



POOL OF RADIANCE

RUINS OF MYCH DRANNOR

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Based on the original CD-ROM
game story by Sarah W. Stocker
and Ken Eklund



BOOK ONE

_____ **Up From Under**

CHAPTER ONE

“That one’s mine.”

Kestrel inclined her chin ever so slightly toward the richly attired stranger ambling through Phlan’s busy marketplace. Her practiced eye had taken only a minute to single him out of the throng. Was he a rich trader? A visiting nobleman? No matter. She’d never been fussy about her victims’ professions, just the size of their pocketbooks.

Ragnall studied Kestel’s choice and nodded his approval. “Want any help?” The thrill of the hunt glinted in the rogue’s clear blue eyes.

“Nope.” She worked alone, and Ragnall knew it. The fewer people she trusted, the fewer she had to share the spoils with—and the fewer could betray her. Besides, the greenest apprentice could handle this job solo. The graybeard was an

easy target. He'd been careless as he purchased a gold brooch, chuckling to the young female vendor about the weight of his money pouch when he'd accidentally dropped it. Kestrel was more than willing to relieve him of that burden. The brooch too, with any luck. "I'll meet you later at the Bell."

Ragnall's gaze had already shifted to a middle-aged woman overburdened with parcels. "If you're successful, the ale's on you."

"If?"

They parted. Kestrel dismissed Ragnall from her mind, concentrating on the task at hand. To Ragnall, several years her junior and born to a respectable family, thieving was a game. To her it was serious work.

She followed her target through the noisy bazaar, weaving past haggling merchants and ducking behind vegetable carts as she maintained her distance. When the man stopped to purchase a sweetmeat, she paused several stalls away to admire an emerald-green silk scarf.

"It matches your eyes," said the seller, a young woman about Kestrel's age. She draped the scarf around Kestrel's neck and held up a glass. "See?"

Kestrel made a show of studying her reflection, actually using the mirror to keep an eye on her mark. "It does indeed," she said, combing her fingers through her wayward chestnut locks. She sighed. Someday when she'd made her pile and no longer had to work for a living, she'd grow her hair out of the boyish but practical cut she'd always worn. Though she doubted she'd ever wrap a fancy scarf around her neck—it felt too much like a noose.

In the mirror, the gentleman finished paying for his treat and moved on. Kestrel handed the looking glass and scarf back to their owner. "Perhaps another day."

She considered "accidentally" bumping into her target as he savored the confection but elected for a less

conspicuous method this afternoon. She'd been in Phlan several months, and already some of the Podol Plaza vendors recognized her. Too many obvious accidents like that and everyone would know her for a thief. She couldn't afford that kind of attention. Though the local thieves' guild operated openly, she had not joined it. The guild required its members to lop off their left ears as a sign of loyalty—a practice she considered barbaric. She planned to leave town before the guild pressured her into joining.

The nobleman stopped thrice more, admiring a jeweled eating knife, studying a plumed helm, testing the fit of a leather belt around his considerable girth. The latter he purchased. By all the gods, was he going to spend the entire pouch before she could get to it?

At last, an opportunity presented itself. The gentleman paused to watch a brightly garbed performer juggle seven flaming torches while singing a drinking ballad and balancing on a wagon wheel. Good old Sedric. She really ought to give the entertainer a commission for all the distractions he'd unknowingly provided.

She approached her target's left side, eyeing the bulge just under his velvet cape. Casually, she bent down as if to secure her left boot and withdrew a dagger from inside. Sedric finished the ballad, caught the last torch in his teeth, and hopped off the wheel. The gentleman raised his hands, applauding heartily.

With a quick slice through straining purse strings, the moneybag was hers. By the time her victim noticed the missing weight from his hip, she was long gone.



Kestrel had learned—the hard way—that after lightening a gull's pockets, it was best to get as far away as

possible from the scene of the crime. She slipped down an alley, her leather boots padding noiselessly in the soft dirt, until she could no longer hear the din of the marketplace. A few strides more brought her to the grounds of Valjevo Castle. No one would bother her here as she counted and stashed her newly acquired coins.

