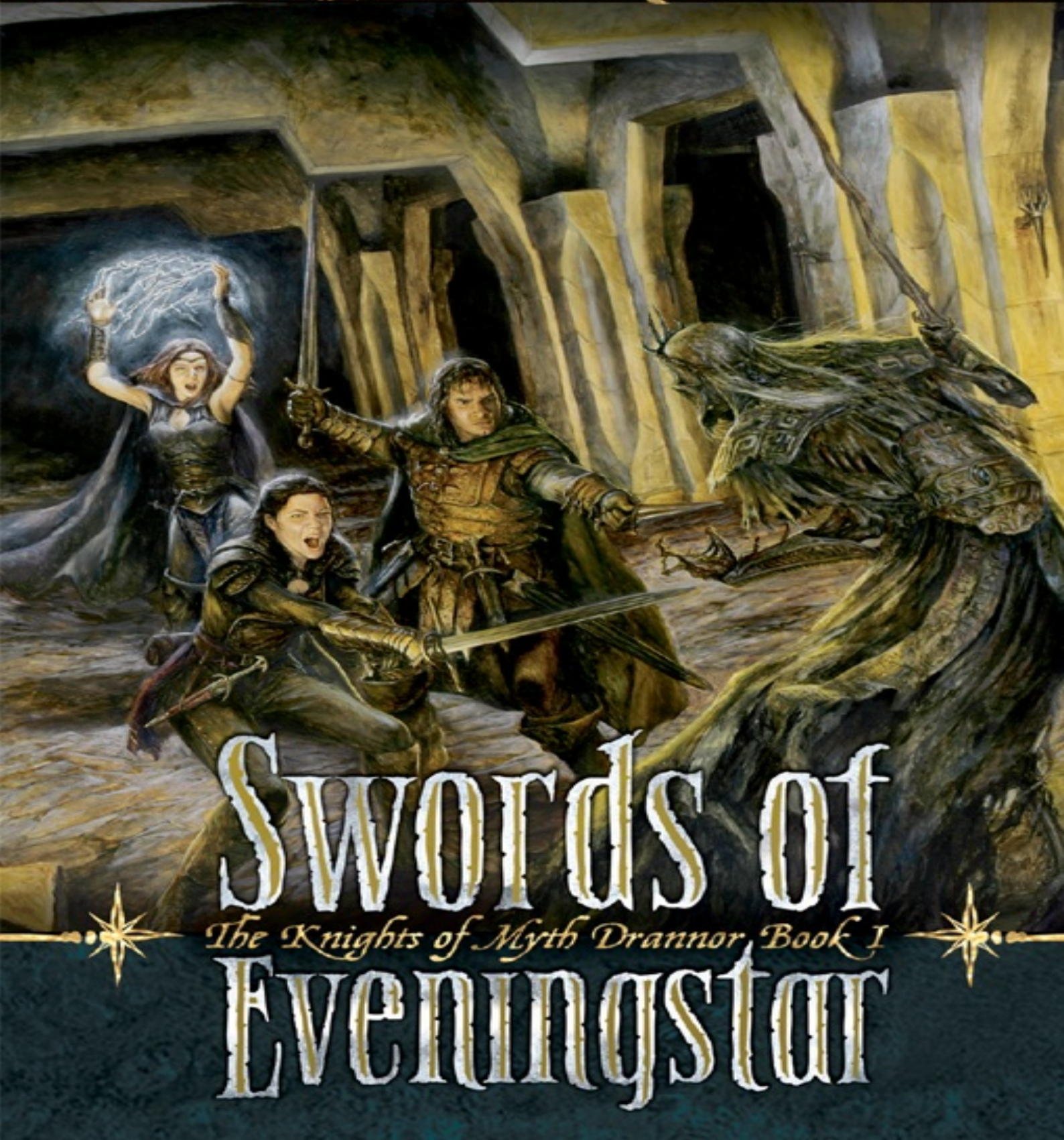


FORGOTTEN REALMS

Ed Greenwood



Swords of

The Knights of Myth Drannor, Book I

Everingstar

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Swords of
The Knights of Myth Drannor, Book 1
Eveningstar



SWORDS OF EVENINGSTAR

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Cover art by: Matt Stewart

Map by: Todd Gamble

eISBN: 978-0-7869-6171-9

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**Caveat lector. Non solum fumo speculisque, sed etiam tintinnabulis fistulisque factus
est.**

This one's for Andrew, Victor, John, Ian, Anita, Jim, Cathy, Jenny, and all who've brought the Knights to life over the years. May you always ride in glory.

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Epilogue

Now in the time of which I have the honor to write, the fair realm of Cormyr was suffering from a dearth of adventurers, which is to say: an uncustomary shortage of fools ...

Ragefast, Sage of Baldur's Gate
*Gloryswords: An Informal And
Incomplete Overview of Adventuring
Bands in the Year of the Spur
published in the Year of the Gauntlet*





Delyn Laquilavvar laughed in farewell and let the mists claim him. Then he was falling, brief and silent plunge toward an elusive brightness beyond the swirling blue endlessness ...

