grin quickly, as he said, "I think he's worried his superiors will regret that promotion if they find out he only caught *them* due to chasing and trying to arrest *us* for assaulting a city official and defiling a holy place."

Torlyn gasped, and Renaer and Faxhal chortled. Vharem draped an arm across Lord Wands's shoulder and whispered, "Kahlem staggered into us after leaving his favorite festhall—er, 'newest shrine to the Red Knight'—and took offense that we happened to be using the midden abutting its wall after a night at Raphen's tavern on Imar Street."

Torlyn's eyes widened, and he said, "Don't tell me . . ."

Vharem nodded. "He pushed Renaer and me to one side, and *this one*"—he jerked his thumb toward Faxhal—"turns and asks,

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‘What beems to see the broblem, occifer?’ as he finished relieving himself on the man’s boots!”

“Kahlem’s not a bad Watchman,” Renaer said, “but his water-headed ideas on how to investigate crimes—”

Faxhal interrupted, “—led the fool to believe we’re smugglers too!” He punched Renaer’s shoulder and laughed. “Now get ready. I’ve got time for one drink before we give them the run-around.” Faxhal grabbed and downed Renaer’s drink in one gulp, and then belched loudly. He pulled two hooded mantles out of his bag and tossed one to Renaer. “Let’s give them the old seeing-double bit, yes? I’ve needed a good run all day.”

Renaer marveled at his friend’s desire to intervene for him and said, “You know, I could actually let them take me in for a change. Clear the air and settle things with Kahlem?”

To their credit, the four men kept straight faces for nearly two full breaths before snickering. Renaer and Faxhal pulled the stylish dark blue hooded mantles over their heads and atop their black cloaks.

Vharem said, “We’ll meet you at the Grinning Lion by the next bell, then?”

Lord Torlyn Wands groaned and asked, “Gods, why does it have to be that place?”

Faxhal asked, “What’s the matter with it? Argupt always has a table for us. Besides”—his voice dropped to a whisper—“the food’s better there than here.”

Torlyn groaned, “It’s become a watering hole of late for the Thongolirs, and I’d as soon avoid their ilk until the solstice balls where I’ve no excuses to avoid them.”

Vharem said, “Sacrifices must be made, milord, in the name of friendship. Besides, you’d have no problem if the Lady Nhaeran would give Lord Terras an answer on his suit.”

“Which, as you’re all aware, is an unequivocal *no*, and you know my sister cannot tell him that until after we clear up the debts that Hurnal set up with the money-grubbing old bastard.” Torlyn

sighed. "My cousin's even opened up our old hunting lodge for rent by hunting parties a tenday at a time. Our family's private hunting lands have become just another asset for him to exploit."

"I'd be happy to help, milord Wands, truly," Renaer said, his face losing its smile as he locked eyes with his friend. Faxhal, for his part, adjusted Renaer's hood so the two of them looked nigh identical.

"Appreciated, but impossible, sirrah." Torlyn shook his head, avoiding Renaer's eyes. He cleared his throat, then chuckled nervously and said, "Be off with ye, nigh-noble rogues. Your sport awaits and the night is young! Vharem and I can't wait to hear about the latest ways you two've found to avoid Watch pursuit."

Renaer and Faxhal looked at each other, sketched salutes at their friends, and bolted for the door. Before they even reached it, Renaer heard Vharem shout, "Ten taols says the Watch comes up empty again tonight! Do I have any takers?"

Renaer looked back once to see Toryln raise his tankard in salute before he was lost behind the quickly massing crowd around their table, all gambling men eagerly betting on successful escape or pursuits.



Renaer and Faxhal found Darselune Street relatively empty. The slate-roofed wood-and-stone buildings across the way had been cleaned by the past night's sleet and ice thawing that day and rinsing soot off the buildings. Ice and frost returned with sunset, and moonlight twinkled on slate and slats alike. The two men passed a carriage tied up in front of the Slaked Sylph, and Faxhal shrugged toward it, his eyebrows rising in question.

