

How Wisdom Came to the Maimed Wizard

By Ed Greenwood



-- Azuth the High One, Utterances from the Altar: Collected Verbal Manifestations of the Divine and Most Holy Lord of Spells (holy chapbook, assembled by anonymous priests of Azuth circa 1358 DR)

Eirhaun the Maimed sat alone in a dark, ruined tower and thought dark thoughts.

Thinking dark thoughts was, after all, his job.

Detecting traitors among the ranks of the Brotherhood would turn a mind to vile darkness -- if it was not that sort of mind to start with.

Eirhaun's was.

Cold winds whistled through the empty windows, stirring the dead, dry branches of a long-abandoned gorcrow nest. No birds were bold enough to visit this tower now since they needed to pass through the dark singing of his ward-spells. Nothing living was.

The feared Maimed Wizard of the Zhentarim came to this forgotten shell of a keep high in the Storm Horns when he wanted to be alone to craft magic, or to hide, or to find utter solitude in which to think. Or all of those things, as he was doing now, with his four eyes floating like glistening pale grapes around his eyeless head. His empty eyesockets stared at nothing at all, but his just-healed hand itched abominably -- and worse luck, Alustriel's curse held: Despite all the spellweavings he could think of, his regrown fingers were tiny coiling serpents, as before. They bit at each other idly and restlessly, now, reflecting their owner's mood, and stealing from him even his old habit of drumming his fingertips on the arm of his chair.

Yet he supposed he must count himself lucky to be able to sit anywhere and be restless about anything. Spellfire had come reaching across a good slice of Faerûn at him, despite being deflected by its real target -- Hesperdan -- with force enough to shatter Eirhaun's stronghold.

A dozen great caverns, the heart of a mountaintop -- with all of their hundreds of interwoven enchantments, guardians, wards, and shieldings -- brought down by a thrust of magic stronger than anything he'd ever felt before, even when Dread Bane himself had walked Faerûn . . . stronger magic than should have been possible.

A dying thrust? Perhaps. Some folk were saying the lass was dead now -- but everyone who'd been snapping hungrily at her heels seeking spellfire was dead, and a long-established caravan encampment had been transformed into a smoking crater. The "they" who were saying Shandril Shessair was gone were the survivors who'd been safely far away and had sent others in to snatch spellfire . . . and to get slain. These survivors now had a very good reason for claiming her dead: the saving of their own skins. They had their own superiors, who could order them to try to snatch spellfire instead -- and so swiftly find their own waiting graves.

Even he, most feared Zhentarim or not, had his superiors. Yet thus far he'd had no sending from Manshoon -- nothing to urge old Eirhaun to go seeking spellfire. Yet knowing the truth was part of his job; how else could one pounce on treachery?

'Twould be good to know just what had happened to Shandril of Highmoon. That meant looking, just looking. 'Twasn't as if he had to reach out his hand -- serpents and all -- into the light, to foolishly make a grab for the fire that ate magic.

Yet, if he never peered and learned, he might be letting a chance at spellfire slip away . . . spellfire that could sweep away all the Manshoons and Hesperdans and Elminsters and Larlochs Faerûn could furnish, and make the lonely man "they" called the Maimed Wizard as powerful as he deserved to be.

Powerful enough to sweep away his disfigurements, to bind all women he fancied to him, and to banish all loneliness forever.

Ahem.

Nay, these were the sort of dreams of mighty power novice mages indulged in, ere their most foolish -- often fatal -- pratfalls.

Yet merely looking and learning would be no more than prudent . . .

. . . and fulfill his duties . . .

. . . and was, after all, something that could do no harm at all.

And therefore . . .

Yes.

Narm stiffened as something brushed his mind, like a soft and questing worm. "What -- ?" he gasped aloud, lifting a hand as if he could reach inside his head and wipe away . . . something . . .

Alustriel of Silverymoon reached out a long arm with the speed of a striking serpent to lay the tips of her long fingers on Narm's shoulder. She frowned at what she sensed. Digging in her nails, she drew the young mage back against herself. He sagged into slumber there without ever knowing it -- and Alustriel turned and smiled at her sister Laeral. It was not a nice smile.

Thoughts flashed between them, eye to eye.

Silent agreement was reached, and their minds reached out together . . .

So this bumbling lad was really the lass Shandril, her mind kept asleep by the Chosen of Mystra -- of course!

Why, the cunning witches! Silver fire not enough for them, eh? They just had to have spellfire, too!

Well, now, perhaps a little surprise lay fittingly in their immediate future. These strutting Sisters had gone their way in serene, victorious arrogance for far too long, with Mystra acting as their shield. Yet surely quelling the mind of a young novice she-mage with sleep was against the teachings of the Lady of Mysteries? How can a captive wizard, forcefully kept in slumber and her body reshaped into the guise of another, spread the use and influence of magic?

Yes!

Let the maid of Highmoon be snatched thither -- now!

