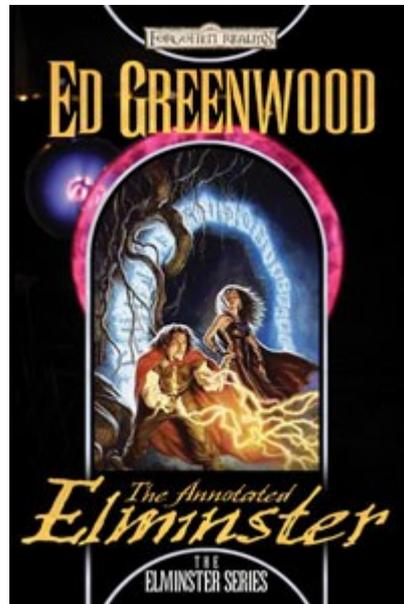


Revenge among Thieves

By Ed Greenwood



This is the darkest moment in the life of young Elminster, when he drifted closest to evil. Things are always apt to be unpleasant when it's time for revenge among thieves . . .

It was the cold that awakened him, in the end.

Elminster blinked in the darkness. He was lying on hard, chill stone, aching and afire with the pain of a dozen cuts, bruises, and wrenched limbs. Memory and crashing sorrow flooded suddenly back into him, and he sat up.

He was atop Ansildabar's Last Rest with the forlorn corpse of Tassabra still and cold beside him. It was night . . . he must have lain senseless a whole day through!

Mercifully, the carrion crows had not been at Tass's torn body. Elminster gazed for a long time at her still face, with its dark and staring eyes and the black trail of blood descending from one corner of her mouth, before ducking down into the open tomb.

Flinging the crumbling, gnawed bones of the once-famous explorer Ansildabar right and left, he cleared out the stone coffin. Dragging Tass down onto his shoulder, he staggered in to lay her down, arranged her by feeling about in the darkness, and tugged on the cracked stone lid until it grated into place over her.

Then he sat down on the coffin to think.

Revenge, a dark voice within him cried -- and now there were two fresh faces beside the ever-fainter ones of his mother and father: his laughing friend Farl, saying something clever and funny and forever silent, now . . . and the tear-stained face of Tassabra, telling him she'd known his secret, and to go out and win back Athalantar . . .

"Gods! I am so tired of being driven by ghosts!" he sobbed.

And then -- he was never sure if it was a god answering his cry, a ghost lingering unseen in the overgrown burial ground, or a voice out of his own mind -- he heard a cold, answering whisper: "A true Prince of Athalantar knows his duty. He lives for his duty -- and he dies for his duty. It is what he is born for."

He stared around wildly, but the night was cold and empty. Oh, princes of Athalantar lay buried here, no doubt, but . . .

It mattered not. The voice was right. His duty was clear.

Elminster stood up, stretched to settle his aching muscles, and said, "Gods keep ye, Tassabra."

Then he remembered his promise and opened the tomb again to take the ring. His fingers brushed cold flesh. Tenderly he laid the torn leather back over her breast in the darkness, and reached up to stroke the long hair he could not see.

"Sleep well, O princess of thieves; ye'll be remembered with honor, if I live long enough to tell a minstrel." The silent dark swallowed his farewell; she was far beyond hearing now.

Elminster held up the ring. It was a plain circle of brass, but -- to his eyes, at least -- it glowed with vivid blue mage-fire. A strong magic.

By that eerie light he read the word graven on the inside of the ring. Then he put it on his finger -- it seemed to expand slightly, under his fingertips, to fit the digit he slid it onto -- closed the tomb, and left the burial ground. He walked through the night silently and slowly, toward a certain warehouse.

Four crossbows, mayhap five, they'd left behind when they'd gone to that fateful rooftop by the castle . . . and there'd been quarrel-quivers to go with them all. Six blades, and a score or more of daggers, as well as some rope and a few spikes, masks, and old clothes . . . he'd need a hand-cart.

There'd probably be one he could steal farther down the same street, at some other warehouse. There were at least ten Moonclaws left, but only one Velvet Hand. That last Hand would have to juggle a lot of weapons to win any battle between them.

In the distance, El saw a watchful patrol striding along, halberds gleaming in the light of their lanterns. With one bound he was up on a stone balustrade, and running along it to leap lightly to a sloped downspout, and thence to the roof beyond.