His boot came down on soft moss, the great dark trees familiar and friendly around him. Sunfall soon; the shadows were already long as he crossed his glade. The unseen wards stirred at his approach, and amid their gentle caresses Delyn of the Seven Spells chuckled softly, remembering the merry jests Fluevrelle and the others had just flung.

Most elf mages—if they disliked bullying apprentices or taking awed and fearful lovers—walked alone, and grew as wary as the ancient Horned Ones of the forests. He was fortunate to have such friends, and so escape tha—

His wards hummed serene and unbroken, nothing amiss. Nor had the ancient way he'd just taken, to cross half of Faerûn with a single step, been a whit different.

So why now, with his wards singing all around him, was something coiling—*uncoiling*—sickeningly, deep inside him.

“What—?”

He'd time for no more than that before something gnawing, strange, and impossibly large surged up into his throat, chokingly ...

Delyn reeled, clawing vainly at the empty air. His tree-cats, who'd been mincing unconcernedly to join him, now shrank back, arching and hissing.

Whatdoomcanthisbe? Wherewhatracingoutofmyownmindto—to—



The elf swayed, face as white as winter moonlight, towering over Myrithla, eldest and longest of his furred companions, who watched in grim fear as her master's eyes went as dark and empty as the sockets of a skull. Even before they shriveled, she could see that he was no longer there behind them.

No one was.

Whatever had been Delyn Laquilavvar had been snatched—or drained—away, leaving behind a suddenly spasming, trembling body that flung wide its arms, dropped its jaw slack to drool a foamy river, and ... started to flare at its fingertips.

Flare as in *flames*, licking and rising, as swiftly as if the elf were dry deadwood and not living flesh.

Myrithla hated fire, and sprang back, spitting in fear. The other rethren were already fleeing behind her, mewling their terror in loud unison.

Their cries were abruptly drowned out by a loud wail, a shriek that burst not from the elf mage's mouth but from his every orifice, air and juices boiling forth together as the flames built into their own roar.

Myrithla flung herself back, heedless of rough landing.

Her master was a column of flame, already shedding ashes, the air thick with the stink of scorched meat ...

And like all rethren, Myrithla hated her meat cooked.



The scrying orb glowed brightly, lighting up a soft smile.

The column of flames in its depths was already beginning to shrink and flicker, the evening gloom of that distant deep-forest glade returning around its fading brilliance.

“Perfect,” said the owner of that smile, in a voice soft with satisfaction. “And such spell Laquilavvar! This one should give me just the key I need to open Dathnyar’s wards. *Thank you.*”

Great things befall when one is brave enough to do something bold, strange, and unusual. Something off one's daily trail, apart from one's chosen character and station and presented-to-the-world mask. Great things—or terrible. Or merely pratfalls and troublesome chaos in their wake.

All of which proves one thing beyond all doubt: Whatever gods watch over us, they're starved for amusement, and richly reward those who entertain them.

Ulvryn Hamdarakh, Sage of Saelmur
Musings On Mortality
published in the Year of the Dying Stars





It had been a bright and glorious day of listening to the new leaves rustle around her every time the gentle breeze set them to fluttering.

Yet the late Tarsakh sun stabbed through them, eager and hot. The Purple Dragon was glad to doff her helm and step into the roadside shade when the gruff old lionar led a dozen fresh blades to her post and told her she was done until next sunrise.

Though the bustle of Waymoot was just around the bend behind her, she went the other way, striding straight to the smells that had been tantalizing her.

The farmwife who'd been selling apples and fresh bread whisked aside the fly blanket from their baskets at her approach, her smile widening.

"Tummy trumpeting?"

"And how," the warrior replied, fumbling for her purse. "Gods, I feel I could eat—eat—"

She stared past the end of the farmwife's cart at something in the trees beyond, her jaw dropping open and her words trailing away forgotten.

The farmwife peered—and grinned. "Him? Aye, I think half the folk hereabouts could give the chance. The female half."

The Purple Dragon swallowed. "Who is he?"

They stood elbow to elbow, watching a tall, broad-shouldered man coming out of the trees as quietly as a passing breeze. His stride was long and liquid, his square-jawed face as handsome as—

"King Azoun," the warrior whispered. "He carries himself like a king."

The apparition's level blue-gray eyes had noted the two women several soft strides ago, but flicked a glance at them again now. Their owner added a firm smile and a nod—and then was across the road and into the trees on its far side, his dusty brown leathers vanishing among them in a few strides.

The farmwife chuckled. "Nay, he's not one of the king's brood. Or so his parents claim. Prentice to the armorer Hawkstone these last few seasons, but seeking the king's coin as forester now, I hear. 'The Silent,' they call him hereabouts. You can see why."

The Purple Dragon licked her lips, cleared her throat, and blinked as if banishing daydreams. "Now that," she said almost regretfully, "was what a man should look like."

The farmwife turned to her. "The *Rebel Prince*. Chapter Three. Boldgrim the Outlaw!"

The warrior nodded eagerly. "You read *Goldghallow* too?"

The farmwife beamed. "Aye, I've every one of his at home—including the ah, Blackcover edition of *The Nymph Said No*."

The Purple Dragon's jaw dropped open again. This time, one of the flies that had been buzzing around the food took a chance and flew into her mouth.

