

FORGOTTEN REALMS

RICHARD  
BAKER

SWORDMAGE

BLADES OF THE MOONSEA

BOOK I



## PROLOGUE

*18 Uktar, the Year of the Purloined Statue (1477 DR)*

It was late autumn in Myth Drannor, a bright cold morning with the first snows of the year dusting the open spaces between the trees. The fall colors were fading fast, but the forest of Cormanthor still mantled the city in a glorious cape of red, gold, and orange. The sun was brilliant on the golden treetops overhead, and the sky was perfect and clear. In the shadows beneath the trees, Geran Hulmaster fought with all his strength and lore against the elf mage Rhovann Disarnnyl, dueling with blade and spell against spell and wand. Steel glittered and rang in the morning air as Geran parried bolts of crackling white force or deflected shining veils of madness in which Rhovann tried to ensnare him.

Geran wore the dove-gray coat and silver embroidery of the Coronal's Guard, but he was a human, tall and lean, with long black hair bound by a silver circlet. He wielded a fine backsword of elven steel, a graceful and strong weapon with a slight curve toward the point. It was longer and heavier than most such weapons, but in his hands the blade leaped and danced like a rapier. He kept his left hand free for spellcasting, fighting as elf swordmages did in the ancient bladesong tradition. Rhovann, on the other hand, was no swordsman; he had only his mahogany wand, and that was weapon enough for the elf mage.

Dueling was not permitted in Myth Drannor; this encounter was ostensibly an invitation to demonstrate skill through the lists in a tournament of the city's defenders. A small crowd of witnesses watched closely to ensure that the forms would be followed. Daried Selsherryn, the sun elf bladesinger who'd taught Geran his magic, stood by to serve as Geran's second. Daried watched

with a disapproving frown, since he could tell already that the contest was long past a simple challenge of skill and was a duel in fact if not in name. Beside Daried stood Alliere, her face white with worry as she watched Geran and Rhovann fight. She was beautiful beyond comparison, a slender moon elf maiden not much older than Geran himself, with hair of midnight blue in which a slim diamond tiara sparkled like the stars in a dark sky. Geran was only a rootless human freebooter, a wanderer who had drifted into Myth Drannor and won himself a place in the coronal's service, but she had come to love him nonetheless, and in the golden light of this perfect morning, she was petrified with fear for him. But Rhovann—a proud and handsome moon elf of a high House—loved her too, and he had come to bitterly resent the affection she held for Geran. And so the human swordmage and the elf wizard fought with the passion of lions over some trivial insult one had given the other.

Rhovann hurled a mighty fire-blast from his wand, and the onlookers gasped in alarm. Geran warded himself with a countering spell, even though the violet flames singed his cloak and licked at his face and hands. The magical flames seared the frost and dead leaves beneath his feet into steam and smoke that fumed around the swordmage. Rather than retreat, Geran brought a spell of translocation to mind, fixed its symbols and syllogisms firmly in his thoughts, and snarled a single arcane word: "*Seiroch!*"

In the blink of an eye he stood close beside Rhovann, who'd lost sight of him for a crucial instant amid the steam and smoke. The moon elf whirled and started to raise his wand, but Geran was quicker. He brought his sword up in a disarming stroke that sent the wand spinning through the air and carried through to slash Rhovann across the side of his face. His enemy cried out and staggered back, falling to his knees.

Geran leaped after the elf and laid his sword point at Rhovann's breast. "Yield! You are defeated!" he shouted.

He held his blade still and steady despite the acrid stench of smoke in his nose and throat and the pain of his singed skin. Rhovann knelt in the thin snow, blood dripping from his handsome face. Brilliant hatred glittered in the wizard's eyes, and his teeth were bared in a feral snarl. The mahogany wand waited in the snow between the man and the elf.

"I will not yield, human dog," Rhovann hissed softly. Then he reached for the wand.

Without a moment's thought, Geran batted the wand away from Rhovann's hand, sending it spinning over the dead leaves and snow. The elf snarled in anger, and something dark and murderous erupted in Geran's heart. Every cold sneer, every veiled insult, every sarcastic remark Rhovann had ever uttered against him coalesced into a black wave that swept over Geran. It was as if his anger, his hate, and his loathing for his rival had delivered him into the clutches of something he was powerless to resist.

