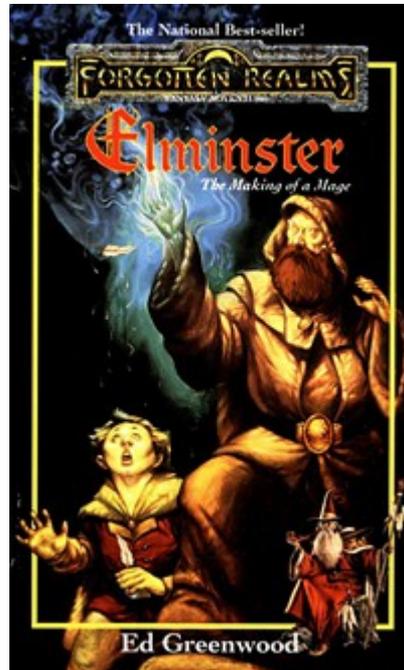


Dark Times in Hastur

By Ed Greenwood



The night was warm and still. Farl peered forward over the stone carvings adorning the front of the rooftop on which they lay, and he murmured, "The slaughter beginneth here, so it doth . . ."

Tarth gave him a mirthless smile in reply and settled his crossbow a little closer to the edge. From here, they could look down on the front gate and forecourt of Athalgard, and see a good bit of the back battlements over by the river. The main keep and the armory towers rose well above them, so they wore dark and dusty gray leathers, and moved seldom.

The Moonclaws would come. On that, they were all agreed. Their rivals would probably swagger in and out by the gates, trusting to swords and speed, not stealth and the rooftops. That seemed their style -- and bespoke a confidence in the face of wizards that lent weight to Eladar's expressed belief that they were in league with the Magelords.

The rooftop was crowded. Tassabra, Tarth, Larrin, Farl, and El were all lying there, each with a crossbow or two: large, heavy soldiers' bows recently liberated from Hastarl's Northgate Armory, as well as their own lighter ones.

Eladar the Dark (who'd been born "Elminster Aumar," but knew that he owned a surname too well known in Hastarl to let a man who used it live for long) was very still as he raked the castle with narrowed eyes for perhaps the thousandth time, hoping he'd have a good shot at a Magelord in pursuit of the fleeing thieves. Stillness in Eladar meant that he was tense, not asleep or patient.

He glared down at the battlements. It had been decided no Velvet Hand would enter Athalgard after the magical stones, if the Moonclaws did not show or were turned back without entry.

There was a sudden commotion below; smoke billowed up in the forecourt.

"Fire?" Larrin asked sharply, craning to see.

"They don't want to see your teeth, Lar," Farl reproved him. "Nay -- 'twas too quick an' quiet, an' there's nothing to burn. Smokesticks."

"Which means the Moonclaws." Elminster said what they were all thinking.

"How'd they get in, then?" Tarth asked out of the side of his mouth, never moving his watchful gaze from the forecourt.

"Glory holes -- tunnels out to the river . . . or hid somewhere inside, with the help of paid-off guards . . . or mayhap they found that secret passage we're always hearing about," Farl listed tersely, eyes bent on the running men below.

"I'll catch one and ask him," Elminster murmured. "Later."

There were shouts, now, and the clatter of a dropped halberd. "Tarth and Tass," Farl said suddenly, "I want you to watch the walls of the castle -- the high towers especially. Shout if you see anyone aiming at us."

"They're out," Larrin said unnecessarily, voice loud and flat with excitement. He slid his bow forward to poke through a low opening in the carved stonework, aiming carefully at the street below.

Figures in dark leather were running hard, firing hand crossbows back behind them as they went.

"Well," Tassabra said scornfully, "as long as they wear those stupid uniforms, we know who to shoot at."

"Fire at will," Farl ordered, drawing his own bow to his shoulder. "Bring those Moonclaws down!"

His bow jerked, and then Larrin's and Elminster's twanged together. One of the running figures below crashed to the cobbles, and another staggered.