When she was done choking, the farmwife flung an arm around her and said, "Eat what you want for free, dear—and take latestew with me this night. Rhabran's gone to mark these two nights, now, and we can talk all we want. *After* you read the naughty bits."



The shadows in the sun-dappled shade were deepening; sunset wasn't far off. Florin move

quickly, gliding through ferns like a ghost. Queen of the Forest, but he loved these walks. The deep green shadows, the magnificent trees, gnarled and vast and patient, sentinels that had seen dozens of passing kings of Cormyr, and stags beyond number ...

He was *of* the forest, he felt at peace here. This was where he belonged.

And yet as spring quickened toward summer in this Year of the Spur, there was a restlessness rising in Florin Falconhand.

Not the weariness of hot metal and forge-crash and ringing, numbing hammerwork that had driven him here from Hawkstone's service, despite his passable skills, but ... something else. Something that was riding him as eagerly as his fellow youngbloods of Espar were riding their lasses this spring, despite the peace of the forest. He gave the trees around him a smile. He didn't want anything more than this.

But somehow, he *needed* something more than this.

Soft-footed and sure, Florin strode on, along a ridge that would bring him back to the king's road again.

Unthinkingly, as he threaded his way around rocks upon rocks, he set enjoyment of the forest aside to wonder rather irritably what it was, this mysterious 'something' he yearned for ... and abruptly became aware that a new sound had joined the whirring wings and chirping calls of the berrybirds all around.

A distant, faint, confused sound that didn't belong here, in the deep stillness of the forest.

A few long strides took him close enough to know that it was a human voice—a high, furious woman's voice, with the shrill, thin fluting accents of highnose Suzail. Someone rich, then, or even noble, but cursing like ... like ...

Well, like no one Florin had ever heard before. He was used to the snarled "tuin, sabruin, and hrast" of the exasperated, and everyone said "naeth" in surprise or dismay, but *this* ...

This was something new.

Florin headed toward the voice as swiftly as he could soft-stride, leaves dancing in his wake. It was rising into a screech, like the cooks did at Tlarnuth's in Espar, savaging each other after emptying too many tankards, unfamiliar words coming out in a fluid rush, and ... yes, there, again: being answered by a deeper voice that spoke but little.

Florin ducked under a long-fallen tree cloaked in moss, slithered down a muddy bank beyond, and was close enough to hear properly at last.

"Lady, I—" It was a man's voice, low, gravel-rough, and to Florin's ear somehow familiar.

"'Lady' nothing, sirrah! 'Oh, pretty lady,' you mouth, but your words are empty, *empty*—and your head emptier still! Deeds, not words, knave! Deeds! Treat me as a lady and I am one—but insist I am one yet treat me as any common trull, some prettily dressed *slave* of yours, and you make me that!"

"Lady," the man said heavily, "I have my orders. They're quite clear and em—"

"*Hah!* What care *I* for your orders, sirrah? You say I am a lady, and so I am—and that means *I* give orders, and *you* obey! O, watching gods above, *why* must I be saddled with such a hog-faced, slop-guzzling idiot *dog* of a miscreant?"

Florin winced, embarrassed by this venom almost into retreating back into the trees, yet fascinated.

The angry lady whooped for breath and went on. "Brutish in words and deeds and at your trencher, before all the gods! You call *this* food? Fare fit for dogs, aye, and for any passing

hog, but not for a lady of the realm!”

The next word was a screech of pure rage, as if words had failed she who insisted so strongly on being a lady, and left her clawing the air in search of what next to say.

She found something.

“Villainous *traitor!* Seek to poison a Crownsilver? Sirrah, royal blood runs in my veins—*am* Cormyr! When you seek to harm me, you harm all Cormyr! The next Purple Dragon I see I’ll inform of your treachery, and have you put to the sword! Keep me captive, drag me into this *horrible* wilderness, feed me chopped and stirred *offal*—why, I’ll see you dead for it! You—yet—you’ll suffer first!”

There followed a violent wet sound akin to a wet fish being slapped on a riverside rock, a short, choked-off male growl of anger, and the furious feminine voice rose again, a little farther off.

“Whoreson! Rogue! You’ll die begging for my forgiveness—and I’ll not give it, and start smiling as they lop off your head!”

“Lady—”

Florin had heard that tone of exasperated protest before, and knew who the man was, now Delbossan! Horsemaster to Hezom, Lord of Espar, a man he’d known all his life. But who was this spitfire of the loud and murderous rage? Hezom had no daughter, to curse a man in the forest for—

“Oh, yes, *Master* Delbossan, you’ll *die* for this! I will have it so!”

With a final shriek of outraged dismissal, the harridan—by the Dragon, the Lady Harridan—fell silent.

A smirking Florin ducked around the last few trees, crouching low to avoid thorncanes, and peered out onto a pleasant view of one of the old woodcutters’ glades beside the king’s road long ago gone to grass and much used for camping.

Its well-trodden grass was dominated by a grand pavilion tent of flame-orange hue that had been pitched at the far end of the glade. Several horses had been hobbled at the near end, and a dainty coach sat in its trail between, with two of Hezom’s guardsmen wincing and grinning in its lee, not yet daring to peer around the conveyance at what sat glumly beyond.