Rhovann lunged after the wand again, his fingers stretching for his weapon. Coldly, deliberately, Geran leaned in and struck, taking off Rhovann's hand at the wrist. Blood splattered the ice-crusting leaves. He heard cries of horror from those who looked on, and his adversary screamed in anger and fear.

Why did I do that? Geran wondered dully. He *knew* that maiming Rhovann in that way—cruelly, deliberately, when the duel had already been won—was a monstrous thing to do. He *knew* that Alliere and Daried and the other elves watching must be horrified by what he had done. Yet something spiteful beyond all understanding had driven him to it anyway. Once, when he was a boy of about nine or ten, his father had given him a fine toy lute inlaid with ivory, a gift carried back from a long journey to Deepingdale. Geran remembered how he had found himself twisting the neck from the drum, fascinated by the flex and strain of the fragile wood. And then, deliberately, knowing what would happen, he'd flexed it too far. He'd done it just to watch the toy break.

He looked down at Rhovann, huddled around his bleeding stump. The elf's hand lay on the ground quite near the wand, palm up, the pallid fingers twitching oddly. Geran raised his sword slowly, studying the crippled elf, and even though he felt dizzy and sick with horror, he aimed carefully at the elf's face. Without knowing *why*, he knew he intended to cut out an eye next, almost as if having already toppled into a shocking abyss, he meant to plumb its depths to the fullest, indulging this black compulsion until he sated it.

"Geran, *no!* It is enough!" shouted Daried. The graceful bladesinger ended the duel by leaping into the clearing and interposing himself. By the ancient rules, that spelled defeat for Geran, since Daried was after all his second and had intervened. But Geran sensed that the rules had been laid aside already. No one in the courtyard would argue that Rhovann had won the encounter, would they?

Geran felt his arm drawing back as if to drive his sword forward one more time, and then Daried seized him by the shoulders and wrestled him away. “It is *enough*, Geran!” Daried hissed into his face. “Have you lost your mind? That was cruelly done!”

Geran stared at his mentor, unable to find words. The black, murderous fury ebbed away as quickly as it had come over him, leaving him weak, empty. The sword fell from his fingers, and he shook his head, trying to clear his mind of the destructive impulse that had seized him. Why did I do that? he wondered. He despised Rhovann, true, but he should have been content with besting him, especially since the mage had instigated the whole thing. All he would have had to do is take a half-step and kick the wand out of reach again or perhaps set his blade across Rhovann’s neck to demand surrender, and the coronal’s judge standing by certainly would have ended the match.

“I had no intention to cripple him, Daried,” he finally said.

The elf bladesinger sighed deeply. “Your intentions hardly matter at this point. You will be judged for this, Geran Hulmaster. And judged severely, I fear.”

Several of Rhovann’s friends were attending to the wounded mage or glaring at Geran with cold fury. Geran turned away slowly and rubbed his face with one shaking hand. When he looked up again, he found Alliere staring at him from the spot where she’d stood to watch the contest. She was as pale as the snow, her hands pressed to her mouth and her eyes wide with horror. The silk handkerchief she was to award the winner lay in the muddy snow at her feet. Their eyes met, and Alliere flinched away.

“What have I done?” Geran murmured. He took two steps toward her, reaching out. “Alliere, I didn’t mean—I don’t know—”

“Oh, Geran,” she said softly. A small, sobbing gasp escaped her throat. “How could you do such a thing?” She backed away several steps and turned to hurry away, disappearing into the shadows under the trees. Geran took one step after her before he stopped where he stood. Alliere had looked on him with *fear*. What could he possibly say or do to explain himself to her?

Did I mean to wound Rhovann or myself when I struck that blow? he silently asked himself.

“Geran Hulmaster, come with me.” The coronal’s judge—a stern-faced

moon elf in the colors of the royal court—approached Geran, one hand riding on the pommel of his sword. Two more Velar Guards waited nearby, equally stern. “You are summoned to appear before the coronal. She must decide this matter now.”