The once-proud stronghold, like the city it had protected, was ruined by war and later corrupted by nefarious inhabitants. From what Kestrel had heard, a pond known as the Pool of Radiance had formed in a cavern beneath the castle. Thought to confer great wisdom and leadership on those who bathed in its waters, the pool instead turned out to be an instrument of evil, used by the power-hungry creature Tyranthraxus to advance his self-serving schemes. Though Tyranthraxus had been defeated and the pool had evaporated into a mundane hole in the ground, the castle remained empty and undisturbed despite improved prosperity in the city. Most residents yet feared to tread anywhere near the pool's dry basin or its ominous environs, so few ventured this way intentionally.

Kestrel, however, came and went with perfect ease. The thief had grown up in the streets of a dozen cities, and it took more than a ruined castle to scare her. She'd never encountered trouble there and found the deserted cavern a convenient hideout. Though cutthroats and a few common creatures also enjoyed the isolation from time to time, generally the once-menacing cavern was safer than most city streets.

Safe enough, at least, that she had hollowed out a cavity beneath a pile of fallen rocks to use as a cache for the coins and other items she acquired. As she thought of the small hoard that waited for her within the castle, her fingers drifted to the nobleman's money pouch at her side. Her stash of treasure was growing steadily—just yesterday she'd added a walnut-sized ruby to the hoard, courtesy of a

quintet of sixes in a game of Traitors' Heads. She wouldn't use those dice anymore, however, until she left Phlan. She'd never live to roll them again if anyone discovered they were weighted.

It wouldn't be too much longer before she could leave petty thievery behind, and the dangerous, seedy lifestyle that went with it. When she had enough coin she'd live and travel in style, supplementing her savings with an occasional high-profit, low-risk heist. No more dockside inns with flat ale and lumpy mattresses, no more tramping from city to city on foot, no more risking her neck for a few measly coppers, no more wearing the same clothes until she itched. She'd secretly ply her trade among a better class of people while enjoying the easy life. The one she and Quinn had always imagined.

She entered the castle bailey and negotiated its once-formidable hedge maze. When Tyranthraxus had been defeated, a wide swath had been cut through several rows of the sawlike leaves, black flowers, and poisonous six-inch thorns, but in the years since then the hedges had grown back enough to warrant caution. She ducked and sidled her way through, careful to avoid even the slightest brush with the menacing vegetation.

Once past the maze, she relaxed her guard. She approached the white marble tower, half-ruined and defaced with sinister-looking but now impotent runes, and circled to an ebony door marked with an intricate carving of a dragon. Standing in the spot she'd marked twenty-five yards from the door, she withdrew a dagger from one of her boots and gripped it in her left hand. Though she could throw a dagger accurately with either hand, her dominant left provided more force and deadly aim.

She hurled the blade at the entrance. The dagger stuck in the door with a solid *thunk*, landing dead center between the dragon's eyes. Foul-smelling yellow mist

issued from the dragon's mouth—another lesson she'd learned the hard way. If not for the potion of neutralization she'd happened to carry on her first visit, she'd never have lived to return.

After waiting ten minutes for the poisonous cloud to disperse, she retrieved her dagger and opened the door onto a landing in the main room of the ruined tower, which lay open to the sky all the way down to the subterranean cavern. Birds, bugs, and spiders made their homes in the nooks and crevices of the interior tower walls. Despite the fact that rain could fall freely inside, the pool basin below had always remained dry.

She nimbly padded down the black iron stairway, alighting at the bottom and heading toward her secret cache. She stopped abruptly when she heard voices.

Bandits. She couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but she could see them through the rubble, not fifty paces away. She quickly slipped into the shadow of a large unearthed boulder. How stupid she had been—approaching so carelessly, without even glancing down into the cavern! Fortunately, the intruders appeared not to have noticed her.