The rooftops were a safer road for him now; Athalgard couldn't have an endless supply of gargoyles -- nor of wizards to send them. He'd see to that.

Elminster was too young to look back once he'd found the fire to go on, so he never saw the lips that had whispered to him of duty, lurking in the shadows in the lee of the tomb.

He'd have been startled indeed to see them now -- as they gathered shadows of their own, darkening and curling around them like lazy plumes of smoke in still air, to suddenly coalesce into . . . a man.

A bearded man in robes, who -- no, two men, for behind the shoulder of the bearded man floated the form of the Master of the Velvet Hands, white and bloodless.

Farl lived, small white radiances flickering about his parted lips and closed eyes as he breathed, and by their light the bearded man tugged and sighed over the cracked and heavy tomb lid, grating it aside until he could reach in to touch his lips to one cold cheek of the lifeless lass who lay within.

Tassabra had no idea what the Magister of all Faerûn looked like, but knew awe anyway as she blinked up at him. The bearded stranger smiled at her with the night stars winking and glimmering over his shoulder. He had a kindly face.

Then she saw Farl floating behind him and knew that there were gods in the world, after all.

The room where the Velvet Hands had first met was pearly with drifting dust, lit by the wan moonlight filtering in through filthy windows. Elminster crossed from one shadow to another, heading for the loose board that was the door to the storage space they'd found.

"So there was a rat left, and here it's come scuttling back to the cheese when Orluth Angalaer is on guard," a coldly triumphant voice said out of the darkness behind him. "A splendid chance to try out that new spell, yes. Well -- attack me, then!"

Elminster spun around. He could just see a man in dark robes lifting one elegant hand in a beckoning gesture.

"Surprised? It's astonishing just how easy it is to make folk talk, once you know what they fear most. Several of the Moonclaws . . . such a quaint name, don't you think? . . . were very eager to tell us all about this lair of yours -- almost babbling, in fact! I judged you'd not dare come here for at least a day, so I bid for this chance to guard -- and I was right . . . as usual."

"Keep talking, clever wizard," Elminster said softly, circling to his left.

"Ah," the Magelord Orluth said jovially, turning so as to keep facing him, "here's where you try a desperate attack. What shall it be? A hurled knife? Try to get me to step onto a trapdoor? Or -- do you fancy yourself a wizard? Is it to be . . . a spell?"

"Try me," Elminster snarled, and then murmured the word graven on the inside of Tassabra's ring as he pointed his hand at the wizard -- who stood outlined against the moonlight now, with a window behind him.

The ring tingled, silently. He felt force rush out of it and burst across the room at the mage -- who was plucked off his feet and hurled backward, as if by an unseen battering ram.

Elminster charged toward the wizard, drawing a dagger, in case the ring's effect was only temporary. A quavering, rising cry of fear began ahead of him, and he saw the Magelord's arms waving frantically in the moonlight for an instant before the wizard smashed through the window -- and was gone.

El rushed to the jagged opening and looked down.

A broken fish-cart sat canted over in the muddy lane below, one wheel shattered. Its fish were usually displayed on tall wooden poles along the high back and sides of the cart . . . poles with pointed ends. Elminster could see

their dark tips poking up through the chest of Magelord Orluth, who lay sprawled on his back, staring up at the uncaring moon overhead. He'd be staring forever, now.

"Well, well," Elminster said, looking down at the ring glinting on his finger. "Well, well . . ."

It turned crisp and cold near dawn, heralding the long, slow slide into winter, but the day came up still, bright, and clear. A perfect day for killing thieves.

Or so Elminster decided, as he crouched in the angle where a chimney rose up past a thatched roof, watching Isparla walk into a house across the way. It was the work of a moment to raise his ready crossbow and put a quarrel through the head of the largest bodyguard walking beside her. El was over the roof peak and gone in the next moment, not staying for them to see him.

He'd worked through the night, preparing the old warehouse. Now he had to draw the Moonclaws into attacking it . . . because if he went alone into that house he'd just been watching, to attack a gang of thieves all by himself, he doubted he'd ever see Faerûn outside it again.

His next chance came when a pair of Moonclaws -- clad as common laborers today, not proudly wearing a uniform the armsmen of Hastarl must know well by now -- ventured out of the house. When the mirror he'd set in a window told him of their appearance, El pulled the cord in his fist. The crossbow missed the man ducking low out the door -- but the second thief hurriedly raised his own bow to return fire, and as he was aiming, Elminster leaned out an upper window in the next house along and carefully put a quarrel into the man's throat. As the dying thief gurgled and fell back inside the house, the first Moonclaw broke into a frightened run down the street.