[spellweaving flourish satisfaction unleashing]

[bright moment victory success!]

[smile]

Now find me, you silver-haired freaks! Your treasure snatched ha ha! Let you look for the mighty hand that took her, and find --

Nothing.

The hall was vast and dark and dusty, and impossibly tall and thin feminine-shaped statues flowed up smoothly from pedestals -- or had cascaded into rubble -- here and there among the cracked and tilted flagstones. These stones were of great size and (formerly) great smoothness. Truly a Hall of Dead Queens.

Elves, or humans akin to elves in taste and limbs and hauteur, had made this place in softly swirling shadows beyond a hidden portal, long before Eirhaun Sooundaeril's great-great-grandsire had first drawn breath, but it seemed to the Maimed Wizard, when by chance he found it, that it had lain abandoned, its wards faded to mere whispers, for longer than his lifetime.

No water nor sunlight touched this place, wherefore it was unsuitable as a refuge. Yet men less coldly suspicious and unloved than Eirhaun looked for hiding-places and caches in which to keep their magic, and this one seemed perfect for both. Into it the Maimed Wizard built spell after spell, linking the failing magics of yesteryear with strong new spells of his own devising. The silent, half-seen web he built obeyed only him, and it sat upon the darkness as a listening heaviness -- a cold awareness that matched its maker.

Stronger he built it, and stronger still, until its vaulting shadows filled the chamber, fanning out from broken pedestals like thick trees of darkly humming magic. Items he seized or found in tombs he built into its web, to lurk until he needed them -- and he'd long since pronounced it, with some satisfaction, a cage strong enough to hold any archmage. The bones of some Zhentarim who'd thought themselves clever and mighty in Art floated among its whispering wards as proof of its power.

Surely it could hold one lass who hurled spellfire if her mind was bound slumbrous by no less than the Chosen . . .

Shadows shifted, and Eirhaun stood among them, wrapping himself in their tendrils like a great cloak, assuming command of the great cold web of magic.

Another shimmering was already there -- a whirling in the darkest corner. Right where he'd put it. He reached out cautiously, probing . . .

Its mind was still bound shut -- shut against him, yes, but not for much longer. All he need do now is slide strands of his web to and into the maid's body, and bind it to his will. Then call up his strongest shielding against any flare of spellfire, and -- stab at that sleeping mind!

"And so," he breathed aloud, his voice one whisper lost among many, "my snatching of spellfire shall be accomplished. Such a small and easy thing."

Eirhaun let his awareness sweep throughout his spellweb, seeking intruders, making sure the wards that should hide his captive were doing so.

All was quiet. Of course.

With a smile like smoothed-out velvet, Eirhaun Sooundaeril extended his spell-strands, and his dark Art coiled like a huge but unseen serpent to his bidding.

Ah, such power! The strands touched his prisoner, and clung . . .

Confusion roiled beneath his probings. He bore in and down, sinking deeper . . .

There was a sudden flash of cold blue light, a --

Spellfire!

The Maimed Wizard bore down with his strands and his shield together, thrusting --

Silver flame blossomed in the darkness, searing through both!

Silver?

In the wake of that flash, darkness was thrust back from its source, which was in the corner where two crumbling statues soared like needles thrust up close together. The gently-smiling lady who stood between them was much taller than Shandril of Highmoon.

Silver hair tumbled and stirred around her as if in a pranksome breeze, and her eyes were two stars of blue-white fire. She wore a dark sash over light-hued leather -- high boots, breeches, and a tunic that clung smooth and tight to her own hide. She also wore a smile.

"Well met, Eirhaun Sooundaeril," she said with icy impishness. "I am Laeral of Waterdeep, and this -- " She held out one of her hands towards him, light dancing over its raised palm. " -- is the spellfire you seek!"

"I -- " Surprise smote the Maimed Wizard, and rage flared with it, but he had time for no more than that one baffled word ere the radiance around Laeral flared -- and another light sprang up in his many-shadowed darkness, but it was down the far end of the Hall of Dead Queens.

He whirled to stare at it and found himself meeting the cold eyes of another silver-haired woman, but this one was tall and mighty-thewed in her worn and much-used armor. "Dove am I, wizard," she told him in coldly-smiling challenge, "and this, too, is spellfire!" Light was curling above the hand she held out to him.

Eirhaun took a step back, his eyes flitting to gaze at both women at once, his hissing serpent-fingers curling and coiling involuntarily. He was less than surprised when the radiance in Dove's hand flared -- and a third light sprang into being behind him.

Within its flickering caress stood another silver-haired woman -- one whom he'd spied upon with spells many a time -- whose black leathers bore the fragrance of green growing things in Shadowdale. Her smile told him she'd been quite aware of his farscrying scrutiny.

"Your unsleeping eyes know me well already, Eirhaun," she said with a lilt of mirth, "but you may as well have my name, too: Storm Silverhand, Bard of Shadowdale. With a handful of spellfire, of course."

