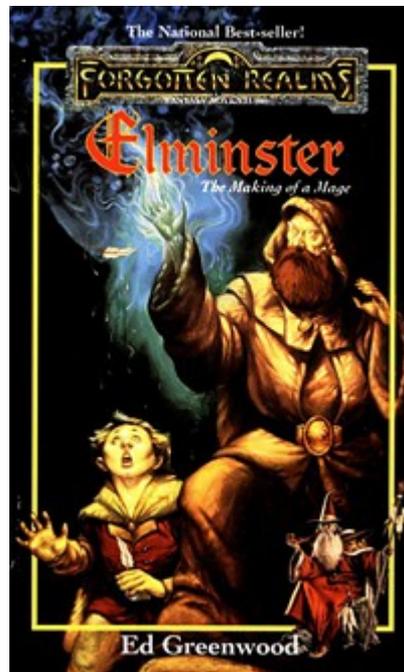


A Ghost of a Chance

By Ed Greenwood



The sun had just set over the Horn Hills whence he'd come. He had to work quickly or die.

Sighing with weariness, Elminster set down his heavy pack, shook out what he needed, and started to drive the blades into the snow. Each sword had to be pounded into the frozen ground beneath with a battered old tent-mallet so an edge of its blade faced outward, walling him away from wolves behind sharp steel.

Tonight he'd found a hill that fell away in a sheer drop on one side, so he only had to make a half-ring of blades. "The gods smile," he murmured bitterly, plying his mallet. "They do indeed."

Elminster's shoulders ached from the cutting straps of the pack, but without all the food and the heavy extras like the eight rusting swords and the mallet, he'd never have made it this far: Caves were few in this part of Athalantar, and everything was well hidden under deep-drifted snow. He was somewhere north of Jander, with the dark line that marked the edge of Wyrn Wood on his left. The danger of crossing the river at Upshyn, under the eyes of all too many armed folk and Magelords, lay somewhere ahead.

El drove the last blade into place, shook his numbed hands, and sighed again. In this open country, he dare not make a fire for warmth or cooking. Cold meat again. Drawing off his gloves, he rubbed fingers he couldn't feel together, to try to kindle some warmth in them, and mulled over the route ahead.

Helm had told him to make for Woodsedge Inn, due north of Jander. Its keeper, Broarn, was a quiet friend to outlaws. That wayhouse must be near, but Elminster was too tired to risk stumbling around these hills in the night looking for it. Frozen-over creeks lay hidden under deep whit drifts at the bottom of every third hill -- and a soaking, out here in this winter nightchill, would bring sure death.

His fingers felt like sticks, not part of him at all, but it seemed they'd grow no warmer. To those buckles, then . . .

Elminster went to his knees, and -- gasped, as the pack in front of his reaching fingers belched sudden smoke and burst into blue flames!

His sword was in his hand and he was on his feet in an instant, backing away as far as his close-set ring of blades allowed.

The flames roared up man-high, but the pack at their heart didn't blacken or sag one whit. Spell-flames, then, not real burning at all.

"Naed," El mumbled wearily. He bent to snatch a dagger from his boot, to have ready to throw, but before he could close his stiff fingers on its hilt a dark figure appeared in the blue blaze, stepped briskly out of the flames, and waved quickly in Elminster's direction, as if throwing something unseen.

That invisible something smote Elminster in the chest and gut like a mailed fist with the full furious weight of a charging horse behind it.

The twilit sky whirled crazily overhead, he fought to breathe, and stone crumbled under his feet.

He was falling, hurled helplessly backward off the cliff, plunging breathlessly down and away from a cruel, triumphantly smiling face.

A face he knew.

It was the dragonriding wizard who'd tried to slay him in the meadow above Heldon, smiling down at him now with precisely the same gloating ruthlessness. "Not this time, Prince! Die!"

Still staring up into those darkly cruel eyes, Elminster bent his will and saw the white radiance rise between them. Still staring up into those darkly cruel eyes, Elminster bent his will and saw the white radiance rise between them.

Give me the power . . . give me . . .

As he had done back in the meadow above Heldon . . .

And before that, when sliding helplessly down the roof of his home, rotten thatch in his hands . . .

And before that, falling from high tree-limbs in the forbidden fringes of The High Forest . . .

Here, now, he was suddenly falling no longer, but floating down slowly through the night air, upright, sword still in hand, hearing a cold laugh from above turn into an angry shout.

El's boots were just about to touch the snow when the night exploded into rolling fire. He was hurled helplessly away again, spinning end over end through bright and snarling flames, to -- crash hard into rising, snowy ground, and roll to a slow stop.