The swordmage stared after Alliere, but she was gone.

## ONE

### *11 Ches, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)*

The Moonsea crossing was wet and rough, three hard days of beating through whitecaps and spray in the cold, angry winds of early spring. By the time the battered coaster passed into the shelter of the Arches, every man on board was cold, tired, and soaked. Ships in the service of kings or great nobles accommodated their passengers in cabins and assigned stewards to wait on them, but the coaster was a plain Moonsea tradesman. It was a working ship that offered its passengers nothing more than a place to sleep on the deck. She finally tied up alongside the wharf at the foot of Plank Street shortly before sunset. Longshoremen swarmed aboard to begin unloading her cargo: sacks of flour, casks of wine, and countless other crates and bundles of goods from Vespine to the south. While the laborers began their work, the ship's only two passengers—one a dark-haired man of thirty or so, the other a well-dressed halfling—carried their own satchels down the gangplank to the creaking wharf.

“So this is Hulburg,” the halfling said. He was of average height for his people, an inch or so over four feet, with a surprisingly sturdy frame under his damp green cloak. He wore daggers, several of them—two at the belt, one in the right boot, and a fourth strapped hilt-down in a large sheath between his shoulder blades—and a hard, suspicious look on his sharp-featured face. Cold water plastered his russet braids close to his scalp, and he began squeezing the water from each braid in turn. “I doubt I’ll like it very much.”

“My business here won’t take long, Hamil,” Geran answered. He towered over the halfling, of course, but in fact he was only a little taller than

average. He had the rangy, lean build and the long, well-muscled arms of a born swordsman. Geran's hands were large and strong, well-calloused from many hours of practice. The sword he'd won in the Coronal's Guard, a long, elf-made blade with a hilt of mithral wire, rode in a scabbard he wore low on his left hip. His black hair was cut short above wide, thoughtful eyes of gray so it wouldn't obscure his vision in a fight, but left shoulder length and free otherwise. The swordsman had an unconscious habit of chewing his lip when deep in thought, as he was now. "We've already missed Jarad's funeral. Give me a few days to look after his affairs and see my family, and we'll be on our way."

"I guess we might as well wait for better weather before we cross back to the southern shore, anyway," Hamil said in resignation. He looked back out toward the Moonsea. Wild whitecaps marched and tumbled beyond the spectacular Arches, which divided the calmer waters of the harbor from the open sea. The slender stone ribs soared hundreds of feet into the air, leaping and plunging like the paths of a dozen skipping pebbles somehow frozen in pale green stone. The halfling studied them for a moment and added, "Those don't look like they belong here. Changeland?"

"The Arches? Yes, they're changeland. I'm told they erupted from the seabed in a single night in the Year of Blue Fire. Destroyed a quarter of the old city on the Easthead there, but they gave Hulburg the best harbor on the north shore of the Moonsea."

"Pretty, I suppose, but not much compared to the Claws of Starmantle." Hamil shrugged. Faerûn was littered with such wonders. Not two days ago they'd sailed beneath a forest-covered islet of stone adrift in the stormy skies forty miles out of Mulmaster. Towns and cities had long ago accommodated themselves to changelands as best they could. "So where are we going, Geran?"

The swordsman studied the town's waterfront, establishing his bearings. Hulburg was Geran's home, but he had left it behind him more than ten years ago, and this was only the second time he'd returned since. "Where, indeed," he murmured to himself. In his travels he'd seen dozens upon dozens of cities and towns. It surprised him how much Hulburg resembled the rest after such a long absence.

The town climbed and rambled over a low hill overlooking a sheltered bay between high, rocky headlands two miles apart—Keldon Head to the west

and Easthead opposite. The sun was setting, and cookfires by the hundreds burned in stone hearths and outdoor kitchens, sending twisting spirals of smoke into the sky to be caught and carried off by the harsh spring winds. Hulburg was a young town built atop the ruins of a larger and older city. Brash new storehouses and sprawling merchant compounds crowded the harbor district, rambling along crooked, poorly paved streets that had grown like wild roots through the rubble and byways of the old city. Beyond the harbor and its walled tradeyards stood a town whose workshops and houses were made from stone taken from the nearby ruins or sometimes simply built atop the foundations of much older buildings. Most had upper stories framed in heavy timber and roofs covered in rough wooden shakes, since Hulburg had an ample supply of timber close at hand in the forested vales of the Galena Mountains; the steep headlands and hills surrounding the town were too windswept and rocky for trees of any size to find purchase.