A tingling spread along her collarbone. It was a sensation she had experienced only a few times before, always a forewarning of serious danger. While others felt chills up their spines, hers apparently traveled up her spine and continued across her shoulders. Previously, however, the heightened perception had alerted her to perils more extraordinary than a handful of brigands. When her intuition kicked in, it usually meant something very, very bad lay in wait.

Her instincts must be working overtime today. Nevertheless, they'd saved her life before. She glanced back the way she'd come, assessing the possibility of a silent retreat.

Too risky. The iron grillwork stairway was far too

exposed, and she'd been fortunate to escape notice the first time. Stifling a sigh, she turned her attention back to the bandits. If she couldn't leave, she might as well see what these visitors were up to—and make sure they didn't get too close to her cache.

There were three of them, young men with a week's growth of stubble on their faces and a lifetime's worth of maliciousness in their dark eyes. They hadn't observed her because they were arguing among themselves over a sack the largest man gripped tightly in his fist. As their voices rose in anger, she caught snatches of their conversation.

“ . . . said we'd split it evenly, Urdek!”

“That's right. A quarter for each of you, a quarter for me, and—” the large man, Urdek, flashed a stiletto—“a quarter for my friend here.”

Kestrel silently shook her head. There truly was no honor among thieves. Urdek's betrayal illustrated precisely why she worked alone.

The two smaller men produced daggers as well. One of them approached Urdek, muttering something Kestrel couldn't make out. Urdek swiftly kicked the dagger out of his opponent's grasp, sending the weapon flying to the ground with a wet *splat*.

The sound caught more of Kestrel's attention than the ensuing fight. She shifted her position to get a better look at the ground where the dagger had landed. It lay in a puddle of muddy water. Tiny rivulets of brown liquid streamed into it from the direction of the dry pool.

Which was no longer dry.

She gasped. In one rainless night, the basin had filled with amber fluid. Its surface lay smooth as a mirror, not a single ripple marring the stillness. The water caught the late afternoon sunlight, seeming to infuse it with a golden glow. To someone unfamiliar with its history, the pond appeared almost serene.

Almost. Around its perimeter, nothing grew. The moss and weeds that had begun to spring up around the dry basin had withered and fallen to dust. Shriveled, skeletal husks lay dead where just yesterday thistles had flourished. The lifeless band of earth extended two feet from the rim of the pool, nearly reaching the scuffling bandits.

Kestrel turned her gaze back to them. Urdek had killed his weaponless comrade and disarmed the other. The smaller man tripped as he backed away, landing near the dead man's dagger. He grabbed for it.

And screamed.

At first Kestrel thought the puddle's liquid burned away the skin it had touched, but the stench that drifted toward her soon revealed otherwise.

The man's flesh was rotting off his bones.

As she and Urdek watched in horrified fascination, the tissue and muscle of his hand turned green, then brown, then black in the space of seconds. Finally it disintegrated, exposing a skeletal claw.

The rot continued up his arm, to his torso and the rest of his body. Putrid hunks of flesh and decomposing organs fell into the dirt, until finally the decay crept up his neck. White hair sprouted from his head; the skin on his face withered. His eyes dried up and shriveled until they became nothing more than two gaping sockets.

The once-human creature lurched to its feet, still clutching the dagger. Its scream of pain now a murderous cry, it advanced on Urdek.

Kestrel turned and ran as fast as her nimble legs could carry her, not caring how much noise she made.



“Now can you tell me?”

Kestrel lowered the shotglass back to the table and

shuddered—whether from the liquor or the memory of what she had witnessed earlier, she couldn't say. She shook her head at Ragnall. "One more. At least."

"You'll regret this in the morning, you know. I've never known you to drink firewine before." Nat's firewine, the Bell's house liquor, was said to be distilled from wine mulled in the inn's washtub. It was also said to pack a nasty wallop. Despite his warning, Ragnall signaled to the barmaid for another shot.