The cupped flame she held flared at those words, and a fifth light was born elsewhere in the shadowed hall. The Maimed Wizard turned with a snarl, drawing his shieldings in close around himself, and beheld --

Another silver-haired Sister he knew. "Alustriel of Silverymoon," he spat, fear now wrestling with rage in him. What trap were they spinning here? What had they planned?

"Fitting justice for what you have become," Alustriel told him, as if she could hear his thoughts. "With the aid of --" She held up her cupped hand, in turn. "-- a little spellfire, of course." The dancing flames in her palm flared on cue.

With trembling hands Eirhaun wove a second shielding around himself, even as he turned and saw a tall and scornful she-drow whose obsidian skin was barely covered by the open gown she wore. Silver hair swirled around her as she fixed him with large, dark eyes whose contempt bit like dagger-points and purred, "Qilué am I, and I, too, bring you spellfire. The doom you were seeking?"

The flare of flame in those long black fingers heralded yet another burst of radiance. Eirhaun turned reluctantly this time -- to face a wild-eyed human woman who wore only the tangles of her restlessly-swirling silver hair and the tatters of a once-magnificent black gown that looked as if it had been burned, torn by nettles, and slashed by blades. Unlike her Sisters, she was barefoot -- and her eyes were like two flames that almost outshone the flickering in her uplifted hand. Almost.

"Most men call me The Simbul," she said with a cold smile. "And I, too, Eirhaun, bring you spellfire."

The Maimed Wizard moaned as the flames held by the Witch-Queen of Aglarond flared up. He was doomed, he was going to die here, he --

"Men all too often forget me," came a cold whisper from just behind him. Eirhaun whirled wildly, letting out a little shriek despite himself.

"Yet I persist and am called Syluné, the Witch of Shadowdale." The ghostly, glowing outline of a barefoot, silver-haired woman in a gown stood on empty air close enough to reach out and touch Eirhaun. He could see the spellfire raging in her palm through her wraithlike fingers. She smiled at him, and asked, "Do I have to tell you what I hold, or are your wits working for you now?"

And she lunged forward as if his shieldings were not there, thrusting through the air at him with spellfire flaming in a hungry circle around her shoulders, and her face falling away to an empty-socketed, grinning skull!

The Maimed Wizard smote at her with all the Art he could command, shrieking in terror -- and in the flash and sizzle of deadly, slaying Art that followed, his floating eyes had time for but one brief glimpse ere plunging darkness swallowed him: Seven outflung and empty hands were raised against him, with no trace of spellfire in them -- and his own magics were rebounding from them back at him!

Brightness, blindness, raw agony bones torn forth from his flesh, no tongue left to shape his screams . . .

Out of red pain he squirmed, helpless, writhing, weeping when he remembered how. Was this godly torment, or had his contingency magics dragged him back to . . . here?

Where was here?

Cold hard stone beneath him, and an excited exclamation. Voices -- blood roared like surf in his ears then, drowning out what they said, and he tumbled in fresh pain that made him whimper and shout and then whimper again.

"We found him here," a frightened voice said, "and . . ."

"Were scared enough to overcome your fear of me," a coldly familiar voice purred. "Well, well. You've learned something this day, at least; all is not lost. I was beginning to wonder. You've earned the right to consume food here -- and so live -- a few days longer. Go and rejoin the rest of the novices."

A boot scraped the stone very close by, and that familiar voice said from just above him, "You are Eirhaun Sooundaeril, and are now truly Maimed, indeed. Would you care to share with your fellow Zhentarim the reason for your present shame?"

A vial was unstoppered, and water that stung like winter ice rained down on the fires raging in Eirhaun. He smelled the tang of healing magic upon it.

Light glimmered in the heart of its spattering -- one of his floating eyes had been restored -- and his jaw worked, now, at his command. He moved it experimentally, discovering he had a tongue once more, and used it to ask, "Hesperdan?"

"Of course," the Old Man of the Zhentarim said sardonically. "I have been Hesperdan for some centuries now, and intend to go on being Hesperdan for some time to come. But you, Eirhaun: What has befallen you? Who or what laid you so low?"

"Spellfire," the Maimed Wizard gasped at the figure looming in his swimming sight. "Seek it not!"

Hesperdan smiled down at him, and replied gently, "Of course not. I'm not the fool here." And he turned away.

The Old Man of the Zhentarim was strolling across the chamber as Eirhaun struggled to raise himself on one elbow -- arms! He had arms again! -- and focus properly.

Strolling, and -- gone, in a single step, winking out as if he'd never been there. "Hesperdan?" Eirhaun asked the empty air. "Hesperdan?"

A faint reek clung to the air around him. His own scorched hair and -- no. No, 'twas . . . pipesmoke.

Now just where, down all the years, had he smelled that pipesmoke before?