There were eight thieves, as far as they could see -- no, seven, as one sprouted a quarrel through the head and pitched forward to skid to a lifeless stop on the stones. An armsman somewhere on the castle walls had just displayed unusual luck . . . or skill.

Seven armsmen in mail were lumbering along after the fleeing Moonclaws, bright halberds in hand.

The Velvet Hands took up their second bows and fired, but no one fell. Farl stared down at the figures dwindling down the street and said quickly, "I'll watch the castle as I wind; Tarth and Tass -- take down those Moonclaws!"

The two eagerly stepped forward, knelt, and fired. Tarth's shot clattered along a shop front, but Tassabra's quarrel found a thief's back. The man threw up his arms like a running rag doll, fell on his face, bounced twice, and then lay still. The foremost of the armsmen gutted him with a halberd a breath or two later, just to be sure.

The rooftop resounded with the clatter and whir of fast-cranked windlasses as Tarth and Tass took up their second bows, aimed, and fired. "That'll be our last, from here at least," Tass said, staring along the street at the disappearing figures.

"We've been seen!" Farl shouted, in sudden alarm. "Down!"

He put a hand on Tarth's shoulder and hauled him unceremoniously to the tiles, shouldering Tass to her knees in the same motion. Then the air was full of humming quarrels, cracking off the stonework and tiles all around them. Larrin grunted suddenly as one tore through his forearm and kept going; another struck one of the quarrel-quivers and carried it rattling over the edge of the roof.

The Hands turned their heads to look, cranking their weapons like madmen. The heads of armsmen could be seen moving along the walls, gathering along the stretch nearest them.

"There's too many," Tarth said suddenly, "to trade quarrels with 'em. Let's get gone!"

"One volley," Farl snapped, "to clear the nearest who're ready. Then we go down the back before the others, still on the move, can get their bows ready."

"Just one more volley," Tass murmured, almost as if to herself. "I've heard that a time or two before . . ."

They raised their bows together, took careful aim at the heads they could see between Athalgard's old stone teeth, and fired as one.

"Hah!" Larrin hissed, teeth clenched in pain, as his shot went home. Tass made a thoughtful clucking sound as she watched her man sag forward, his bow cartwheeling out into the air, to fall down, down . . .

"Let's go!" Farl said, wheeling about. "Lar, need help?"

They all scrambled in haste -- except for Eladar, who knelt motionless, waiting.

Farl turned his head. "El! What're y --"

"There," Elminster said with satisfaction. "Die, Magelord."

The bow jerked in his hands, and Farl looked back at the castle -- in time to see a grandly gesturing man with a staff shudder, throw up one hand as if choking, and fall over backward, out of sight.

"Gone down the inside wall," Farl said with a grin. "That's got him, even if the quarrel didn't. Well aimed!" His face changed. "Now let's get out of here!"

El grinned back at him, and spun about. Farl followed -- and so neither of them saw the dark figure rise stiffly from the walls, flapping batlike wings, to follow them.

"How many did you see fall?" Farl said, as they drew shuddering breaths under a rooftop awning, about a hundred roofs later.

"Moonclaws? Two -- and a third was barely on his feet. If the Magelords get a chance to question any of them," Tassabra said grimly, "we have to assume they'll name and describe us, out of spite or in bargain for their lives."

Farl nodded. "When did this business stop being fun?" he asked the night sky.

"Like everything else," Elminster answered quietly, "it all changed when the Magelords came to Athalantar."

Farl sighed. "I'm beginning to think y -- what was that?"

Something dark passed low overhead, banked in midair back toward them, and flapped its wings to slow itself, claws out to slash and grab.

The Velvet Hands dove in all directions, scattering potted plants and furniture. "What is it?" Tassabra hissed, as her blade sang out of its sheath.

Larrin, hampered by his clumsily bound arm, was the slowest. They watched in horror as slate-gray claws closed on his head and shoulder, tightened -- and crushed both, as a cook cracks eggshells. Then the thing opened its fanged mouth and laughed exultantly, flinging the limp body away. Off the roof, down to a shattering in the darkness.