Geran looked north along Plank Street and glimpsed the old gray keep of Griffonwatch glowering over the town. It was a mile from the harbor, perched atop a rocky spur of the eastern ridge. While it was not very well situated to guard the city against attacks by sea, that was not why Angar Hulmaster had raised his keep there. Griffonwatch faced north, inland, a defense against the savage orcs, ogres, and other monsters who dwelled in the desolate hills and moorlands of Thar. Many of the buildings and storefronts fronting the harbor or crowding along Plank Street were new to Geran, but the old castle, at least, had not changed.

I've missed this place, he found himself thinking. Twice now I've come back to bury someone, but never otherwise. Why is that?

"I'm soaked, and this wind is damned cold," Hamil observed. "Are we going to stand here much longer, Geran?"

"What?—Oh, of course." Geran looked up and down the busy Bay Street. It was more crowded than he remembered. Gangs of porters, shouting long-shoremen, and merchants and their clerks hurried this way and that. Most seemed to be outlanders, men who wore the colors of foreign merchant companis or trading costers. "Forgive me, all of these merchant yards are new. The town's grown a lot in eight years."

"If you say so. It looks the back end of nowhere to me."

Geran snorted. "I certainly thought so when I was growing up here. I couldn't wait to leave the place." He pulled the hood of his cloak up over his

head and allowed the peak to shadow his features. He didn't really expect that he would be easily recognized, but for the moment he didn't feel much like talking with anyone he might happen to meet. "Let's find something hot to eat before we do anything else. I've been seasick for three days, and I need something under my ribs."

The halfling glanced up at Geran and nodded in the direction of the old gray keep looming over the town. "Won't they feed you there?"

"They would." With Hulburg's cobblestones under his boots, Geran was beginning to remember why he had come home. Jarad Erstenwold was dead, murdered. Until he'd actually set foot in Hulburg, that news had been something to push off a few days. The difficulties of a four-hundred-mile journey from Tantras had served to occupy his thoughts for the last ten days, but having reached his destination, he could no longer turn away from the tidings that had brought him there. He sighed and ran his fingers through his damp hair. "Give me an hour by a good fire with a Sembian red in my cup. Then I'll be ready."

"As you wish." Hamil gave Geran a measuring look, but he said nothing else. Like any halfling, he seemed to burn food fast and rarely lacked an appetite. He wouldn't turn down a meal to settle his stomach.

The two quickly surveyed the collection of taverns and alehouses near the wharves, found the establishments there less than inviting, and turned up High Street and climbed into the commerce district. The large mercantile companies did their business in the walled tradeyards by the harbor, but along High Street, the town's shopkeepers, provisioners, and artisans had their places of business, along with the better taverns and inns of Hulburg. Geran passed two places he remembered well and settled on one he did not, a taphouse called the Sleeping Dragon. Clean fieldstone, dark timbers, and a brightly painted signboard marked it as new. Besides, it hadn't been there the last time Geran had been in Hulburg.

"This will do," he told Hamil and ducked into the front door.

The common room was crowded and loud. Most of the patrons seemed to be foreigners—Thentian and Melvauntian merchants in the doublets or quilted jerkins and square caps favored in those cities, Mulmasterites with their double baldrics and dueling swords low on their hips, and even a few sullen dwarf craftsmen in heavy fur and iron. A handful of Hulburgans were scattered through the crowd, notable because they tended to be much

plainer in dress than the merchants and traders of other cities. Most people in Hulburg preferred a plain hooded cloak and a simple tunic and leggings to the less practical fashions of the bigger cities, since Hulburg was still something of a frontier town, and its people valued warmth and comfort over style. “Where did all these outlanders come from?” Geran wondered aloud. “The town’s full of them.”

