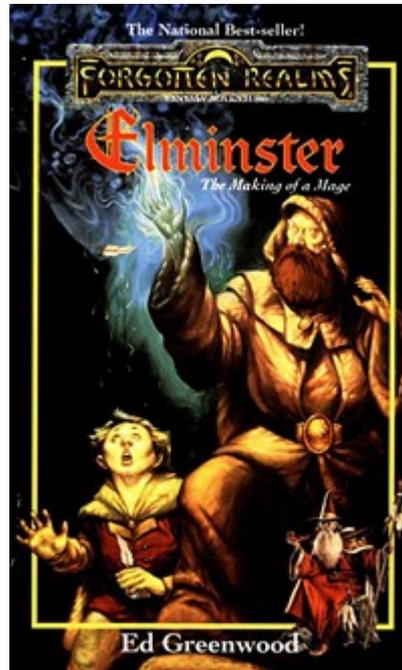


Far Too Many Thieves

By Ed Greenwood



"A fine morn," Elminster agreed, looking around. Hot squirrel-and-greens tarts steamed in their hands, bought from old Lansiblin at his usual corner. He bit into his, wincing as the crust burned the roof of his mouth, and chewed appreciatively. "Ummh. A bit less rat than usual."

Farl eyed his own. "Good. I was wondering . . . but perhaps he's put it all in mine."

El chuckled. "Nay -- ye know he couldn't get all of 'em, tails 'n' claws an' all, into anything that small. An' if he did, what meat would he have to put in all the rest?"

Farl nodded, chuckling, and bit into his own. "Enjoy this fair day," he mumbled, through a mouthful that seemed to be as hot as Elminster's. "If the Moonclaws respond to our first foray as I expect them to, this may be the last morn we dare show our faces on the streets for a time."

El nodded. "I suspected as much, after we --"

He broke off, face paling, as he stared into an alley. Farl reached out to catch the remnants of the tart as they fell from his friend's hands, but said nothing.

He could see Klaern Blaenbar lying on his back in the alley litter as well as Elminster could.

The thief was staring endlessly up at the sky. There was dust on his eyes and his open mouth, and flies crawled here and there on him. Beyond him lay a lump, dark red with dried blood, that might have been his brother Othkyn.

"Did ye know?" Elminster whispered, turning sharply.

Farl shrugged. "I guessed. Jhardin, most likely." He handed Elminster back his tart. "They knew all our names and faces -- an' were going straight to the Moonclaws. For the coins, or mayhap they'd joined the 'Claws already. We couldn't let them live."

El looked into his eyes, white-faced. "In a fight, aye, when ye're hot and blades are out, an' it's his life or thine -- but to creep after someone ye've decided will die aforehand, hunting him down . . ." He shook his head. "I'm beginning to hate this," he added in a whisper.

"Plucking gems from sleeping ladies is more fun, aye," Farl agreed, "but you do battle with Magelords and armsmen; why should you wail over a traitor? Hastarl is better off without the Blaenbars." He walked on.

Elminster followed, turning his head away as a hungry, foraging dog headed into the alley -- and raised its head eagerly as it caught the scent of meat.

He shuddered once, not looking back, said very softly, "This is not avenging my parents," and hastened after his friend.

The last of the tart tasted bad, and he threw it away.

Selûne was but a fleeting coin-edge in the sky; the last faint moonlight would soon be gone. Yet there was still enough left to gleam on an impatiently raised sword. Wherefore El dug urgent fingers into Farl's shoulders and dragged him aside, into an alley.

From out of the night somewhere ahead came a curse, followed by the faint footfalls of several unseen folk coming carefully -- but quickly -- their way.

Farl patted Elminster's hand to show he understood, and pulled away; El heard the faint whisper of his needle-thin longsword sliding out of its sheath.

He drew his own long knife from his boot, hefted the dagger already in his other hand, stepped carefully back over the edge of a lidless, broken, discarded crate, and waited.

He did not have to crouch idle for long. There was a splintering sound from the darkness just in front of him, the startled beginnings of a curse, and then the crash of someone falling heavily atop rotten wood.

Elminster sprang. His heels came down on flesh, and his long knife stabbed down right beside them. The grunt of breath forcibly whuffing out twisted into a high shriek of pain. El stabbed again and leaped clear, to one side.

He struck the stone wall beside the crate and rebounded off it, holding his blades out and ready. One caught the throat of the next Moonclaws man, who gurgled helplessly and went down.

"Uldorn?" an anxious voice hissed, very near. Elminster froze, still and silent.

"Uldorn?" The voice was a little closer.

Elminster managed a muffled, liquid moan. He heard the next footfall, almost on top of him -- and thrust viciously into the night.

His blade pierced leather and sank into someone, who made a shocked, startled sound. Whoever he'd stabbed pulled away in a loud thudding of boot heels, reeling back.