Kestrel regarded her friend. At least, Ragnall was the closest thing she'd had to a friend in a long time—the fair-haired scoundrel had never betrayed her, which was more than she could say for most of her acquaintances.

The only person she'd ever really trusted in her life had been Quinn, the old rogue who had found her in a burned-out house when she'd been barely old enough to walk. Quinn had raised her as a daughter, at first trying to protect her from the shady side of his life but eventually teaching her everything he knew. At the age of seven she was winning bets from unsuspecting tavern patrons by throwing daggers with amazing accuracy. At nine, her mentor had deemed her old enough to dabble in minor illegal activities like picking pockets. By twelve she was learning more lucrative—but also more dangerous—skills.

Then Quinn had died.

That had been ten years ago, and she'd survived on her own ever since. All she had left of him was the knowledge he'd passed on to her and a custom-made club he'd commissioned. The compact steel baton was easy to conceal, but with the flick of a wrist it telescoped to thrice its size. She'd lost track of how many times the weapon—and Quinn's training with it—had saved her life. While daggers were her weapon of choice, the club sometimes proved more practical.

Though there had been times when she'd wished for Quinn's advice or guidance, years had passed since she wanted to talk to him as badly as she did tonight—not as a master thief, but as the only parental figure she'd ever known. The scene at the pool had shaken her more than she thought possible.

Quinn was gone, and she was an adult now. She pulled her thoughts back to the present conversation and Ragnall's admonition about the firewine. "I'll be fine," she said. "You know I could drink you under this table if I wanted to."

"I know," he conceded. "I've witnessed it."

Kestrel rarely drank to excess. In her profession, it was too risky not to be in full possession of one's faculties. She didn't intend to get drunk this evening, just dull the tingling in her collarbone. Though she'd fled Valjevo Castle hours ago, the sensation hadn't ceased. If her adrenaline didn't stop pumping at this rate, she'd be too exhausted to leave town in the morning.

Which is exactly what she planned to do. Phlan could keep its creepy Pool of Radiance and the undead creatures it spawned. She was moving on.

The serving wench returned with the liquor bottle. She refilled the shotglass, which Kestrel immediately emptied and slid forward for more.

"Slow down, Kes—you'll make yourself ill." Ragnall turned to the barmaid. "Bring us two tankards of ale instead."

Kestrel made no objection. The firewine was burning a hole in her gut anyway. "And some bread and cheese," she added.

She looked around, taking in the atmosphere of Nat Wyler's Bell one last time. Though she'd called it home for several months, she wouldn't miss this dingy little corner of Phlan. The common room had a hard-packed dirt floor

and rushes that hadn't been changed in years. The tables and walls were scratched and scarred. At its best, the fare was mediocre. Her corn-husk mattress upstairs was in desperate need of restuffing. The inn's main appeal—its *only* appeal—was that Nat minded his own business and encouraged the serving girls and other patrons to do the same.

No, she wouldn't miss the Bell, or Phlan as a whole. It was a place, just another place. By next week she'd be in a new one.

The food arrived. Kestrel tried to eat, but the doughy bread stuck in her throat. She washed it down with the ale, but it sat like a lump in her stomach.

"So tell me what happened." Ragnall lifted his own tankard but set it down without drinking, his blue eyes narrowing. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"Who?"

"The old goat in the market today."

"No!" Kestrel snorted.

"What is it, then? I've never seen you quite like this."

She stared at him a moment, debating. Would he think her crazy? On the other hand, what she'd witnessed today might *make* her crazy if she didn't tell someone. She quaffed more ale and leaned forward.

"The Pool of Radiance has reappeared," she said in a low voice.

Ragnall's eyes widened. "You know this for a fact?"

"I saw it suck the life out of someone today—rotted his flesh right off his bones."

He leaned back in his seat and let out a low whistle. "After we parted at the market, I heard a few rumors, but I didn't put any stock in them."

She frowned. "What kind of rumors?"