“Doubtless most of the natives had the good sense to leave, as you did.”

“Hmmp.” Geran shook his head. Hulburg had been a sleepy little backwater ten years ago when he had set out to see Faerûn, but it seemed that was no longer the case. He realized that he’d seen more foreigners in the streets than native Hulburgans in their short walk up from the docks—men and women in the colors of merchant costers, guilds, and companies from all over the Moonsea. “I wasn’t gone that long. It’s only been ten years. Eight, really.”

*You spent too much time with the elves in Myth Drannor, Hamil answered him without speaking. He was a ghostwise halfling, and his people could make their thoughts heard when they wished. I think they bewitched you, Geran. Ten years is a long time for humans or halflings alike. You’ve forgotten how the rest of us reckon the years.*

Geran frowned but made no reply. The two companions chose a table in a far corner of the room and worked their way through a serviceable supper of stew, black bread, and smoked fish. The Sleeping Dragon charged five silver pennies for their board, but at least they included a flagon of passable southern wine with the meal—though Geran doubted that it had ever been within a hundred miles of Sembia. He poured himself two cups and stopped, not wanting to dull himself before finishing the journey. There would be time for that later.

“You haven’t said much about your friend Jarad,” Hamil said after a time.

“Jarad? No, I suppose I haven’t.” Geran returned his attention to his small companion. “He was my closest friend when we were growing up. Once upon a time we were the young kings of this town. We hunted every hilltop and valley for ten miles around, we explored dozens of old ruins, we pilfered and begged and charmed our way through the streets, getting ourselves into more sorts of trouble than you can imagine. We taught ourselves swordplay and picked some fights that we shouldn’t have, but somehow we

always came through it. Mirya—that's Jarad's sister—and my cousin Kara followed after us as often as not. The four of us were inseparable." Geran smiled even though the memories made his heart ache. "Hulburg may not seem like much compared to Tantras or Mulmaster, but it was a good place to grow up."

"Jarad remained in Hulburg when you left?"

"He did. I was anxious to try myself against the world. I couldn't stand the idea of boxing myself up in this town, but Jarad didn't see things that way. So I went to study in Thentia, and then I traveled to Procampur to study from the swordmasters there and fell in with the Dragonshields, and I even visited Myth Drannor and lived among the elves for a time—as you well know. Jarad stayed here and became a captain of the Shieldsborn, the harmach's guards. More than once I tried to talk him into joining me in Tantras or Procampur, but he never had my restlessness. He used to tell me that he had too much to look after right here in Hulburg, but I think he simply liked it here better than anywhere else. He just didn't see a reason to leave." Geran drained his cup and set it down. "All right. I think it's time to call on my family."

They left a few coppers on the table and made their way outside. The sun had set, and the wind battered at shutters and doors with bitterly cold gusts. Signboards creaked and swayed. The few streetlamps in sight guttered and danced wildly, and people hurried from door to door clutching their cloaks tight around their bodies.

"Charming," Hamil said with a shiver. The halfling hailed from the warm lands of the south, and he'd never gotten used to the chill of more northerly lands. "I can't believe that people choose to live in places like this."

"Winter's worse," Geran answered. He turned right and set off along High Street, trying his best to ignore the cold. He was a native Hulburgan, after all, and he was not about to let Hamil see that it bothered him too. They came to the small square by the Assayer's House, a rambling old stone building where the harmach's officials oversaw the trade in gold dust and mining claims, and descended the stairs leading down to the Middle Bridge and Cinder Way. Once that part of town had been given over to several big smelters, but some sixty years ago Lendon Hulmaster had moved the stink and slag of the furnaces a mile to the east, downwind of the town.

Afterward a crowded district of workshops and poorly built rowhouses known as the Tailings had grown up in place of the smelters.