Renaer shook his head. "Why actually do something illegal to add merit to their pursuit of me in Lords' Court?"

They jogged across Gulzindar Street, their boots scraping the frost-rimed cobbles on the road. They saw a Watch patrol heading west toward the Field of Triumph, their backs to them.

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Faxhal belched loudly, and then bellowed, “Have you no manners, Renaer?” The man grinned and then sprinted south toward the Spires of the Morning, leaving Renaer a few steps behind.

The watchmen spun on their heels and the armar shouted, “There he is! Renaer Neverember, hold! We have a—! After them!”

The broader avenues like Julthoon Street, Calamastyr Lane, and Swords Street glowed brightly in the moonlight due to the diligence of the Dungsweepers’ Guild and a lighter shade of cobblestones used on the major roadways all across Waterdeep. As the two men dashed across a carriage’s path, they heard their pursuers curses at their path being blocked by that same vehicle soon after.

Renaer kept quiet as the opulent and well-tended buildings of Sea Ward receded. Faxhal was already past the temple to Amaunator, its pink marble courtyard walls glistening with frost and icicles. Looming ahead were the more utilitarian domiciles and row buildings of Castle Ward, though there were exceptions to the common buildings, like the gargoyle-infested Charistor looming three stories tall over the intersection with Swords Street, or the squat white stone of Jhurlan’s Jewels with its quaint Old Cormyrean wall merlons atop its roof at Tchozal’s Race.

“We’d better split up,” Renaer said to Faxhal.

“Last one to Argupt’s buys for the night,” Faxhal replied, whispering so as not to lead their pursuers to their final destination. “I’ll head east up the Walk—you lead some south!”

Both men turned south down Swords Street at full speed, laughing as their pursuers howled their plans aloud. “Head over to the Street of Silks and head them off at Keltarn!”

The two friends pointed ahead and firmed up their plan. Faxhal shouldered an uneven stack of crates stacked alongside the mouth of Elvarren’s Lane as he passed. The moldering boxes teetered and fell behind him into the paths of the Watch and a few passersby.

The two saluted each other, and Faxhal whirled off to the east,

turning left and racing up Zelphar's Walk. Renaer expected him to run up to Armin's Cut and swing back up to Tchozal's Race to lead a few of the Watch in circles.

Renaer slowed his pace slightly, nearly allowing two young members of the Watch to come within ten paces of him. Reaching into his pocket, he readied his weapons as his ominous target loomed out of the darkness.

Blackstaff Tower seemed to make the night around it darker. No torches lit its windows, nor did any brighten the dark steel and stone of the curtain wall around its courtyard. Renaer raced past the gate, admiring the metalworked roses and staves that entwined the metal bars. Looking over his right shoulder to make sure they were within range, Renaer tossed a handful of stones at the gates to Blackstaff Tower and immediately doubled his speed, leaving his chasers behind. Suddenly, the night lit up, a sea green glow emanating from the metal gates into the surrounding street. The woman and man slowed, appearing to run but moving only at a snail's pace. Renaer smiled but shook his fascination away and kept running. "I wasn't sure that was going to work. First time I've ever used Blackstaff Tower's spell defenses against anyone."

Renaer dashed left, heading east up Tharleon Street. The Flagon Dragon Inn's three stories dominated that corner, the stone dragons at the base of the walls all gouting fire. He waved at the two dragon-helmeted guards at the door as he ran past, and both returned the wave. He'd have to drag Torlyn back here again soon—he liked this place, even if it did cater more to those of less-than-noble class. Renaer jogged into the Silkanth's Cut, ducking behind Rarknal's Whitesmiths and running up the outer stairs leading to the rooftop garden on the adjoining building.

Renaer never slowed his pace and continued to run up to and past the roof's edge, launching himself toward the clothesline that angled over the eastern arc of the cut. He grabbed it and used his momentum to swing himself further up and onto the parapet of a row house. Keeping up his pace, he ran across that roof as well,

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leaping over the low wall that marked where that building abutted the next. As he ran east across that roof, he headed toward the stone arches that arced over Hoy's Skip below. Since the Spellplague, many of the row buildings had arches to support the buildings.

