

GAMERS' QUEST

By George Ivanoff



The Ruby's Red Glow

A *Gamers' Quest* story by George Ivanoff © 2009 G Ivanoff

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'Hands it over!' Tark stepped out of the shadows, double crossbow cocked and ready.

'Prithee, sir,' said the man in green, 'what dost thou wish of me?'

'Stops with the funny speak.' Tark eyed the man suspiciously.

The stranger wore an emerald green doublet over dark green shirt and tights, knee-length brown leather boots on his feet. Tark looked down at his own shabby clothes and worn shoes. He would have to thief himself a pair of boots, he decided. He looked back at the man, lamenting the fact that his boots looked too large.

'Hands over the jewel!'

'Allow me to introduce myself, dear sir,' said the man, doffing his olive cap (with peacock feather) and bowing. 'Baron Pyper.' He straightened up, eyes sparkling.

'Why don'ts anyone ever want ta do things the easy way.' Tark sighed and squeezed the first trigger. The crossbow arrow whisked Pyper's cap from his hand, pinning it to the ground behind him.

'The jewel,' Tark insisted.

'As you wish.' Pyper's green eyes sparkled with a mischievous intensity as he reached into his doublet. Holding out his closed fist, red light spilling between the fingers, he smiled. Slowly he uncurled his fingers, revealing the red ruby in all its brilliance.

Tark breathed in sharply. Slowly, as if in a trance, he reached out his hand.

'Be very sure,' said Pyper.

Tark met his eyes, hand poised above the jewel.

'Oh, I is sure, alights.'

He lowered his hand to take the jewel.

The ruby flared with light and Tark was gone, his crossbow falling to the ground.

Pyper casually tossed the ruby into the air, catching it again. 'Thievers are always sure.' He shook his head slowly as he concealed the jewel.

Once Pyper was out of sight, Zyra dropped to the ground from the tree in which she had been sitting. Tark's magik cloak, which had helped to conceal her, hung from her shoulders, draping around her black, form-hugging jump-suit.

'So the snitch wuz rights about the jewels.' She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. 'And it looks like the fancy dude with the jewels is the snot-rag that's been thief-nappin'.' She wrapped the cloak around herself. 'Betta be careful.' She patted her concealed knives and set off in pursuit.

Concentrating on following Pyper while staying out of sight, Zyra hardly noticed her surroundings. The way she moved through the trees, no one would have guessed that this was not her normal territory. Zyra usually worked the Hill, home to the ultra-rich and mega-powerful, and the slightly less-affluent surrounding area. The Forest was usually Tark's thieving-ground. So it was not often that they worked together on a job.

But this job was special. This job needed a team.

Zyra followed Pyper out of the Forest and to the Crossroads. To Zyra's surprise, he didn't head towards the Hill as she had expected. Instead he turned toward the ruined urban landscape of the City.

'Why?' Zyra wondered aloud before continuing to follow. There was no one in the City who would want to buy a jewel ... or a kidnapped thief.

As they traversed the cracked, debris-littered roads between the crumbling and collapsed buildings, Zyra wondered where they were heading. Tark and Zyra's home was in the basement under the rubble of collapsed building, but they were heading to a different part of the City. To Zyra's surprise, they passed under the walkway between the giant concrete towers where the gangs and mutants lived, without challenge. They passed through the almost flattened centre of the City and skirted around the Temple of Paths and the old graveyards until ...

Pyper slipped through a hole in the chain-link fence that surrounded the redundant power station. Spires of twisted metal rose from the concrete oblong building, surrounding a central smokestack that soared to a seemingly impossible height. It was one of the few buildings that remained in tact. And it was one of the few buildings that no one, not even the mutants, ever went near, let alone in.

Pyper walked up to the keypad beside the building's only door.

Without hesitation, Zyra lifted a small pair of binoculars to her eyes just in time to see him enter the code — 314159. As Pyper entered, Zyra concealed the binoculars, silently giving thanks to the Designers that she had stolen them on another job just, three days earlier.

Zyra waited a minute then dashed to the door and keyed in the numbers. She entered the darkness and drew her knives.

As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she could make out a dim glow at the end of a corridor. Keeping close to the wall, she made her way to the end of the corridor, checking doors as she went. They were all locked, except the door at end. Cautiously pushing it open, she stepped into a cavernous, dimly lit room full of dormant machinery — a factory of some sort. Huge pistons and cogs and turbines; long, winding conveyor belts; gigantic metal claws and enormous compressors; all frozen in inactivity. Zyra noted the absence of dust or cobwebs. Although not currently in use, this machinery had recently been operative.

At the far end of the factory was another door. Zyra passed several vats of bubbling green liquid as she made her way to the door. She could hear voices from inside, but couldn't make out what they were saying. It sounded like two people. She took a deep breath, hoping she was right. This was it. If the tip-off was correct, and so far it had been, she and Tark were about to become VERY rich.

Zyra shouldered the door open and sprang into the room, knives at the ready.

'Greetings, dear lady,' said Pyper.

Zyra quickly scanned the room. More machinery, lots of computer equipment and only two people. Pyper, holding the jewel, and another man in a white coat, holding a beaker of some clear liquid. Neither of them appeared to be armed. Zyra grinned.

'Lets Tark go,' she demanded. 'Then hands over all yar jewels.'

'I'm so terribly sorry to disappoint you,' said Pyper, 'but that will not be possible. Professor von Munculus is in need of Tark's essence. And *one* ruby is all I need to perform my work.'