Struggling to his feet, groping for a blade he no longer held, and shaking his head to try and banish blinding flames from his sight, Elminster heard that cold, cruel voice again.

"So you thought to escape me, Prince? You'd have done better if you'd not been so foolish as to carry an armful of enchanted blades -- magics I can trace -- with you! Typical Aumar brilliance! Think yourself a mage? Hah! You may've mastered a simple slowfall, but fire seems to burn you as well as it does the next stupid swordsman!"

Elminster turned and ran from that mocking voice, stumbling in his sightlessness. Slipping and floundering about in wet white froth, he tried to summon his will again, to reach into that deep, floating void where he could find healing . . .

The ground struck him, cold and hard. The chill of snow in his nose made him sneeze, and El came fully awake, hurting. Aye, he'd managed to reach the healing place, to start setting himself to rights, and doing that had let him slip into slumber. He must run, now. Up and away from this deadly Magelord.

Up, Prince Snowhead!

He rolled and thrashed and found his footing, bewildered and blinking. Darkness -- but he could see again! The flame-blindness had fallen from his watering eyes, and all around him was the night, with a gap in the snows in front of him, trees showing him it was a short drop down into a snowy dell. He leaped.

Flame lit up the night with a roar right behind him, bathing his neck and head with sudden heat. The Magelord must have hurled fire at the spot where he'd stood up.

Elminster landed hard, bounced in slithery snow, and ran, the Lion Sword bumping against his chest inside his scorched jerkin. How many balls of a fire can a wizard carry and hurl, without going back to his spellbooks?

He dared not stay to find out. "Forgive me, Father," he panted, as the dell ended and he mounted a steep slope, slipping in untouched snow. His promised revenge would have to keep. Now he must flee or be slain, and the Magelords might well rule Athalantar forever.

The top of the slope proved to be a ridge; El flung himself down the far side and ran on, heart pounding, into the night. A thick stand of needlepines rose like dark waiting warriors ahead and to the right, but their cover was an all too obvious destination -- and his own pyre, if a fireball found him there.

In front of him the ground was a gentle, unbroken bowl of snow, offering no concealment for a long, long way. All he could do was run, and trust in the wizard's poor aim.

Fire exploded again, close by to the left. Elminster dived to the right, hit the snow hard, and rolled, hissings of steam loud in the night just behind him.

Every magic that missed him was a wasted spell. He held to that thought as a slim shield as he staggered to his feet again, and ran on, gasping in the cold night.

On, on, then hard sidewise, then hurry a few strides back the other way again, and then turn to risk a look back . . .

Nothing was there but snow -- snow empty of wizards -- and the deepening night sky. El turned again and ran on.

Something dark promptly flickered on the snows ahead of him: the Magelord, standing on a snow-cloaked rock, smiling. It was not a nice smile.

Only one tactic offered the last survivor of Heldon the merest ghost of a chance: to charge right at the wizard, hoping to get so close that any fireball would sear them both, and so --

But then, this cruelly grinning Magelord might be just another magical image, a phantom sent to slow El or turn him back.

Yet what choice did he have? Elminster forged on through the snows, leaping and swinging his arms to keep both balance and haste. That cruel smile slipped into open-mouthed surprise.

The wizard threw up arms, hands weaving air in swift spellcasting. Not slowing, Elminster snatched his best dagger from his belt and threw it.

The steel fang spun end over end at the Magelord, struck a hand, and darted off into the night, trailing blood. The wizard clutched at his bleeding fingers, hunching over as he hissed curses of pain and fury, his spell ruined.

Elminster ran as fast as he could, wallowing and snarling, not daring to break stride long enough to haul the bouncing Lion Sword out of his jerkin. Two strides . . . one . . . the wizard ducked aside, snow flying, but Elminster leaned out one stiff arm and managed to punch the side of the man's head -- hard -- as he sprinted past.

The impact left them both staggering in the deep snow. Ignoring the sudden fire in his knuckles, El dragged out the sharpened stub of his father's blade as he fought to turn -- and got his head around in time to see the Magelord, on his knees in the snow with eyes glittering in fury, suddenly vanish -- leaving only curling wisps of his breath behind.

Slashing the air with what was left of the Lion Sword, Elminster strode deliberately to that place and through it, stamping about slicing emptiness until he was certain the wizard was gone, not merely turned invisible.

Then he stopped to think, watching the last wisps of the Magelord's breath fade into nothing as his own curled out to join them.

El discovered he really hadn't that much to think about.