The flying monster landed heavily on the roof, and came toward them: a gigantic, lizard-thing that moved with catlike grace. They saw its wings arch and fold behind it as it came, reaching a grotesque head with a horn, fangs, and a cruel, leering mouth toward them. A long, barb-ended, pointed tail curled and slithered behind it, and its claws grated on the tiles -- claws that seemed as hard and gray as the stone beneath them.

"Gods!" Farl said, shocked. "A gargoyle!"

"A parting gift from the Magelords, no doubt," Tassabra said bitterly, as it turned toward her. "Get away!"

Her hiss rose into a scream of fear, as she hacked and stabbed at it with frantic energy -- and it seemed not to notice, calmly reaching in around the wall of steel she wove, to clutch at her.

One claw snagged in hair, and tugged. Tassabra shrieked again, and jerked her head back, tearing free.

By then, the Velvet Hands were all around it, slashing and thrusting. Steel rang and sparks flew -- and the thing of living stone staggered, reaching out a claw almost as an afterthought to rake bloody strips from the leathers of the lady thief's flank and front.

Moaning in pain, Tass reeled away from it, clutching at her breast. Her blade clattered to the tiles.

The gargoyle pounced, claws out -- but it was still in the air when both of Elminster's boots crashed into the side of its head, driving it sideways.

The roof rushed up to meet the Prince of Athalantar, hard. He landed on his back, breath whooshing helplessly out of him, and struggled to roll away before the thing turned to savage him.

He was still gasping and scrabbling when its head turned, and those cruel fangs opened wide.

Then two blades slid into that gaping maw from opposite directions. Farl and Tarrh snarled with the effort, planting their feet and driving in until their shoulders were almost against the rearing, bucking head. The thing emitted a hollow, gasping roar, plunged and shook furiously as if trying to shake them off, and then convulsed.

They sprang away, dragging their bloodied blades free, and the thing crashed down on the roof like so much falling stone, and rolled.

It thrashed in apparent pain, rolling over -- and then lunging out with its claws! Gods above, the convulsions had been a ruse!

Elminster scuttled away across the tiles, panting in his haste and horror, as cruel claws reached for him.

One closed on his leg, tightening -- gods, the pain! Elminster roared and kicked frantically with his other foot, trying to get free. The gargoyle slipped, pulling him around on his shoulders . . . and Elminster realized in fresh horror, as their hopeless, grating slide began, just how close to the edge of the roof they were.

Then there was only air under them, and he had a brief glimpse of helpless-looking Hands watching him, and --

The world exploded in a crash that made his teeth chatter, and jarred what seemed to be every bone of his body. There was a brief confusion of shrieking wood, cracking slate, splinters bursting past -- and Elminster found himself hurtling through air once more, the riven roof he'd fallen through above him . . . and the gargoyle just below him. It turned gracefully over and over, fighting to unfold its wings before it -- struck the floor.

Elminster watched it hit and shatter, crushing a man beneath it into bloody pulp. Then he landed, bruisingly, atop them both. Dust rolled up around them. El shook himself and stared all around -- at a room full of startled folk wearing tight leathers, a crossed moon-and-dagger sigil gleaming proudly on every breast. Moonclaws, all. Blades were in many a hand as they gaped at him.

"Thank you, Tyche," Elminster spat bitterly, at the gaping hole above -- and then hastily rolled out of the way, as Tassabra dropped down through it, slim sword in her hand once more. She landed catlike atop the uneven rubble that had been the gargoyle, scooped up a stony claw in her free hand and waved it experimentally as a weapon, and then ran to him, grinning.

Farl plunged down into the spot where she'd been, landing with a curse and a stagger. By then, Moonclaws were charging at them from all over the room. When Tarth dropped into their midst a breath later, two crossbow bolts met in his body before it hit the floor.

He fell limply, on his face, and did not move again. No one had much time to notice as the outnumbered Hands raged furiously around the room, hacking and stabbing at their hated rivals. Haste was their only hope. Hurling daggers spun across the room like flashing wheels of metal; foes shrieked in pain, slipped in smears of blood, and pitched to the floor in death.