Geran remembered the Tailings as a sparsely inhabited and poor neighborhood, but it seemed it had taken a turn for the worse since he'd last been home. Outlanders crowded every dilapidated house or hovel—dirty and sullen men who gathered around firepits, staring at the two travelers as they passed. Who are these people? Geran wondered again. Miners with no claims to work? Laborers indentured to one of the guilds or merchant companies? Or just more of the rootless wanderers who seemed to collect like last year's leaves, blown here and there by the winds of ill fortune? The towns and cities of Faerûn were full of such men, especially in the years since the Spellplague.

*Geran*, Hamil said silently. The swordsman sensed his small companion's sudden alertness and slowed his steps. He followed Hamil's gaze and saw what the halfling saw—a gang of five men watching over the street. Three lounged on the sagging stoop of a dismal alehouse, and two gathered around a firepit on the opposite side of the street. They carried cudgels and knives, and each man wore a red-dyed leather gauntlet wrapped in chains on his left hand. *Crimson Chains. Slavers.*

"I see them," Geran answered. A slaving company from the city of Melvaunt, the Crimson Chain had a bad name throughout the Moonsea. He'd met them a few times in the Vast, but he never would have expected to find them in Hulburg. The harmachs had outlawed slaving long before he'd been born, and it was a law they kept rigorously. Geran's mouth tightened, but he kept walking. The Chainsmen might have some legitimate business in Hulburg, he told himself. And even if they didn't, it wasn't his place to object. The Shieldsworn would roust them out if they intended trouble.

"Not so fast, friends." One of the Chainsmen—a short, stocky man with a shaven head and a long, drooping mustache—stepped down from the alehouse stoop into their path. He grinned crookedly, but his eyes were hard and cold. "I don't think I've seen you around here before, hey? You've some dues to pay."

Geran scowled. He'd seen this sort of thing more than once, but never before in Hulburg. In any event, he was not inclined to pay off thugs anywhere as long as he had good steel on his hip. "Dues? What exactly do I owe dues for, and who's collecting?"

The bald Chainsman studied Geran with a shark's smile. "There are lots of bad sorts about, you know. I'm Roldo. My boys and I keep order in the Tailings. Your dues buy you safe passage, my friends. Everybody pays."

Hamil rolled his eyes. "And how much are your dues?" he asked.

"How much've you got?" another one of the slavers asked.

"More than I'd care to part with."

"Then hand over your purse, little man, and I'll see how much you can afford," the Chainsman Roldo said. He spat on the ground. "We're reasonable fellows, after all."

Geran studied the Chainsmen surrounding them. Five on the street and possibly more in the alehouse or another place nearby, and most looked like they knew how to use the cudgels at their belts. It would be easier to play their game and buy them off with a couple of silver pennies, but the thought of paying for safe passage in his own hometown did not sit well with him.

Besides, he told himself, they're probably not as reasonable as they say they are.

Deliberately, Geran let his duffel drop and shrugged his cloak over his shoulder, revealing the backsword at his hip. Harassing two nondescript passersby was one thing for a gang of ruffians, but a man carrying a blade might know how to use it. Hoping the Chainsmen might see things that way, he rested his hand on the pommel. "I think we'll look after ourselves," he said easily. "Now, if you don't mind . . . ?"

The slaver's face darkened, and his false humor fell away. He scowled and jerked his head, and the Chainsmen nearby pushed themselves to their feet and started to close in around Geran and Hamil.

"You don't understand, friends," Roldo rasped. "Half the ditchdiggers and dirtgrubbers in this town wear steel, hey. I ain't seen one yet who knows what to do with it. Everybody pays. And your dues are getting steeper."

Not so steep as you think, Geran reflected. He supposed he could simply walk off and see if the Chainsmen tried to stop him. Or he could wait for one of them to make a move. But he could see where this was going, and if he was right, well, there was no reason to wait for the slavers to start it, was there? He took a deep breath and looked down at Hamil.

The halfling glanced up. *Now?* he asked silently.

*I'll take care of the alehouse if you deal with the other side of the street,* Geran answered. *Try not to kill any of them if you can help it.*

*Done,* Hamil replied. Then, without another word, the halfling's hands flashed to his belt and came up with a pair of daggers. He threw both in the same motion, sinking each dagger into a Chainsman's knee. Before either ruffian could even cry out, Hamil had the big fighting knife from his shoulder harness in his hand, and he dashed into the stunned pair by the firepit without a sound. Apparently neither of the men there had really thought they might be set upon by someone no bigger than a ten-year-old child. To all appearances the halfling had simply gone berserk.