Zyra was slightly taken aback by the response, but did her best not to show it. 'I don't gets what yar up to and I don't cares. Just hands over Tark.'

'No!' Professor von Munculus stepped forward. 'Ve vill not be letting go of zis boy.' He spoke in a thick accent that Zyra found hard to understand. 'Unt ve will be taking your living essence also.'

Zyra stepped forward and raised one of her knives. 'Hands over Tark or does I haves ta makes ya?'

'You vill not be doing anything except vot I am telling you.'

'Your friend Tark has been captured within this ruby,' said Pyper, holding up the jewel. It began to glow gently.

'Unt zis is a highly volatile acid,' said von Munculus, holding the beaker of liquid beneath the ruby.

Pyper held the ruby delicately between thumb and forefinger. 'And if you, dear lady, do not do as you are bid, I shall, regrettably, be forced to drop Tark into the acid.' Pyper shrugged, as if to apologise.

'Ze ruby will be unharmed,' explained von Munculus, a degree of relish entering his voice. 'But ze boy vill be no more.' He made a strange little, high-pitched sound that was partway between a giggle and a sneeze.

'Wot's goin' on 'ere?' Zyra's mind flew through possible escape scenarios as she played for time. 'Why is there only one jewel? And wot's this about essence? Our snitch neva said nuthin' abouts essence. Said there wuz lots of jewels, is all.'

'I can explain about the ruby,' said Pyper. 'There is only one ruby because we have no need of more. Only I can use the ruby to capture people. I am a quasi-mage with but one very useful talent.' He took a little bow. 'I can lure and capture people with the ruby.' He smiled. 'As I am doing with you.'

Zyra suddenly realised that she had taken two steps towards Pyper and the ruby, which now pulsed with an inner light. She concentrated hard on staying still, as Pyper continued.

'I have been employed by the esteemed Professor to capture people who ... how shall I put this ... who most others will not miss. I have several people in my employ spreading rumours of jewels among the thieving populous.'

Zyra took another step forward.

Von Munculus took up the explanation. 'Vunce Pyper releases zose he has captured, I use my machinery to drain ze living essence from zeir bodies.'

'Wot?' Zyra reached out an arm towards the ruby, dropping one knife as she did so. 'Why?'

'I am in ze business of creating artificial persons. But each of zese creations needs a living essence, and zis is something zat only ze Designers may create. So, I have Pyper steal vot I cannot make.'

'Steal is such a harsh word.' Pyper smiled. 'Try *acquired*.'

Von Munculus rolled his eyes. 'Vatever.'

'Huh?' Zyra's hand was now only inches from the ruby. Sweat trickled from her forehead, glistening on the piercings that decorated her eyebrows.

'Be very sure,' said Pyper.

'Oh, I is sure,' Zyra whispered. 'Very sure.' Her hand shot through the air, past the ruby Pyper was holding, knocking the beaker of acid from the professor's hand. It splashed up into his face.

Von Munculus fell to the floor clutching his face, screeching in a demented, high-pitch quaver.

'I is stronger than ya thinks,' snarled Zyra, knife blade at Pyper's throat. 'Now, hands over Tark.'

'As you wish, dear lady.' Pyper gulped. 'But you will need to stand back.'

'Don't ya tries nuthin'.' Warily, Zyra pulled her knife back and took a step away from Pyper, watching him suspiciously all the while. 'I is watchin' ya. And I is ready.'

'Have no fear, dear lady. I promise to behave. You have bested me and defeated my employer.' He nodded towards the professor's now still form, lying face down on the concrete floor in a puddle of green ooze. 'I have no need of your Tark. And I am nothing, if not a man of my word.'

He held out the ruby, which glowed even more brilliantly with its inner light. And suddenly Tark was there, reaching out towards the jewel. 'Oh, I is sure, alrights.'

'Stop!' yelled Zyra. 'Don'ts touch it!'

Tark snatched his hand back, a bewildered look in his eyes.

'It is safe, now, to touch,' said Pyper. 'It is but an ordinary ruby unless I will it otherwise. And I do not will it.' He smiled, eyes sparkling. 'Take it, sir. 'Tis yours.'

Tark hesitated, glancing nervously at Zyra.

Zyra had to stop herself from rushing forward and hugging Tark. Instead she nodded, casually walking over to stand beside him as he took the ruby.

'Now, wots are we gonna do with ya?'

Pyper shrugged. 'Perchance I could purchase my freedom?'

Zyra raised a pierced eyebrow.

'I realise I said I had need of but one ruby.' Pyper reached into his doublet. 'But I always keep a spare or two, just in case.' He held out his hand, two similar sized rubies sitting in his palm.

'Deal!' Zyra snatched up the rubies and pocketed them.

Picking up her earlier discarded knife, she turned back to Pyper, pointing it at him. 'Don'ts ya tries followin' us.'

Pyper raised his hands. 'Wouldn't dream of it.'

Zyra nodded, then lead Tark out of the room and the building.

The moment they were gone, Pyper walked over to Professor von Munculus and turned him over with his booted foot. The flesh of the professor's face had been melted away, revealing a metal framework filled with sizzling wires.

Pyper crouched down and rifled through the professor's pockets until he found a small bag of coins. 'I trust you have no objection to my being paid.' He continued to search the professor, a smile forming as he pulled a Designers Paradise key from the inner pocket of his coat. 'And, I dare say, you will not be in need of this.'

Pyper rose to his feet and reverently held up the card-like key.

'Praise be to the Designers.'