Farl was chopping, leaping, and thrusting like some sort of manic dancer, his blade going in and out of the throats, faces, and stomachs wherever he saw the dark leather of the Moonclaws. Elminster was too busy to see more than repeated glimpses of his friend -- but whenever he looked, Farl seemed to be dealing out another death. Being a Moonclaw had definitely become a dangerous profession in Hastarl.

A thief cried, "Noooooo!" as he fell with three daggers in his chest -- and Tassabra jumped on his shoulders, driving him hard against the floor. The points of the blades burst bloodily through his leather-clad back, and he went limp. As if that had been a signal, silence fell.

Those who still stood stared around the room at each other, panting loudly in the sudden stillness.

Over a dozen dead lay sprawled around the room. Another six still stood, leaning grimly on their weapons and glaring at the three blood-spattered Hands.

"Storntil," Farl called across the room pleasantly, "are you still waiting for your friends to make it back from the castle? I fear none will, this night or ever."

"This I know," Storntil said coldly. His lips twisted. "I see the ranks of the Velvet Hands have also been thinned of late."

Farl did not reply; he was looking around the room as he panted, and wearing an expression of injured puzzlement. "Where is your mistress, Serpent-hips? Is she -- indisposed?"

"Enough gloating, Farl," Storntil said shortly, and a black-bladed dagger spun from his fingers.

Farl lifted his own dagger, a little, and watched Storntil's blade ring off it and whirl away to strike one wall and clatter to the floor. He raised his eyebrows. "Poisoned blades, Storn? Where's the fair hunting in that?"

"I do not play at life as a sport," Storntil told him coldly, as he charged forward. Everyone in the room was suddenly in movement again, hissing and wincing as stiffening muscles ached -- or wounds tore open and cried fresh agony. Elminster grunted as his blade met that of a larger, heavier man with a shock that numbed his whole arm. He turned both their blades away to the side, leaned in, and stabbed his foe repeatedly with the dagger in his other hand, until the man reeled away and fell.

"Ah," Farl said to Storntil, as their blades met, "that's too bad -- because I do." Steel flashed and skirled, and his smile became fiercer as he fought the older, heavier Moonclaw man off.

"Those words'll look fair enough, graven on thy tombstone," Storntil snarled, battering his way past Farl's dagger and forcing them both together in a clinch. They struggled, faces inches apart and crossed weapons bristling all directions, locked together and straining as the two men shoved, planted their boots, and grunted with effort.

"That's . . . fine . . . with me," Farl gasped, arms and shoulders shaking with effort, as Storntil's greater strength inexorably forced him back.

Then Tassabra spun past in her own deadly ballet of blades, and casually thrust a dagger deep into Storntil's rippling ribs.

The veteran thief roared and jerked sharply sideways in his pain, dragging Farl with him. Farl let go his trapped blade, snatched at his belt for another dagger, and drove it into Storntil's left eye as they toppled to the floor together. The two blood-drenched men rolled apart in opposite directions, but only one got up.

Farl shook blood out of his eyes and ran forward to aid Tassabra, who was beset by two blades of the Moonclaws. A woman hacked at him as he ran past, and he turned and slashed, backhanded, with a vicious disregard for her sex.

She wailed and fell, and another charging Moonclaws man stepped on her, and fell. Elminster landed atop that man with both knees, stabbed down without looking, and leaped up again, continuing his own battle of blades. There was no time to think, to look around, to mourn --

There were shouts, and a door burst open at the back of the room. Elminster chopped at a thief who turned to look at the cause of the sound, felled his man, and whirled to see for himself.

Farl was entangled with the last Moonclaws man -- except for the dozen or so fresh blades, who were streaming in through the door, urged on by their bandaged leader: Isparla, the beautiful and deadly lady thief known as 'Serpent-hips.'

"Run!" Elminster cried and turned toward the half-open street door that no Moonclaws was still alive to guard. A young and enthusiastic thief tried to sprint past and bar his way -- but Elminster thrust his blade between those racing legs, held on through the battering that followed, and when the lad ended up screaming on the floor, punched him, hard, in the throat.