"Stories similar to yours. I guess several people—the number increases with each telling—have disappeared

since last night, and others speak of undead creatures wandering the city. Like I said, I thought they were just bogeyman tales to keep children in line, but supposedly Elminster himself arrived tonight to investigate.”

“Elminster? How did he get here so fast? Or even hear about this?”

Ragnall shrugged. “How do wizards do anything?”

How indeed? Kestrel disliked spellcasters, considering them more treacherous than the sneakiest assassin. They were always muttering under their breaths, moving their hands in strange gestures, collecting odd substances. They gave her the creeps. Just when a body least expected it, they’d blow something up or send objects flying through the air. Or worse—set traps, like the one at the tower, that unleashed their sorcery long after the spellcaster had left the scene. She still bore a scar on her left wrist from trying to pick an ensorcelled lock three years ago.

“You going to report what you saw?” Ragnall asked.

“Yeah, right,” she said. “That’s what I need—to solicit a wizard’s notice. No thanks.”

“I hear there’s a reward.”

That got her attention. “What kind of reward?”

“One hundred gold pieces for a genuine firsthand account.” He broke a hunk of cheese off the wedge. “That’s what I heard anyway. Don’t know if it’s true.”

A hundred gold pieces. Kestrel had been debating the wisdom of trying to retrieve her treasure from its hiding spot near the pool. If she couldn’t get to it, the nobleman’s money pouch was all she had in the world, and any additional coins would make a big difference. Even if the rumors of reward proved false, perhaps she could convince Elminster that her tale was worth paying to hear.

She stood, immediately regretting the quick movement. A wave of dizziness rocked her. That firewine must have been more potent than she’d thought.

Ragnall extended a hand to steady her. “You all right?”

She nodded. The dizziness passed, but her head remained cloudy. “Fine. Where did you say Elminster was?”

“Meeting with the Council of Ten.” He snorted. “As if the blowhards who run this city could have anything useful to say. Why do you ask?”

She drained her tankard, tossed a few coins on the table, and fastened her cloak around her shoulders. “I’m off to see the wizard.”



Kestrel groaned and rolled over. She was going to kill whoever had stuffed her mouth with cotton. And glued her eyes shut. And now shone a lantern in her face.

Someone was sitting on her head.

Slowly, she forced one eye open. Then the other. Then both. Then squeezed them shut again.

She was back in her room at the Bell, lying facedown on her lumpy mattress. Sunlight poured in the window, sending darts of pain shooting through her eyes. Her head hurt so badly she feared her skull might explode.

Damn that firewine. And damn Ragnall—for being right about it.

By minuscule degrees, she pried herself off the mattress and into a sitting position. When the room stopped spinning, she glanced down. Relief flooded the tiny corners of her brain not occupied with processing pain signals. However intoxicated she’d been, she’d at least managed to pass out on top of the money pouch, preventing anyone from stealing it while she slept. Her thieves’ tools also remained undisturbed, as did the club secured to her belt. Her twin daggers, of course, remained untouched, one hidden in each boot.

No one else was in the room. Either Nat hadn't rented out the other two beds last night, or the lodgers had risen and left. Either way, she was grateful for the solitude—she didn't think she could bear the sound of even a whispering voice. The murmurs rising from the common room below were bad enough.

She crept over to the washstand, her body stiff from having slept in her leather armor. She splashed cold water on her cheeks and looked into the glass. Deep creases from her mattress webbed the skin on the left side of her face. She must not have budged all night.

What time had she returned to her room? She recalled drinking with Ragnall downstairs and his talk of Elminster. After that, she couldn't remember anything specific. Had she really gone to see the old mage? Blurred images of a mysterious bearded man floated through her mind, but they could just as easily be remnants of a firewine-induced dream.

She pulled together her scattered thoughts and tried to clear the fog from her head. For someone who had planned to travel many miles from Phlan today, she was off to a poor start. From the strength of the sun, she judged the time to be close to noon. She needed to obtain provisions for her trip, collect her treasure from its hiding spot, and hit the road. Or the docks—she really ought to decide where she was going. Sembia, perhaps? Cormyr?