Not far in front of the pavilion a tiny fire flickered on scorched stones, and sitting on a log before it was Irlgar Delbossan, wearing the remains of a—yes, a *large* bowl’s worth of steamed meat that had been dumped all over his head.

Florin slipped out of the trees so swiftly and quietly that he was halfway across the glade before the two guards saw him. They came around the coach in a hasty scramble, swords singing out—but Delbossan looked up, gave Florin a hard stare that turned into a sour smile of recognition, and waved the men back whence they’d come.

Flies were already buzzing around the horsemaster. There was—Florin sniffed appreciatively—rabbit stew, still steaming and thick with toasted bread-ends and a thick herbed gravy, all over Delbossan’s shoulders and lap, and piled high on his head.

Some of it fell from brow to lap with a slow, inexorable *plop* as Florin came to a halt, trying *very* hard not to chuckle.

“New way of banishing baldpate, Del?” He couldn’t quite keep a smile off his face.

Delbossan scowled. “I suppose your four friends are trailing along behind ye, to come and laugh at me, too.”

“Nay, friend, Tymora smiles upon you: I’m alone.”

“Good. I wearied of Jhessail’s merry tinkling waterfall long ago.”

“Her—? Oh. When she laughs. Aye.”

Planting one boot on the battered strongchest the horsemaster had been using as a dining table, Florin leaned forward, chin in hand, and smiled down at his friend. “So give. Tell me why rabbit stew—*good* rabbit stew by the smell—ends up piled high on the head of Irlg Delbossan, horsemaster bold!”

Delbossan sighed and leaned out to reclaim one of the discarded bowls. The loud lady who’d presumably flounced off into the pavilion had obviously slammed her own bowl of stew down over his head, flung it aside, and plucked up his own to season him a second time. Holding the bowl glumly under his chin, he raked a goodly amount of stew down off his head into it.

Florin fought the urge to laugh quite successfully this time.

With gravy running in rivulets down his face, Delbossan looked up and muttered, “I’m at my wit’s end, lad. Yon flaming chit of a noble lass—ye heard her, I know ye did—Horns of the Hunt, half the King’s stlarning *Forest* heard her!—has driven me half mad already. I can see why her parents have had it to *here* with her!”

“Nobles, aye? Who *is* she? And what’re you doing with her out here, in the trees? Aren’t her sort all ‘prithee dance me around my great hall’ types, all gowns and gaudy airs in hearth-of-all-Faerûn Suzail?”

Delbossan grinned despite himself and licked stew from the back of one hairy hand. Then, as if remembering his manners, he held out the bowl with a dainty flourish. “Stew, lad?”

Florin almost choked, trying not to roar with laughter, but managed to wave the offer away.

Delbossan grinned and got up, stamping his feet to shake great clumps of stew from himself, and headed for the trees. To wash himself clean in the stream that looped around and wandered back there, of course. Florin followed, even before the horsemaster’s beckoning wave.

Delbossan sent the two guards out into the glade with a quick hand signal, waved away their grins good-naturedly, and strode along a little trail that led to a privy, and past it toward the faint tinkle of moving water.

“She’s a fair demon, lad,” he said, wading out into the stream and sitting down. Fish glided away as the horsemaster winced—this creek ran fast and cold—and lowered himself onto his back. “As ye doubtless heard. Like I said, even her parents are fair tired of her high-handed, haughty-to-all behavior. ‘Despairing,’ was the word our lord used. She’s a Crownsilver, and wants all the world to know it.”

“That much I heard. One of the three ‘royal noble’ houses, aye? Yet I must confess, Del, I know nothing much about them. ‘Proud Crownsilvers, fierce Huntsilvers, and Truesilvers bold/Give Obarskyr silver and trouble enough, but no gold.’ Her parents sent her *away*? To Lord *Hezom*?”

“Sent her to be trained so she’ll not shame them the more. And aye, Lord Hezom sent me down to throne-town to fetch her back up to Espar for his tutoring. The Lady Naranth, Crownsilver, as charming a lass as ever kicked me, dumped my best rabbit stew all over me, slapped me, raked my face with her nails, and shrieked at me worse than any drunkard

lowcoin lass! Lad, it seems nobles don't bridle their younglings, these days!"

Florin shook his head in disbelief. "So this banishment is to be punishment for her?"

"Belike they want her temper trained in private, instead of before all Suzail—so 'tis the upcountry backwoods, where stride the likes of ye and me, and no highnose gowned lady goes!" The horsemaster raked the last of the stew out of his hair. Now that it was gone from his face, Florin could see two crisscrossing rows of fresh bloody scratches the Lady Crownsilver had left on Delbossan's cheek, by way of loving adornment.

Their eyes met, and both men shook their heads in unison.

"I can't believe I'm doing this, lad," said Delbossan.

"I can't see Lord Hezom taming her—not unless he's planning on using you, Tarleth, and all your whips and bridles to break her!"

"Ha ha, lad, tempt me not," Delbossan replied, rising and shaking himself like a dog to be rid of a dripcloak of water.

Florin waved an arm at the stream. "So, has she an oh-so-haughty servant to bathe her, or are you expected to do that, too?"

"Dismissed all her maids, or they fled," the horsemaster growled. "She half-slew the lady one, I hear. And no, I don't expect to be plying any backscrapers or holding out any drycloaks on this trip, young Florin! Don't be spreading word I have been, either!"