Elminster calmly picked up the second bow, waited for a clear shot, and felled him too. Then he picked up both bows and vanished out the back of that house.

The couple who dwelt therein never knew Eladar the Dark had been in their bedchamber. They were surprised that evening, when opening the shutters to let in the moonlight, to see a hard-faced man in black leathers with some sort of badge on the breast, sitting atop a house across the way, staring at them with a loaded crossbow ready in his hands. The couple looked at each other in astonishment -- and hastily closed the shutters again.

Elminster struck again late that evening, stepping through the back door of a tavern to put a quarrel into the back of a Moonclaws man who'd crept out for a late tankard. Then he spent a sleepless night waiting in the warehouse, but the Moonclaws came not.

Exhausted, he slipped away when the dawn mists were rising off the harbor, to sleep the day away on the lid of Tassabra's coffin. He awoke when the shadows of early evening were creeping across the burial ground, and hastened to the warehouse by a careful rooftop route, looking around often for signs of a watch on the place.

He found such a man -- a watcher without a bow, who stole away from his rooftop perch when Elminster approached. Elminster nodded in satisfaction and checked both doors of the warehouse. The bolts and bars he'd placed on the inside had held, though the locks had been expertly broken. He entered by a secret way Farl had found years before and made ready. The first thing he did was unbar the doors.

Selûne was riding high in the deep blue sky over Athalantar when El heard the first stealthy sounds by the alley door. He smiled, sitting barefoot in the dark shaft with his implements around him, and waited.

There was a stealthy footfall. Then there came the whisper of the rope, the heavy crash of the box of blades landing atop someone, and a rattling, dying gasp. Elminster smiled again. It was a crate of rocks on a rope-and-pulley, old sword-blades driven through its bottom to project a deadly forest of points downward. Sometimes the battering ram succeedeth where the soft word will not.

There was a whispered conference, and then another intruder came up the stair, fast. He sprang over the obvious tripwire stretched across the next-to-last step -- but when he landed on the step beyond, the tread sank, a trigger creaked, and the crossbow-gun fired point-blank.

The heavy thudding of the body tumbling back down the stairs made Elminster shudder -- but this was duty. Farl, Tass, Jhardin, Tarth, Larrin, Chaslarla, and Rhegaer deserved no less.

He told himself that again, as the next clever Moonclaws intruder avoided the crossbow by leaping aside -- to land on the floor-spikes with a howl. Whoever it was fell heavily, onto more spikes -- and at the same time, a shrill scream told Elminster someone had tried to climb in by the window. The weighted blade hanging just inside it must have been slow to fall, missing their head and neck to thud down instead on their shoulders or back. The fainter thud that followed told him the intruder had backed out of the window, and fallen.

El pulled the rope that raised the blade again, as far as the knot that told him it was above the window-frame. To make it fall again, he'd have to undo the cord. He didn't dare leave the shaft to reset the brace of scrap wood that had held it up.

The next Moonclaws came in a rush, three or four together. El pulled the cords that made the closet door pop open a fingerwidth, and the other crossbows all around the dusty meeting-room fire at the head of the stairs. More screams, and more bodies fell.

"A Farl trick," El told the shadows in the shaft around him. "One for thee, Farl."

Clambering up the rope hung in the shaft, he peered through the spyholes he passed -- and through one, saw a bold Moonclaws man in leathers, a short sword gleaming in one hand and a small hand crossbow in the other, cross the room and use his blade to pry open the closet door. The man kept himself behind the opening door, his own bow raised and ready.

The stuffed-straw dummy Elminster had put in the closet, a crossbow quarrel sticking out of its gut, wouldn't fool anyone who looked at it for more than a moment, so El wasted no time in firing his hand crossbow through the spyhole. The toylike weapon fired tiny darts, so Elminster had coated them with the contents of Farl's lone precious packet of sleep venom. His dart struck the man's cheek, and the thief cried out, put a hand to his cheek, and staggered drunkenly across the room before falling. Onto more spikes.

Thankee, Tyche. Elminster reloaded and climbed on to another spyhole above the head of the stairs, where he had a clear shot with the little dart-hurler at two more Moonclaws thieves.