An hour later, her pack stocked with food and other supplies, Kestrel strode toward the castle. She'd considered leaving her stash behind and coming back for it later, but greed had gotten the better of her. Who knew when she'd return to the Moonsea? Her travels might never bring her here again. In the meantime, the thought of those riches just sitting beneath the rocks rankled her thief's soul. The idea of starting over—of having to wait that much longer before living a life of ease—sank her heart.

Already her collarbone tingled. She ignored the sensation. She knew she headed toward danger, but she also trusted her ability to avoid it. Just get in, get the goods, and get out. That's all she needed to do. Stay away from the water and be alert for any stray puddles.

As she entered the tower, she saw three figures near one end of the pool. She could tell from his uniform and standard-issue chain mail that one was a member of Phlan's city patrol. The guard was a large man, at least six and a half feet tall, with a pair of the widest shoulders Kestrel had ever seen. Beside him stood a knight in full plate armor, the scales-and-warhammer symbol of Tyr emblazoned on his tabard. He wore a sword sheathed at his side and a warhammer strapped to his back. A paladin, she assumed. He was about half a foot shorter than the guard and of a more average build. The third figure, a slender woman, wore brown leggings, leather knee-high boots, and a dark green cloak. She leaned on a wooden staff, listening to a conversation between the two men. The woman's hood shadowed her visage and the fighters' helmets obscured theirs, so Kestrel could not get a good look at any of their faces.

Silently, Kestrel berated herself. Of course, she should have guessed that in light of yesterday's events the pool would draw investigators or gawkers today. She glanced around for evidence of the ill-fated brigands but saw no sign of them. Their bodies, if anything remained of them, must have been disposed of while she'd snored her way through the morning.

She assessed her surroundings. The cache lay on the other side of the strangers, but their focus seemed to be on the pool itself. If she moved very quietly and kept to the shadows as she circled around, she might manage to reach it without arousing the group's notice. The exposed stairway was unavoidable, but if she didn't take a chance she could grow old waiting for the trio to leave.

“Lord of Shadows preserve me,” she muttered. She crept to the stairway and slowly descended, hugging the wall to make as much use of the thin shadows as possible. When she reached the bottom, she started her cautious circle toward the rock pile. As she padded, she eavesdropped on the party’s conversation.

“So Elminster thinks this has something to do with goings-on in Myth Drannor?” the guard asked. “What does the ruined elven capital have to do with us?”

“From what he explained to me, he has suspected for weeks that someone has created a new Pool of Radiance there,” the woman said in a hushed tone. “Now with Phlan’s pool reawakened, he’s all but certain. Even as we guard this site, he’s trying to contact a party of adventurers he sent there to investigate. If they do find a new pool, they will destroy it—and whoever created it.”

“You sound sure about that,” the paladin said. “Those ruins have a reputation for eating adventurers alive.”

“These are not ordinary adventurers,” the woman replied. “Elminster hand-picked them, and they bear the Gauntlets of Moander—artifacts created specifically to destroy such pools. They will succeed where lesser parties would fail.”

Yeah, right, Kestrel thought. She’d heard her share of tales about thieves lured to the ancient elven city hoping to find untold riches in its ruins. She’d heard very few tales of thieves who’d actually returned. Elminster better have sent a score or more adventurers into that den of doom.

She made it about halfway to her goal before her foot slipped on some rubble. Damn! To Kestrel’s ears, the tell-tale scuffling sounded loud as a thunderclap.

“Who’s there?” the guard called out. All three of the figures now peered in her direction. “Show yourself!”

Kestrel paused, torn between trying to elude them and attempting to brazen it out. Before she could make up her

mind, the hooded woman raised her hand, palm facing Kestrel's direction, and murmured some words the thief couldn't understand. A spellcaster! Kestrel turned to escape whatever sorcery was about to be hurled at her . . .