Renaer deftly ran over the arch as if it were a dry street instead of the ice-rimed bridge it was. He continued south, vaulting over or climbing above the abutment walls among the buildings lining the Street of Silks. When he stopped, dropping into the shadows next to an overlarge chimney, he could look across the street and beyond to see into the well-lit windows of the Smiling Siren festhall.

Renaer waited. The young Lord Neverember heard the Watch stumble past him on the street below, their armar chewing out the new recruits and barking orders. Looking down, Renaer knew he'd run many a scamper with this armar, the bald patch on his head exposing a familiar birthmark.

The balding armar's voice traveled in the crisp winter air. "No, he's not a Shar-worshipper to draw shadows around him! You're just incompetent! Now look down to Keltarn and see if he's heading east. He likes to take Cymbril's Walk, not the Prowl, because the taverns along there like him. We'll head up to Bazaar and investigate parts east. If we don't find him by the Street of Bells, we regroup at the Singing Sword and . . ." The words grew muffled as they moved out of Renaer's hearing range.

Renaer smiled, then something tapped him on the shoulder and he felt his stomach lurch. He turned and found himself facing the tabard of a barrel-chested Watch valabrar standing less than an arm's reach from him, a watchman's rod in hand. In Selûne's pale light, Renaer stood, and said, "At least it was you and not Ralnarth. Well, Officer Varbrent? Am I a prisoner?"

The grizzled older man rubbed his salt-and-peppered beard with the end of the rod, smiling slightly at Renaer. "Nah, but you're getting almost predictable, lad. You've come here twice before. You don't scout too well ahead of yourself or you'd have noticed me waiting here for you. Slow night?"

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"Slow enough. I didn't find any other things to lead them toward."

"Like those smugglers the other night? Ralnarth caught a good reward there, he did."

"And we both know he doesn't deserve the promotion, Morrath. He's a bully with coin and a noble name behind him, that's all!"

"Aye, lad, but he's connected in the right places, so he moves up the ladder. Besides, for his faults, he serves a purpose."

Renaer smirked at the Watch captain. "Someone for you to laugh about back at barracks?"

Morrath snorted and said, "No. He's vain, so his uncle's money gets him and his Watchmen better equipment, but ultimately that's only good for the city. Don't worry—we both know why he's got his recruits chasin' you. That'll die down in another day or so, assuming you and your friends stay out of his nose. Kahlem won't bring things to the notice of your father. Not while I'm about."

"Thanks, Morrath," Renaer said, clapping the watchman on the shoulder.

"Boy, your rat-scampers are handy for training the young 'uns or punishing those who've o'erstepped their places. I just wish you or your friends would join the Watch to train them directly. You'd be a farsight better officer than Ralnarth."

Renaer winked and said, "You can't afford me, Morrath."

"Well," Morrath said, "can't blame a man for trying. Just keep yourself from trouble, boy."

Renaer and Morrath both clambered down a stone rose trellis from their rooftop perch. Renaer dropped the last few feet, landing in a crouch onto Swords Street again.

"Do you want to share a carriage?" Renaer asked, but when he turned in Morrath's direction, the man had disappeared. "Well met, Morrath. Have to learn that one some time."



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Renaer stepped out of the shadows at the mouth of Scarlet's Well and flagged down a carriage. The single horse and its young driver both started from his sudden appearance. He didn't blame them, for the area was known to be haunted, albeit by a harmless woman's spirit still weeping bloody tears for her lost love. The boy got over his fear quickly when he saw the quartet of taols Renaer held up. The boy reached eagerly, but Renaer closed his hand around all but one of the square coins. "The rest are yours if you get me quietly to the Grinning Lion in less than two songs."

