

## ***In the Alleys of Messemprar***

An excerpt from *The Alabaster Staff*, Chapter 2

Navigating by instinct, she moved through the narrow, winding gap, passing a few branches before coming to a dead end. She paused for a moment and stared blankly at the wall in front of her, concealed as high as her waist by a pile of decomposing garbage. She pulled a lock of wet hair out of her face and retraced her steps, but just as she arrived at the first juncture, she saw her way blocked by an armed man.

He was short, clearly shorter than she. The steam curling from his sneering lip combined with his powerful build to give the impression of a bull or a fighting dog. A thick cloak covered his head and shoulders, and a black tabard with some sort of gold emblem draped soddenly off his wide chest, the hem shedding droplets that splashed in the dirty puddles at his feet. A shield hung across his back. He straightened as he saw Kehrsyn approach, and her ears picked up the grate of steel on steel. He's wearing mail beneath his cloak, Kehrsyn thought, splint or scale.

"Olaré," she said, for lack of anything better, and took another bite of her pear. "So, um, what kind of uniform is that? That's no soldier's outfit that I know. And you don't have that medallion the Northern Wizards' people wear. Are you a mercenary? Or some kind of deputized..."

Kehrsyn's words trailed off as the burly man drew a long sword from a well-crafted scabbard. He swung it easily at his side in a lazy figure eight and stepped toward her.

Kehrsyn immediately jumped to an unwanted conclusion. "I'll scream," she said.

"Go ahead," said the man in a surprisingly high-pitched voice with a noticeable northwestern accent. "If the local pikegrabbers get here, I don't gotta trot you all the way over to the damn barracks to get my bounty."

Kehrsyn furrowed her brow.

"Don't try to act so damn innocent, pretty little thief," he said, sounding more like a juvenile than the veteran he clearly was. "You stole that pear, and there's a bounty on freeloaders like you."

Kehrsyn's eyes widened as she stared at the half-eaten piece of fruit in her hand. "I did no such thing!" she blurted. She began edging backwards, down the dead-end alley.

"Of course not," replied the man, "'cuz I hear that in this city, if you steal food, they don't chop your hand, they chop your damn neck."

"I didn't steal it!" said Kehrsyn, knowing how thin her protests must sound. "It was a gift! This boy, he liked—" She halted her tongue before she said, "he liked my performance," knowing full well it would be taken the wrong way. "He liked me..." she continued, even more flustered.

"Uh-huh," said the man blandly, swinging the blade unconsciously in his right hand. "We dock here only this damn morning, and soon as we get them pears out, someone steals a whole damn bunch. You leave the market, eating a damn pear. I follow, and you walk faster."

When I get close, you run and duck into this damn alley. And now you say you din't do nothin'. Well too damn bad for you." Then, looking her over, he added, "Though you maybe could work a deal. The others would like the looks of you, all nice and thin like that. The Zhentarim can be... merciful. At times."

"I didn't steal it," stammered Kehrsyn as she continued her slow retreat. Her stomach tightened in knots. "Ask the people at the square. I was performing."

"Quit your damn bleating."

He reached for her with his free hand, but Kehrsyn hopped lightly backward. Glancing at his extended arm, she saw that he indeed wore splint mail. He stepped forward. She dropped her pear and drew her rapier, holding it defensively in front of her with her left hand. As she had hoped, this caused him to pause briefly. He lowered himself as if to spring.

The man studied her, negligently describing easy, lethal arcs with his sword beside him. For a moment, as he examined her stance, he wore the ruthless face of a tiger, but then a cruel smile pulled up one corner of his mouth.

He saw the point of Kehrsyn's rapier trembling ever so slightly. The rain dripped. The fearful trembling grew. His smile widened, as did Kehrsyn's eyes.

The man straightened up again, nodding in smug disdain. "So pussycat thinks she's got a claw, huh?" he mocked. "Here's what I think of that!"

He swung his sword crosswise and slapped the blade from her hand with a flagrant, sweeping backhand blow, sending it clattering against the stone wall of the alley. But, as he did so, Kehrsyn was already thrusting with a dagger in her right hand—her good hand—the blade held vertically the

better to slip between the strips of metal splints. Too late the man saw that he had fallen for her bait; believed her trembling, fearful feint; left his body wide open for a counterattack. The long stiletto struck the man at the top of the thigh, just where the leg joins the abdomen, cutting tendons and lancing innards.

Although he yet felt no pain, instinctively the man was already doubling over to protect his groin. He tried to strike Kehrsyn with his return stroke, but she nimbly dodged the blow and countered by tracing a gash across one eyebrow.

The man's traumatized hip gave way and he crumpled to his knees. He glared at her balefully, but then the blood welling up from his cut brow started to sting his eye. Just as he winced, Kehrsyn stepped forward and kicked him as hard as she could on the chin, sending the man backward. He flopped on the pavement, his lower legs doubled back underneath him.