Once he'd found and retrieved his dagger, he turned north, sword still in hand, and strode into the night. He was leaving clear tracks in this deep snow and had to get to yon trees. He dare not return for his pack. The Magelord could find it at will, and for all El knew, a patrol might be standing guard over it right now.

No, he'd best make for the Woodsedge Inn, heal himself -- the stink of scorched leather, and no doubt his hair, too, was strong about him -- and then decide where to go.

He was in the trees before he saw the first cairn, and realized where he was. Not in a crofter's woodlot, but in an old burial ground. This was a tomb-cairn, and so was that, yonder, and those other two snow-mounds the moon was rising over. El froze for a moment, remembering minstrel's tales of clutching skeletons and long-nailed stinking things that ate the flesh of the living . . . and then he shrugged and walked on. He was as good as dead if he turned back into the open snows, after all, and he'd seen nothing yet but stillness, snow, and standing trees. He was alone, for now at least --

He was not alone. A familiar dark robed figure was suddenly standing like an upthrust black blade in the moonlight atop the tomb-cairn right in front of him, no longer smiling.

"You've earned your death over and over again, Prince," the wizard snarled, drawing a thin stick of wood from a belt-sheath. "You'll not escape this time! 'Tis a pity to waste a wall-shattering spell on you, but if that's what it takes . . ."

Elminster was already racing to get behind a tree, knowing that the wand now being aimed at him could fire whatever doom it dealt long before he could get to any safety -- if there was such a thing as safety, from magic like --

There was suddenly something more than a lone wizard standing atop the cairn, and the Magelord screamed. A moment later the wand exploded in a shower of strange green sparks, leaving the wizard on his knees, sobbing and clutching at the ruined remnant of his hand.

Rising above the pain-wracked man like a steel-hued shadow in the moonlight was what had caused the wand to burst: the tall and silent figure of a warrior in fluted and chased armor of olden design, its helm gaping empty as it stared down at the Magelord, thrusting a blade like smoke through the wizard.

The Magelord stiffened again, his weeping turning into a little shriek of terror. Elminster could see right through the knight -- it must be a ghost, and so the phantom of whoever was buried beneath the cairn -- and realized what he'd just seen had been the ghost rising up through the Magelord, phantom blade drawn, reaching out to touch the wand as the wizard trembled, and then growing far darker and larger in the wake of the wand's destruction. Oh, Watching Gods Above . . .

El hadn't realized he'd whispered that aloud, but the empty helm swung up sharply to regard him, as if it held not dark emptiness but eyes that could see and ears that could hear. He could feel an awareness, though somehow not the weight of a gaze . . .

The Magelord started to crawl away, trembling and babbling, not seeming to care that he was about to clamber head-first off the cairn into a bruising plunge into the snow -- and the ghost looked down again and slid its silent, shadowy blade into the wizard's backside.

The Magelord screamed again, seemingly more in terror than in pain, did something abrupt and desperate with his hands -- and vanished.

Slowly the ghost lifted its empty helm to regard Elminster again.

El found himself dry-mouthed and shaking, more afraid than he'd ever been in his life before. He stood there in trembling silence as that shadowy blade moved to point right at him.

Though its smoke-like tip was the length of about three men away, El felt a sudden chill seize him, his teeth starting to chatter and his limbs juddering in earnest.

And then the ghostly knight turned his blade and his body as one, lifting that ghost-sword to point unwaveringly a little east of south. The chill fell away from Elminster in an instant.

El stared at that pointing blade. The knight looked for all moonlit Faerûn like a signpost atop its cairn, pointing the way to . . . Jander? The inn he sought? The next waiting Magelord, or the place the one harrying him had fled to?

He swallowed, and then shrugged. Whatever this silent phantom was pointing to, it seemed to want him to begone -- and his body wanted nothing better than to do just that, shrieking and fleeing wildly. Along the line of that ghostly sword was as good a direction as any.

Elminster gave the darkness framed by the still and silent helm a respectful nod, turned, and started through the snow, taking care to move in exactly the direction of the pointing blade.

Once he was out into the open, moonlit snow once more, he risked a look back. Full moonlight was falling over the cairn, and he could clearly see the ghostly pointing figure.

More than that: he saw the empty helm nod to him, slowly and deliberately, the blade descend as it did so, and then rise to point again -- in exactly the direction it had indicated before.

Elminster sketched a bow to the ghost, and then turned in the deepening snow and trudged on, trying to keep the way he trod straight and true to the line of that pointing blade.

The snow was soon thigh-deep and he was wallowing, but he tried his best to forge a straight way -- and found that distinctive tree after rock rose obligingly to give him landmarks to walk toward.

It was almost magical.