The first fell back against the second, who never even knew what had befallen his suddenly unconscious comrade. He climbed on alone, looking thoroughly scared, and Elminster, lacking time to reload, crossed silently over the ceiling on the path of thick rugs he'd laid ready in the attic the day before, and made a noise on the back attic stairs.

Aha! The Moonclaws man crossed the floor like a striking serpent, hauled the door open with bow raised, and saw -- nothing. He waited for several companions to arrive and whisper with him before any of them dared ascend those narrow, dark stairs. The one who did carried a crate in front of him, raised on his bow, as a shield to draw Elminster's fire.

Cautious now, Claws? Too late, I fear. Elminster waited until that foremost Moonclaws had slipped in the puddles of slippery fish oil he'd poured on the stairs earlier, and stumbled back against the next man. Then the last Velvet Hand dropped open the trapdoor behind them, swung down, and put a crossbow bolt into the back of the third Claws.

That man groaned as he went to his knees. The other two whirled around in time to see their comrade go down and the open trapdoor swinging behind him. Warily they approached it -- and Elminster brought down one of them with the second crossbow he'd laid ready on the rugs, firing down the fish-oiled stair at their backs.

As he crept quickly across the attic again, he thought what a pity it was that windlasses made so much noise. If crossbows could be wound silently, or fire more than once with a single winding, he could have kept this up all day -- but then, so could any archer who was after his blood. Hmmm.

A weapon that could kill from a distance, and allow a coward wielding it to try again and again, would be a truly terrible thing -- but sane gods would never allow such a thing, would they?

Those thoughts took him back to his shaft. El ducked down into it until only his head was above the floor concealed by an old, upturned crate, and waited, peering through the cracks between the crate slats.

Slowly, cautiously, the improvised shield used by the thieves rose into view again. When it drew no fire, the man behind it crouched with it raised in front of him and scuttled crabwise forward so his companion could also get up the stairs under cover. Then they both crouched, looking all around.

They saw the furs -- scattered now, so as not to lead them straight to the shaft. They also saw two discarded bows, and a trail of blood -- pig's blood, and drying fast, but Elminster hoped they'd not think overmuch about that in the excitement of the moment -- leading to one of a pair of low doors. These had been the gates of grain-chutes, leading out of the attic to the alley outside, but someone had long ago bought or stolen the chutes outside the building, leaving only openings much favored by roosting birds.

The thieves weren't grain shippers and gave all this not a moment's thought. Obviously believing Elminster was lying wounded behind the door with the blood leading to it, they loaded their bows -- and then yanked the door open.

This made the second door burst open, and the last crossbow, within, to fire both its bolts. One smacked harmlessly into the attic ceiling, but the other went right into the back of the smug thief crouching behind the supposed safety of the door he was opening.

He screamed, clutching at his back. His companion stared down at him, horrified -- and then turned and fled, slipping and falling heavily on the oily stairs. El heard his crossbow go off during the tumble.

El climbed up out of the shaft, scooped up the screaming man, and shoved him through the first door. The thief's struggling body burst through the bit of rotten dark cloth El had tacked across the opening and hurtled out of the grain chute. It was a long drop to the alley beyond.

Elminster had barely made it back into the shaft when he heard a heavy slam from somewhere below. He smiled again. Someone had tried the other way in -- and the heavy door, whose hinges he'd carefully unfastened the night before, had toppled over onto him or her.

El grabbed the windlass he'd left hanging in the shaft and wound both bows in the attic, laying them loaded and ready on the furs before retreating back into his shaft. He timed his movements so the sounds he made were covered by the similar creakings and scufflings of several newly arrived thieves, who'd heard his winding and were heading aloft, bent on murder.

This bunch was unusually stupid. They came up the stairs at a run, which allowed El to use those bows to put a quarrel through the head of one and the leg of another. Then he wrapped his gloves around the rope in the shaft, not bothering to put them on, and slid down it to the room at the very bottom. There he scooped up the bow he'd left ready, and stood just beside the bottom of the shaft with the weapon on his shoulder.

He waited there a long time while they whispered. Then, as he'd known he would, he heard the faint sounds of one of them starting to descend the rope. El let the Claws get a good way down the shaft before stepping out to fire upward between those scrabbling booted feet.