"*Del*," Florin said reprovingly, "that's not my way."

"I know it, lad," the horsemaster growled, wading out of the stream and squelching past Florin. "'S just I've got troubles enough, about now, without half the King's Forest thinking I'm *bedding* this dragon!"

"Dragon, is it? Face full of fangs, has she? Ugly as an old toad?"

"Oh, she's beautiful enough—if ye like ivory curves mated with the tongue, temper, and nails of a snarling wardog!"

The horsemaster turned, shaking his head, and added, "Must be rooted in being reared noble—no woman of Espar behaves thus!"

Florin surprised himself then. Without really knowing why, he found himself clasping Delbossan's forearms, leaning down over the older man in his urgency, blurting, "Let *me* do it, *Del*. Let me take her on a—a little foray through the forest, then back to meet up with you again. I can follow the Dathyl here up past Espar, and join you at Hunter's Hollow!"

The horsemaster blinked at him in utter astonishment.

"Wha—*why*?"

"I—I think I can break in yon highnose-lass a bit, *without* whips, lead-reins, bowls of stew, or Lord Hezom made miserable for a summer, with ... well, a walk in the woods!"

Delbossan stared at Florin. His jaw had dropped open.

"Let the mud, the thorns, the stinging insects—and feeling lost, cold, and hungry, to say nothing of the little matter of having to *walk* a good distance," Florin said swiftly, shaking his old friend, "break her high-and-mightiness, or at least tire her out a bit and make her a shade more grateful for having shelter and riches. I could pretend to be a beast or outlaw after dusk, and chase her out of her tent—and then rescue her, as Florin the wandering forester does the moment she's in the deep trees."

"*Lad!* She's not to be touched! If—" Delbossan's voice was raw with horror.

"I can control my lusts, thank you, Master Delbossan," Florin said firmly. "And I believe

you know me well enough to be sure I'm chasing no ransom here. Nor rescue-coin."

"But why by all the *gods* would ye want to get mixed up in this? She's—"

"Del, I've never even *seen* a noble, let alone talked to one! And beautiful, you say! Silk velvet, facepaint, and airy graces—all *here*, not in stinking Suzail with me trying to peer past half a hundred glaring guards, to even get a glimpse of her!"

"But if she's harmed—if she even thinks ye've pawed her, whate'er the truth, lad, your life is forfeit and so's mine! I dare not—"

"Let her starve on the road to Espar because your bald head is so greedy for rabbit stew!"

The horsemaster shook his head and plucked himself free of Florin's grasp.

"Ye're wanderwitted, lad. Wild-crazed!"

"I'm ... perhaps I am. Del, hear me! I—don't you remember when you were young? I'd like that *now*, aye?"

The horsemaster's look of horror deepened. "Ye want to bed half Espar, without any of them knowing about the oth—?" Then, as Florin's expression changed to one of amazement, Delbossan flushed a deep red, shut his mouth like a poacher's trap, shook his head violently, and whirled around to stamp back down the trail.

"Del!" Florin hissed urgently, grabbing at his arm. "Del, *listen!*"

The horsemaster kept walking.

"Del," Florin said quickly, into the older man's ear, "you trained me! As a little lad, with smiles, apples, and letting me ride: you trained me. I'm a steed you schooled and sent into the world seeing things your way. My parents told me what was decent and right, aye, but you made their words true by showing me they weren't just trying to sway me with empty speeches—just by being yourself, you showed me what it is to be of Cormyr. You know what I will and won't do."

The horsemaster swung around again.

"Lad," he said heavily, "ye're what they call 'handsome.' I'd hate to be the cause of the twinning of ye—both young, both headstrong—rutting because ye're alone together. What if ye get hurt with *child*? Hey? What then? I say again: her life would be ruined, but thine and mine'd be ended, short and sharp! If not by blade by the king's decree, then by bow or dagger, some night soon, on Lord Crownsilver's orders!"

"Thaerefoil," Florin said firmly, fingers busy at one of his belt pouches. He held out the leaves for Delbossan to see. "You know what it does."

"Makes even a stallion less than a man," the horsemaster murmured, bending to smell the leaves. "Fresh. Ye just gathered these."

"I did. Not with this in mind, but ..."

Delbossan looked up at the young forester. "Ye'd drink a tea made with this—of me making, and with me watching?"

Florin put the smallest leaf in his mouth, chewed, opened his mouth to show the horsemaster its crushed paste on his tongue, swallowed, and opened his mouth again for inspection.

"Gods above," Delbossan murmured, "that much'll unman ye for days!" He gave Florin a long look. "And if she runs off and breaks her neck, or gets eaten by wolves?"

Florin drew his dagger. "This shall defend her. No harm will come to her, and I'll demand no coin of her family nor spread falsehood about her. I swear by the Purple Dragon and by

the honor of the Falconhands. I swear by the Lady of the Forest I serve.”

His last sentence seemed to roll away among the trees, echoing weirdly, and as Delbossa stepped back in amazement, leaves everywhere seemed to glow, for just a moment. The old man caught his breath as he watched them fade.

Florin seemed unaware of both glow and voice-thunder, but stood eyeing the horsemaster his gaze steady. “Well?”