El took a long step forward and then lunged, keeping low. His knife bit something solid again. There was a sob, the hiss of a heartfelt curse, and then sounds of uneven, stumbling flight.

Whereupon an arrow whipped out of the night, past his ear, and hummed unseen down the alley.

"There's that cursed archer again!" Farl snarled. "Touch right, El!"

Elminster spun to the right and ran, Farl right beside him. An alleymouth brought them a cool breeze, and they ducked into it together -- as steel skirled briefly in the dark street behind, awakening a shrill scream.

Shutters grated open, above, and sudden light spilled down into the street. A man shouted, "Who be there?"

He clutched a crossbow across his bare, hairy chest as he grimaced, peering down into the night.

Farl and Elminster drew back into the alley, out of the man's sight. In the light falling from the window they could see two men they did not know face-down on the cobbles, groaning and rocking back and forth in pain. Another pair lay sprawled and still.

Something moved forward, catching the light -- and in horror they recognized their friend Rhegaer, eyes glassy, being shaken off the point of a blade that stood out through his throat. His Moonclaws slayer kicked him, and the young boy slid off the steel with sickening slowness, crumpling bonelessly to the street.

"I see thee!" the man in the window bellowed, drawing back. They heard the rapid whir of a vigorously plied windlass, and shuddered, knowing what was coming.

As the changing light told them the man had stepped back into the window, an arrow leaped out of the night. They heard the man cough, the sharp crack of the crossbow firing, its quarrel humming up into the night sky -- and then the man fell heavily across the sill.

A breath later, his body crashed down like a full feedsack onto one of the feebly moving bodies below. The boots of the Moonclaws man beneath him kicked once . . . and then both men lay still.

Over them, a breath later, leaped a familiar slim, rounded figure: Tassabra, running hard, her hair streaming out behind her. The longsword in her hand was bloodied almost to the hilt.

"Calm knight," she puffed as she veered into the alley and plunged between Farl and Elminster, making the old joke.

"Fair morn ahead, if the gods be with us," Elminster gave the full, formal reply, his mind and eyes on the darkness whence she'd come. A swift breath later, a Moonclaws man came running out of the night, on her trail.

It was the thief Elminster had once kicked out a window; he'd never forget that flat-eyed, cruel face with its sandy fringe-beard and short-cropped hair. The man wore an archer's bracer and held his bow still strung, waving a curved saber in his other hand.

El and Farl threw their daggers together. El's missed its mark, gashing the man's cheek -- but Farl's blade found an eye. The man threw back his head, staggering, and ran on into the wall. He was dead before his body had slid down it to the ground.

"That would be Goroht," Farl said with some satisfaction. "Any thought to how many we've killed, this night?"

Tassabra was still gasping for breath, bosom heaving. "I . . . felled three," she managed. "Jhardin -- another. He's . . . back there somewhere. I fear we . . . lost Chaslarla this night. She couldn't run . . . and Rhegaer, here. How many did you two take?"

"Not enough," Farl said, embracing her.

She kissed him, and then shoved at his chest and added in a fierce gasp, "If you don't let go of me, Farl Fancy-breeches, there'll be another of the Velvet Hands dead this night, here in this alley -- and it won't be me!"

"My regrets," Farl replied, stepping back.

Tassabra gave him a look that had steel in it. "I'm sure," she replied. "Now take me into some building where they serve beer, that doesn't have Moonclaws waiting to kill me in it!"

Willingly, the two men obeyed. Behind them a shriek rang out, as someone looked out of the open window and saw what had befallen the man with the crossbow. It was not proving to be a quiet night in Hastarl.

For once, Farl was as silent and white as Elminster. In the bright morning light, they looked grimly around the dusty little room where Jhardin had lived. The big man lay sprawled in his own blood, his own chamberpot jammed down over his head. Someone had slit his throat and carved a crossed moon and dagger into the hairy hardness of his huge chest. Everything in the room was smashed, soiled -- or missing.

When Farl turned around, his eyes were blazing. "It's all-blades-out war between us now."

"It wasn't, last night?" Elminster asked quietly.

Farl gave him a black look. "I hope the gods won't make a prophet of you yet, about gangs."

Elminster shrugged. "We're in it now," he said, "blood and all -- Tassabra, Tarth, Larrin, an' the two of us. That's not near enough."

Farl scowled. "I still think a Magelord or purse-heavy merchant's behind these Moonclaws. They're too many, to spring up out of nowhere so sudden, with uniforms and all . . ."

Elminster nodded. "And so?"

Farl rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "So we find out who gives them their orders, and cut off that head. If we do it right, we may even be able to slip them some orders that'll leave them battling armsmen. For now, we must warn the others, and get into hiding."

"At the burial ground?"

"Where else?" Farl said, and his lips curved in a sudden, lopsided grin. "One way or another."