The boy nodded enthusiastically as Renaer slipped inside the carriage. Renaer found no comfort inside, as the matted cushions provided little relief from the hard bench or lurching ride.

Renaer enjoyed the chases with the Watch, but he bristled when the law enforcers—including his father the Open Lord—flaunted power over him and others. Dagult and Kahlem Ralnarth's abuses of authority showed the people that the Watch did not work always for the greater good of the city—just the whims of officers or the Lords. Worst of all, he didn't know what his father wanted, other than obedience and for Renaer to only act within the limited confines of Dagult's imagination. Renaer heard his father's words often enough—"You're a dupe, a wastrel, and you're throwing money away at every church across the city! I won't have my son waste his life!"

Renaer whispered, almost in prayer, "I want more for my father and for Waterdeep. This used to be a city where dreams came true and gods walked the cobbles. Now, the grime of commerce and greed covers everything, including the once-shining helms of the Lords. The Crown of the North still rules all commerce and politics, but it can't remotely claim to be the City of Splendors. This city needs heroes to bring back its life and luster. But gods know if I have it in me to be one."



Many hours later, Renaer crept quietly up the stairs to his rooms, a task not terribly difficult given the stone steps and carpets. He expected to be alone, but lights still blazed beneath the door to his father's study.

"The man is the Open Lord," Renaer muttered. "Why in the gods' names doesn't he use his offices at the palace?"

Despite his aggravation at the delay in sleep, Renaer smiled. He discovered years ago that he learned more when folk didn't know there were others within earshot. He slipped silently into his room, closed the door, and stripped for bed. Folding his clothes neatly on a side dresser, he shivered from the cold despite the small fire in the fireplace near his bed. Renaer burrowed beneath the furs and quilts, all the while keeping an ear cocked to the voices carried through the chimney shared with the next room's fireplace.

"We've not learned nearly enough, Dagult." Renaer didn't know this thin reedy voice, nor did he like what the man had to say. "She is as stubborn as her master was."

"We know the Blackstaffs have always had access to unknown magic," another unrecognized voice said. "I got her talking about the masked Lords of the past, but she would not say how they controlled them."

The thin-voiced one said, "The secret of long years, of course, is the most profitable of secrets we could glean from her. I always suspected they bargained with elves or dwarves for those secrets."

"Three tendays! That's what you told me! And it's been seven!" Dagult slammed his hand down on a table. Renaer knew his father's temper well, and Dagult's roar meant he was frustrated but not yet angry. That's when he'd get very quiet. "You claimed I would have the Overlord's Helm to help me uncover my fellow Lords' secrets. *That* is what you claimed would make this gambit worth it! Well?"

The second voice joined in again. "We can't get her to focus. She's been mad ever since—"

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“*Focus?*” Dagult snapped. “What do you think you have Granek for?”

The thin-voiced man coughed and said, “Yes, well, his methods are—”

“Only slightly more successful than your magic, apparently,” Dagult said. “Now, when are you going to deliver what you promised? You’ve already received far more reward than what you’ve delivered in return, but I’m still prepared to bring you into the fold, should you gain results before the solstice.”

Just who was Dagult conspiring with here? Renaer wondered. He *never* put more on the table unless he could hang someone with the other end of the deal. And to deal with wizards . . .

“We shall celebrate together before another tenday passes, milord Neverember,” the reedy voice replied. “The three of us shall free the city from the Blackstaff’s interference for the first time in two centuries—or at least ensure the Blackstaff is aligned in full with the Open Lord’s policies.”

Renaer heard the door open, and the men wandered out of his earshot. He saw three shadows pass his doorway, and one returned back to Dagult’s office. Renaer heard the thud and hiss of another log being tossed on Dagult’s fire grate. The bluster and volume had dropped away, and the cold quiet tone chilled Renaer despite the fire and the furs. “Just make damned sure that this never soils my hearth, wizards, or you’ll find out I’ve more power than even your wizards’ guild can muster.”

Dawn nearly reached his windows before Renaer fell into a fitful sleep.