The screaming stopped, and Elminster reached the door. "Farl! Tass!" he called -- and as he spoke, Tassabra leaped across a table and booted the lone, glimmering oil lamp into someone's face. Its flame flickered to the floor, and darkness fell upon the room.

Tass reeled out of it a few breaths later, to burst past Elminster, panting, and fall into the street beyond.

"Farl!" Elminster called. "Farl!"

"Here, darling," said a mocking voice by his ear, and Farl rolled past him and out into the street, streaming blood from a dozen places. He found his feet, staggered, said, "Let's be off," and then spat blood.

He was still looking dumbly down the red wetness welling up out of him when a triumphant trio of Moonclaws leaped from the shadows and ran him through.

The Master of the Velvet Hands stood swaying with three blades crossed in his body, wearing the half-smile Elminster knew so well, and said, "Good on my . . . tombstone . . . indeed." Then he reeled.

A Moonclaws blade flashed in front of Elminster's eyes, and he parried it desperately -- only to find himself beset by two strong and swift blades. So he did not see his friend fall.

Tassabra saved him, swording one of the women viciously from behind so Elminster could spring free of the other, turn, and lash out with his longer reach. The woman gasped, clutched at her throat, and fell back into the dark doorway.

"Run!" Tassabra gasped, tugging at Elminster's arm.

"Farl . . ." he panted, in protest.

"He's dead, Eladar! 'Tis naethe the two of us now! Come you on..."

She sobbed and tugged, and suddenly Elminster was moving, running beside her white and terrible, eyes blazing. Tass shivered when she saw his face, as they pounded around a corner and sprinted down the street beyond.

They were weaving like drunkards with weariness when at last they reached the refuse-choked back alley that ended at the low, crumbling back wall of the old burial ground. They clambered up the wall together, and then Tassabra choked and spasmed and fell atop it, arms dangling.

Elminster reached up and dragged her down by main strength. "Just a few steps more," he muttered grimly, turning toward the tomb where he and Farl had lain, planning Athalantar's bright future and draining wineskins, so often.

"Eladar," Tassabra gasped, "I can go no farther. Let me die . . . in peace."

Elminster looked back, startled, in time to see her go slowly to her knees, bent as if under a great weariness. The front of the old leather war-harness she always wore had been torn half away by the gargoyle's raking claws, and the leather on her arms and shoulders was crisscrossed by a dozen sword-cuts . . . but it was not until she sank down on her face that El saw the black shaft of a crossbow quarrel standing out beside one of her shoulder blades.

He gulped, and ran to her. "Should I -- pluck it out?" he asked anxiously, raising her limp weight on his knees.

Slowly, wearily, Tassabra shook her head, and turned her face up to his. Her eyes were large, and scared, and very dark. "The gods wait at the gate for me, Eladar . . . 'tis so dark, ahead . . . K-kiss me . . ."

Elminster bent over her. Her lips were cold, but met his hungrily. She arched against him and then shuddered and fell away, to hang limp in his arms. There were tears on her cheeks, and her eyes were very bright, as Tass shuddered and arched again in his arms, fighting against the pain that was dragging her slowly down into the unending darkness.

"Take . . . my ring; 'tis magic . . ." she gasped. Elminster nodded, tears in his own eyes now. He stroked her cheek, and Tassabra managed a wobbling smile. It slid into a sob, and she shuddered again, fought for breath, and choked out, "I once lived in Heldon . . . it's why I joined the Hands . . . T-take back your kingdom, Prince of Athalantar . . ."

Then the light in her eyes died, and she relaxed. Tassabra of the Velvet Hands let out her last breath in a long, fading gasp, and then lay heavy and still in Elminster's arms.

The Prince of Athalantar knelt in the night shadows of the burial ground for a long time, his tears falling on her cooling, unseeing face, before he used the last of his failing strength to boost her body up onto the tomb, arrange Tass neatly flat on her back with hands that trembled in weariness -- and collapse beside her, as darkness reached up and swallowed him.

Raging, Elminster sank alone down into the long night.