Teeth flashed in Delbossan’s sudden smile. “Lad, I begin to feel delighted. Mind ye tell me all about it, after.”

They clasped forearms, as one warrior to another, and the horsemaster leaned forward and muttered conspiratorially, “Do nothing until nightfall—and then wait ’til ye hear yon two jackblades snoring ...”

Chapter 2

A HUNGER FOR ADVENTURE

Grand adventures are tales full of wonder, daring, and peril. They all began as slapdash accounts of some folk having a horrible time, long ago and far away, and found a little lace and glimmer along the way.

Thus do sages solemnly record all 'history.' Whatever gods smile upon you grant that storytellers favor your tale, so that it displays you brightly, and twists you not so much that your very name and face are lost.

*Arasper Ardanneth,
Sage of the Road
Arasper's Little Book
published in the Year of the Prince*





To the north of the scattered cottages of Espar, grassgirt hills rise west of the King's Road. Rolling like half-buried green leviathans for a long way north ere the woodlots scattered across their humpbacks rise and join together into true forest again.

To the west, the hills find close-tangled trees more swiftly. The folk of Espar are not so numerous as to hew firewood enough to swiftly thrust back the woods.

On the crest of the highest hill, at the edge of that close and familiar forest, stand the tumbled foundation stones of a ruined, long-fallen cottage. No man alive in Espar can recall who dwelt there, or when it fell into ruin. All know it as 'the Stronghold,' though it was never a keep. For generations it has been the playground of the boldest youths of Espar.

Two such bold youths, young lads in dusty breeches, boots, and homespun, were lounging against its weathered stones, watching the sun descend toward the trees. One had just arrived, puffing slightly from his eager trot up the hillside, and had been greeted thus: "Hail, Clumsum."

"Hail, Stoop," the arrival replied calmly. He rarely sounded anything other than calm, which was unusual in a youngling—or anyone else—who bore the silver Ladycoin about his neck and sought to be ordained in the service of Tymora. His name was not 'Clumsum' though few in Espar called him anything else. "Saw you down by the creek this morn. Much luck?"

"Much luck, thanks to your tireless prayers," came the gently sarcastic reply, "but not so much fish." As if to punctuate that statement, the speaker's stomach rumbled loudly. He added a sigh, tossed aside a tough blade of grass, and plucked another to chew upon. Though he was 'Stoop' to most of Espar, that wasn't his real name either. And although he bore around his neck not a luck-coin of Tymora but a sunrise disk of Lathander he'd painted himself, the two Esparrans were firm friends, and always had been. Doust Sulwood and Semoor Wolftooth: Clumsum and Stoop.

"Sit, Doust," Semoor said around his blade of grass, waving at an adjacent stone. "The sheep will be late. As usual." His boots were propped on a rock before him, and his words came floating lazily past them.

Doust grinned and sat, saying by way of reply, "Well, they *do* have more chores than we."

His friend made a rude, dismissive sound halfway between a snort and a spit, and shifted his feet a trifle to give Doust room to prop his own boots up on the same handy rock. Semoor looked even more sleepy than was his wont. There was an easy smile on his rumped face, and his shoulder-length hair was its usual dusty brown rats' nest. His overlarge nose jutted out at the world as it always did, giving him something of the look of a vulture.

Just now, he was waving a disdainful hand at the hillside below.

As usual, the sward was dotted with Hlorn Estle's flock of patiently grazing sheep—and as usual, Hlorn's three sons were sitting here and there on the slope, eyeing the two lads up at the Stronghold suspiciously.

"'Tis so nice," Semoor said sarcastically, "to be wanted."

"Ah, I see the Morninglord's rosy glow doth suffuse thee, this even," Doust observed with a little smile, selecting his own blade of grass.

"Sabruin," Semoor drawled, choosing the least polite way of saying 'go pleasure yourself.'

“After you do the same, so I can watch and learn how,” Doust responded, and then pointed into the trees across the road below and added in satisfaction, “Ah! Islif comes!”

“Jhess’ll get here first,” his friend replied, pointing across the hillside to where the sheep were gathered most thickly.

Doust scrambled to his feet. “Huh! Belkur’ll set the dogs on her, if she goes walking right through the herd!”

“He already has—and she’s worked some spell or other; they won’t go near her,” Semoor said delightedly.

Belkur Estle’s snarled curses rose clearly into the evening air, amid canine whinings—and through them came a petite lass in long, gray skirts, striding as unconcernedly as if the fields were hers and empty but for her strolling self. Fiery orange-brown hair fell free around her shoulders in a tumbling flood, and her eyes were large, gray-green, and merry.

“Ho, sluggards,” she greeted them, lifting her skirts to reveal wineskins hooked about both her garters. She proffered them with a wide grin.

It was matched, with enthusiasm. Semoor plucked one skin and unstopped it eagerly. “Ah, Flamehair, Lathander sent you!”

“No,” Doust disagreed, claiming the other skin and sitting down again, “I believe Tymor—”

“And I rather believe *I* managed to bring myself here—and steal the wine from Father’s empty vat, too,” Jhessail told them tartly. “Don’t get drunk, now, holy men; I grow tired of slapping the both of you at once.”