"What in the Nine Hells?" the leader of the gang growled. He went straight for his own knife, a good piece of fighting iron almost a foot and a half long. The two men on the wooden steps of the alehouse yanked their cudgels out and started to clatter down to the street—but Geran was faster.

By the time the leader had his hand on his knife hilt, Geran had already swept his sword from the scabbard. The elven steel was etched with a triple-rose design, and it was superbly balanced by a pommel in the shape of a steel rose. He'd earned it in the service of Coronal Ilsevele soon after arriving in Myth Drannor, and the sword suited Geran better than any other he'd ever taken in hand. He swept the point up and across the slaver's knife-hand in one smooth motion with the draw, laying open the man's forearm. Roldo cursed and reeled away holding his wounded hand, blood streaming through his fingers.

"Take 'em, lads!" he snarled.

The two men on the steps came at Geran in a quick rush. He retreated several steps, emptied his mind with the quick skill of long practice, and found the invocation he wanted. "*Cuillen mbariel,*" he whispered in Elvish, weaving a spell-shield with his words and his will. Ghostly streamers of pale silver-blue light gleamed around him, seemingly no more solid than wisps of fog. Then Geran stood his ground as the first man lunged out at his skull with the knobbed cudgel. The swordmage passed the heavy blow over his head with the flat of his blade, then slashed the fellow's left leg out from under him with a deep cut to the calf. The Chainsman went down hard with a grunt of shock.

The second man came at him an instant later. Geran spun away from the one blow, batted aside the other with a hand-jarring parry near his hilt, and smashed the rose-shaped pommel of his blade into the slaver's nose. Something crunched, and blood gushed as the fellow staggered back and sat down heavily in the street.

A sharp *thrumm!* whistled in the street. Geran caught a glimpse of a crossbow's bolt just before it struck him high on the right side of his chest—but his hasty spell-shield held. The bolt rebounded from a sharp, silvery flame flaring brightly in the shadows of the street and clattered away across the cobblestones. The Chainsman leader stood openmouthed, a small empty crossbow in his good hand.

"Damn it all, he's a wizard!" the first slaver by Geran snarled. The fellow scrambled awkwardly to his feet and quickly backed away, favoring his injured leg. Then he turned and fled into the night. The man with the broken nose followed, lurching blindly after him. On the other side of the street, the remaining two Chainsmen were limping away from Hamil as fast as they could, giving up the battle.

Geran ignored them. If they thought he was a wizard and wanted no more of him, he wouldn't say otherwise. He advanced on the slaver Roldo. The man was already drawing back the string of his crossbow for another try, but Geran put a stop to that by striking him hard across the side of the head with the flat of his blade. The blow split Roldo's shaven scalp and stretched him senseless on the wooden steps of the alehouse. "That was for taking a shot when I wasn't looking," the swordmage growled. He was tempted to give the slaver something more to remember him by, but he held his temper. At least half a dozen spectators were peering through the alehouse's windows and doors, and some might not be friendly.

Hamil sauntered up, sheathing his knives one by one as he studied the scene. "You let yours run off with hardly a mark on them."

"I'll set that straight if I see them again. Did you find all your knives?"

"I'm willing to loan them out for a time, but I want 'em back when all the dancing's done." The halfling stooped down to wipe off one last bloody knife on the tunic of the unconscious Chainsman at their feet. "So, is this the typical evening entertainment in Hulburg?"

"No," said Geran, "it's not."

He returned his sword to the sheath and looked up at the old gray towers of the castle overshadowing the town. Dim yellow lights burned in a handful of the keep's windows; other towers remained dark. Crimson Chain slavers seemed to think they owned the streets. What in the world had happened to Hulburg while he was away? How long had it been like this?

He picked his bag up from the ground and took a deep breath. "Come on, Hamil," he said. "I think it's time to find out just what's been going on around here."