. . . And a moment later found herself unable to budge.

She tried to fight the magic, but her body refused to respond. Her feet, arms, even her mouth could not move. She was stuck in a half-twist, half-crouch, helpless to defend herself. Heart hammering, she watched the trio make its way toward her.

The paladin reached her first, assessing her from head to heel. "A thief, by the look of her," he said with obvious distaste. "Identify yourself!"

The sorceress approached. "She can't speak until I release her from the spell."

Gods, but Kestrel hated wizards! She'd not only lost control of the situation but of her own body. How long was the witch going to keep her like this? What did she plan in the meantime? Her vulnerability made Kestrel want to scream.

The paladin nodded toward the guard's short bow. "Train that on her." When the guard complied, the knight of Tyr unsheathed his long sword, pressed the tip of it beneath Kestrel's chin, and met her gaze. His eyes were as gray as his steel and just as cold. "Don't try anything foolish." He lowered the blade but kept it drawn.

She wouldn't. If the paladin didn't cut her down first, Phlan's guards were known to be quick to release a bowstring. Accurate with their aim, too—though at this range, the fighter could be blind and still hit her. Kestrel's agility and weapons couldn't help her now; she would have to rely on her wits.

The wizard spoke a command word, and Kestrel's body sagged. The rogue caught herself from falling and stood upright to face her captors.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” the paladin demanded.

She considered lying but decided a modified version of the truth might ring more genuine in the holy warrior’s ears. “My name is Kestrel, and—”

“Kestrel!” The guard lowered his bow. “You’re late!”

“I—I am?” She glanced from one member of the trio to the next. The paladin still regarded her warily, but the mage appeared suddenly guilt-stricken. The guard actually looked as if he were greeting an old friend. Did she know him—all of them—from somewhere?

“Er . . . yes. I *am* late,” she stated boldly. “I apologize. Profusely. Didn’t mean to keep you waiting.”

“We weren’t so much waiting as concerned,” the guard said. “I thought maybe you arrived before us and something happened.” He removed his helm, revealing coarse blond locks, a square jaw, and a neck thickly corded with muscles. “My name’s Durwyn. Like you, I volunteered to stand watch here.”

Volunteered? When in her life had she volunteered for anything? A sense of dread swept her. “Just . . . um, when did you volunteer for this duty, Durwyn?”

“Last night. Elminster told my commander that you and two others would be here today.”

Damn and double-damn Nat’s firewine! She’d actually gone to see Elminster and now couldn’t remember what transpired. What in the world had she gotten herself into?

The paladin cleared his throat to draw her attention from Durwyn. “Tell me if you would, Kestrel, what you were doing skulking about if you indeed came to stand guard with us?”

A fair question, but his tone chafed nonetheless. The inflections of his voice suggested noble birth. Holy warrior or not, if he thought she’d tolerate arrogant condescension very long, he was sorely mistaken.

She lifted her chin. “Spying on you, of course. You don’t

expect me to put my trust in people I know nothing about, do you? I was trying to judge what sort of folk I'm to work with."

"Honest ones. Which, I imagine, is more than we can expect from you."

She bit back the retort she would have liked to let fly. Paladins of Tyr, if indeed that's what this knight was, were known for their self-righteous sense of honor and justice. Rogues avoided them like the gallows. "You mind tossing me your name between all the insults?"

"Corran D'Arcey, Defender of Tyr the Even-Handed, and third son of Baron Ethelred D'Arcey of Sarshel."

So, she'd guessed correctly. A paladin of Tyr *and* a blue-blood. She held his gaze without blinking, determined to show him that his titles did not intimidate her. "I'll just call you Corran for short."

"And I'll just—"

"Aren't we supposed to be guarding a pool here, Corran?" she asked.

The rebuke silenced him for a beat. "Yes, *we* are," he said tightly. He sheathed his sword and strode back to stand nearer the water.

In the awkward quiet that ensued, Durwyn shrugged and followed him.