“Ah,” Semoor told her slyly, “but we never tire of being slapped!”

“Sabruin,” Jhessail told him in a dignified tone, settling herself between them. Both promptly laid hands on her thighs in hopes of being slapped, but she gave them withering glances instead. They grinned, shrugged, and applied themselves to emptying wineskins.

A young woman taller and more heavily muscled than anyone on the hillside—including the sheep—was striding up the hill now, clanking as she came. As straight as a blade and as broad of shoulder as the village smith, Islif Lurelake was in a hurry. Some of the Estle dogs barked at her, but none dared rush her, because a drawn sword was gleaming in her hand.

The clanking was familiar; it came from her homemade battle-coat, an old leather jerkin onto which Islif had sewn castoff fragments of old plate-armor in an overlapping array. But none of the three in the Stronghold had ever seen that splendid sword before.

“Heyah, Islif!” Semoor Wolftooth called, when the striding woman was still a good way below. “Where’d you get *that*?”

The warrior woman lifted icy gray eyes that stabbed at him like two sword points and said flatly, “From Bardeluk.”

Doust frowned in thought. “Uh ... oh, Lord Hezom’s new guard, aye?”

“Ho ho,” Semoor said teasingly. “*Persuaded* him to give you his second-best blade, did you? Just like that?”

Islif Lurelake strode into the Stronghold and came to a halt, towering over them. When she was this close, broad-shouldered and buxom, her arms corded with muscles Doust and Semoor would have given much to call their own, the battle-coat lost all hint of the ridiculous. She was striking rather than beautiful, with a hard, long-jawed face that had caused her to be dubbed ‘Horseface’ more than once by unfriendly tongues, and her jet-black

hair was cut short in a warriors' helm-bob. With those piercing, almost silver eyes, she looked as dangerous as the sword in her hand.

"I didn't sleep with him, if that's what you mean."

The would-be servant of Lathander lifted his sunrise disk and told it, "Oh, I never thought you'd been *sleeping*, in all those half-days—half-days, lass!—you've spent behind closed doors with, ah, *fortunate* Master Bardeluk."

Islif snorted, and nudged him with the metal-shod toe of a much-patched boot. "What a *small* mind you have, holynose! I've been shut up teaching him to read and write. This—" She hefted the long, slightly curved longsword, and they saw a blue sheen race down it—"was my price, from the beginning."

"Stop waving that about," Jhessail said quietly. "You're ... impressing me."

Islif grounded the blade on the toe of one boot—and surprised them all by smiling broadly. "Well," she said, bright teeth flashing, "that's a start."

"You're certainly impressing the Estle boys," Doust observed. "Their eyes are like roundshields!"

Jhessail looked downslope. "They look less impressed than suspicious to me." She sniffed. "Afraid we'll pounce on one of their precious sheep and butcher it right here, belike."

"Huh," Semoor grunted. "More likely they're hoping we'll start kissing, and you'll take your clothes off. That's what *they* use the Stronghold for."

"Live in hope, don't you, Wolf?" Jhessail replied, her words dripping acid.

The priestling of Lathander shrugged and spread his hands—an elaborate gesture somewhat spoiled by the half-empty wineskin wrapped around one of them. "Lady Flamehair," he explained, as if to an idiot child, "that's what holy folk *do*. Live in the hope that the gods will grant us, every day."

"Until, in the fullness of time, you die like everyone else," Islif commented, extending a imperious hand for his wineskin.

Semoor pretended not to notice, and declaimed, "Islif Lurelake, Jhessail Silvertree, Semoor Wolftooth, and Doust Sulwood—adventurers bold!"

Doust sighed. "I'm not so sure 'bold' is telling truth. Say: restless for adventure."

"And you neglected to mention the boldest of us all," Jhessail said, from between the two priestlings. "Florin, who's off somewhere tracking stags and exploring the King's Forest right now!"

It was Semoor's turn to sigh. "The man in whose shadow I dwell, day after month after season."

"Well, that's because you're not—in truth—bold enough," Islif pointed out, firmly plucking the wineskin from his grasp as a breeze rose at her back, setting the leaves rustling. "Florin is. Which is why he's elsewhere, whilst we sit here watching the last of the day fade, talking and dreaming—and no more than that."

"But we can't just go tearing off into the woods hacking at things and telling everyone we're adventurers!" Semoor's growl was as fierce as it was sudden. "Or 'tis the inside of one of the king's *jails* we'll be finding, soon enough! We need a charter—and charters cost coins, and none of us have!"

Doust looked at his friend, his eyes even darker blue than usual. "Coins we could scrape together, but we *still* have to convince someone we deserve a charter, and by all Tymora

holy kisses, I don't know how! Would *you* grant a bunch of restless younglings license to wander about the realm, hacking at things and *looking* for trouble?"

Semoor snorted. "Of course. Stupid question. Fortunately for the realm—and ill luck for me—I'm not King Azoun."

"Stoop, don't *say* that. Tymora frowns on those who speak of ... ah, 'poor fortune.' "

" 'Tisn't Lady Luck's frown that makes me despair of ever managing to convince any court official to grant us a charter," Jhessail snapped, her face going red. "I mean, *look* at us! Bored restless younglings, yes? Get apprenticed, they'll say! Learn a trade! Earn an honest day-coi. And send word back to us that you've done so, to save us the trouble of sending a war wizard by to peer at you as we serve all the malcontents!"

She stopped waving her arms suddenly, snatched the wineskin Doust was holding, and took a long, deep drink.

The two priestlings exchanged glances. Semoor spoke first.

"Let's just go to Sembia, and to the Nine Hells with a charter!"

Jhessail gave him a fierce look. "And bid farewell to *Cormyr*?" She waved down the hill at its ripples of waving grass, then swung around to indicate the gently dancing leaves in the great gnarled trees above. "Our home? Leave *this*?"

"Well," Islif said dryly, "I haven't noticed any great mustering of outlaws in Espar. C hoards of treasure, dragons' caves, or evil wizards, for that matter. And if we walk around our neighbors' lanes and pastures trying to stir up adventure, there soon will be outlaw hereabouts: us."

"Aye," Doust said slowly, gazing out across the fields, "Espar's a fair and pleasant place ... but watching sheep wander is about all the excitement any who dwell here can expect, most days."

"Most *years*," Semoor corrected sourly.

Islif shrugged. "If we ever—somehow—become adventurers, staying dry and warm and fendng off hunger may well become daily excitements."

"Always the cheery merry-maid, aren't you?" Semoor sighed, turning his sunrise disk of Lathander over and over in his fingers.

"I'm easier on the ears than some always-sharptongues I could name," the warrior-lady replied, hefting her sword meaningfully.

"Oooh," the priestling of Lathander gasped in mock-terror, recoiling with all the subtlety of old Laedreth the Lute playacting a frightened queen in the greatroom of the Eye, with a few tankards inside him. "You're so—*menacing*! Oooo!"

Islif sighed. "With just one good kick, holynose, I could *really* make you squeal!"

Semoor leered, "Ah, but I can do the same to you with naught but my tongue!"

Islif rolled her eyes. "Semoor, your mind outrecks a cesspit. It's a wonder to me your prayers don't make the Morninglord spew his guts out!"

Semoor's smile went away in an instant. "Don't jest about that. Holy Lathander blesses new ventures—and that's just what we'll be, if we set off adventuring!"

"Aye," Jhessail agreed grimly. "If."

"And if not," Doust said quietly, " 'tis temple-field farming for Wolf and for me, separate somewheres in the upcountry, while the two of you grow gray hairs here in Espar as farmwives, birthing calves, tilling fields, having babies, and cooking, cooking, cooking."

“Don’t remind me,” Islif snapped.

“Florin,” Jhessail said wistfully. “We need Florin to show us the way clear of this.”
The wind rose around them with a sudden howl, as if in agreement.



“Lad, both of the lord’s jacks’re deep in dreams,” came the hiss out of the darkness on the other side of the tree. “Still game for this?”

“Of course, Del,” Florin murmured, from his side of the great duskwood. “I’d not miss this for all Lord Hezom’s gold.”

The dark shape of the horsemaster moved in the still-faint light of the rising moon. Delbossan was shaking his head. “Huh. If she gets hurt—or if yon pair of jackblades walk—’twon’t be Hezom’s gold the two of us’ll have to be worrying over! He already owns rope enough for our hangings!”

“They won’t wake ’til morn,” Florin muttered close by Delbossan’s head. “Trust me.”

“Oh. Another of your herb-powders in their tankards?”

“Now if you ask not, I’ll not have to say, aye?” The ranger grinned. “Yet I’ve a strong hunch, somehow, they’ll be unharmed when they rise ... around highsun. Mind you pretend to have been affected, too—and scare them enough that they agree to help you search along the road to save all your hides, rather than running straight to Espar to cry the alarm. Somewhat south of Hezom’s guardpost you ‘find’ a trail, and follow it through the woods around Espar to Hunter’s Hollow. I’ll meet with you there by highsun, three days hence.”

“Done, lad. Don’t make me rue this.”

“Trust me, Del. Now take my place here behind the tree, and keep hidden. She’ll probably run to where the moonlight’s strongest, but who can say for sure?”

“With *that* dragon, lad, there’s no surety—trust *me*.”

They chuckled together, foreheads almost touching, and parted, clapping each other on the shoulders in the nightgloom. In the words of the old song: ’Twas time to be taming the lad.

...



The pavilion glowed like a bright jewel in the night, which surprised Florin not at all. A city-reared noble lass would want the warmth and reassurance of nightlamps around her, of course.

Filigreed screens inside the tent cast intricate, pleasing patterns on the pavilion walls, concealing shapely silhouettes from prying eyes outside—but Florin could see enough to know that the Lady Narantha Crownsilver was still up on her feet and moving around barefoot, by the soft gliding sounds, rather than shod. Probably—if she were anything like the wealthy merchants’ wives who betimes stayed for a night at The Watchful Eye, Espar’s lone inn—she’d be brushing her hair. Brushing and *brushing* her hair. Long and glossy it would be, in the lampglow....

Florin swallowed, shook his head at himself for thinking such thoughts, and glided forward as silently as drifting night mist.

He grinned like a wolf as he went, lips drawn fiercely back from teeth. It might not be much, and was far from heroic, but Florin Falconhand was finally—after all these years

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