Kestrel was disappointed to be left standing with the sorceress and not the guard. Durwyn seemed kind but not particularly bright—the perfect source to pump for more information about what she'd gotten herself into. The spellcaster, on the other hand, made her nervous.

The mage, who had not yet spoken to Kestrel, drew back her cowl. By her gold-flecked blue eyes and slightly pointed ears, Kestrel guessed her to be of partial elven descent. Moon elf, judging from the bluish tinge to her ears and chin. "I am Ghleanna Stormlake," she said. "Had I known your identity, I would not have thrown that spell."

Kestrel could not tell whether Ghleanna's words held contrition or criticism. Was she supposed to have strutted into the tower declaiming her name?

"Apology accepted," she said, whether one had been offered or not. Then, deciding Ghleanna could prove informative, she added, "I should have arrived on time."

The mage's lips formed a half-smile. "Elminster told me you might have a . . . headache . . . when you awoke."

Kestrel felt her face grow warm. She'd not only been drunk but also obvious about it. No doubt the wizard had taken advantage of her compromised state to coerce her into this volunteer duty. She thought of the conversation she'd overheard as she arrived in the cavern earlier. "Elminster seems to tell you a lot of things."

"I am one of his apprentices. When he left this morn to investigate tidings from Shadowdale, he asked me to keep an eye on events here in Phl—"

A crackle of energy suddenly rent the air. Not ten paces away, a floating, glowing ball of white light appeared. It expanded, forming a window in its center as sounds of ringing steel and battle cries filled the air.

"A gate!" Ghleanna exclaimed.

Corran and Durwyn rushed over. "To where?" Corran asked.

The window elongated to the size of a door, allowing brief glimpses of the combatants. A besieged fighter stumbled into view, overwhelmed by an unseen opponent. "By all that's holy, help us!" he cried.

"That's Athan—one of the adventurers Elminster sent to Myth Drannor." Ghleanna cried. "They must be in trouble!"

The border of the gate flashed and hissed, like a flame being extinguished. The window winked. When their view returned Athan could no longer be seen. The sounds of battle continued, mixed with cries of the dying. Just outside visual range, a terrible moaning commenced.

“We must aid them!” Corran started toward the gate.

“Are you out of your mind?” Kestrel asked. No way was she stepping into some sort of magical portal. If the sorcery didn’t swallow them up forever, they’d only be spit out into the middle of whatever was happening on the other end.

“We’re not supposed to leave our post,” Durwyn said.

“This is more important,” Ghleanna answered. “If Athan’s band fails, all Faerûn could be lost! Make up your own minds, but I am going.” She stepped into the gate. It flashed violet light, obscuring both the mage and the Myth Drannor scene from view.

“She’s crazy,” Kestrel declared.

“No—she’s honorable and committed to a greater good,” Corran retorted. “Something a rogue wouldn’t know anything about.”

She glared at Corran. “So follow her, then!”

The gate hissed and sputtered, its light turning pale blue, then a sickly green. The window began to shrink.

“I will—and so will you!” So quickly she couldn’t react, Corran grabbed her by the arm and dragged her into the gate.

She shouted her objection, but the sound was swallowed up by a vacuum. She found herself surrounded by black nothingness, the extradimensional space seeming to stretch to eternity. Corran still held her arm in an iron grip. Involuntarily, she grabbed his elbow just to have something solid to hold onto. They floated, propelled only by the momentum with which they’d entered. Far in the distance, she could see the battle scene in Myth Drannor taking place through a window.

A window that was closing.

They were going to be trapped in here! A frightful rumbling surrounded them as the window ahead wavered. Suddenly, the space didn’t seem so vast anymore. In fact,

it felt close. Her chest tightened as she gasped for air. The rumbling repeated, accented by flashing golden light from either end of the portal.

Corran turned toward her, mouthing words she could not hear. She didn't need to hear them—they were the same words running through her own mind.

The gate was collapsing.