The man shrieked, let go the rope in his pain -- and fell the rest of the way. Elminster deliberately reached out an arm toward him and then pulled back. The man's surviving comrade, seeing a foe to strike at, hurled a dagger down the shaft. It struck the fallen thief, of course. Elminster dragged the groaning Moonclaws out of the shaft by one ankle, into the crawl-passage beyond and finished him with a dagger thrust.

Turning the body, he wedged it across the passage with the help of several old floor supports and crawled along the dark passage to his other hideaway: an old smugglers' cupboard on the first floor of the warehouse. He couldn't do more than see and hear through the chinks in this space, so he sat silent and kept watch.

There were only seven Moonclaws left inside the place, it appeared, including the two who were asleep and the one in the attic wearing a quarrel in his leg. The others stood arguing in heated whispers a few feet from Elminster's cupboard. They appeared to have lost all interest in further expeditions into the old warehouse. He didn't blame them.

After a time, they left. Elminster sat there patiently, waiting for darkness and hearing the occasional thump from above, where the man with the injured leg was making his slow, painful way down from floor to floor.

Then El frowned. Was that . . . smoke?

He sniffed. Aye, smoke.

He sat still and silent, thinking -- and then he heard the menacing crackling begin, all around him, and knew the time for thinking was past.

El dived back down into the tunnel, scraping knees and elbows in his haste -- and faintly, from far overhead, heard the first choking cries for help. The Moonclaws hadn't gone back for their wounded.

The flames were rising above the other warehouses, now; people were shouting and scrambling up onto roofs all around to beat out windblown embers. From a safely distant rooftop, the leader of the Moonclaws watched the blaze with bitter satisfaction, her nostrils flaring in anger.

"Seen enough?" The man who'd spoken, her latest lover, meant to comfort, but Isparla whirled around and glared at him so fiercely that he stepped back, face paling, and said hastily, "Well, he's the last; the Velvet Hands are no more!"

By the time the smoke finally drove Elminster out of the smugglers' tunnel into the sewers, he had an idea. He smiled in the close darkness and took a way that brought him up to the streets in a stinking back alley. Feeling for coins in his belt, he went looking for a bucket and some straw, to catch his own embers in . . .

Isparla stared at the flames licking up out of the windows of her house, white-faced. As she watched, the roof crumpled and fell in. She turned away, shoulders shaking, and her lover weighed the perils of stepping in to comfort her at the wrong moment with the dangers of staying aloof, sighed, and put his arms around her.

He'd judged right, for once. She sobbed against his chest for several breaths before sniffing loudly, plucking a bit of his linen jerkin out of the front of his leathers to wipe her eyes on, and saying, "Right. To the Roost, then!"

She strode away. The Moonclaws men standing in the street stared grimly at the burning house for a moment longer, and then followed.

Elminster rose from behind a chimney and kept careful pace with them along the rooftops.

They led him across the city, to streets that held the respectable houses of merchants rising in their trade . . . and to one of the bath-houses the socially soaring favored before they had spare wealth enough to command their own luxurious tubs and scented waters.

The Moonclaws slipped inside through a back door. Elminster eyed the place wearily, his last crossbow -- except for the little dart-hurler dangling at his belt -- on his shoulder. Was there no end to this band of thieves? If the Hands had known there were so many, mayhap they'd have fled Hastarl after all.

He shook his head, sighed, and carefully put a quarrel through the head of the shadowy figure that rose from behind a parapet on the bath-house to watch him. Then the Prince leaped to the next rooftop, a little nearer to the Roost of the Moonclaws. Revenge, it seemed, was a demanding business.

"And to crown all, he still lives! Unless any of you really believe that fire was the will of the gods, and not set by any man . . ."

No one so believed, it seemed -- at least, not openly, in the face of Isparla's wrath. They'd seen Serpent-hips string up a man who disagreed with her by the heels and whip him to death -- and then lick blood from the dripping body and laugh. None of them thought it prudent to disagree with her now.

She strode the length of the main bath hall, where the most junior members of the band scrubbed at the sides of the empty baths by flickering candlelight, and back again. "Well? Gods torn out your tongues, the lot of you?"

Silence. She glared around at the spineless remnants of the Moonclaws, wishing Stormtil, at least, had lived -- and raised a silent prayer to the gods to rid her of all these fools.

For a moment, it seemed as if the gods had answered. A man toppled forward with a groan. They all saw the quarrel quivering in his back.

Men shouted and turned to stare up at the balconies all around -- dark and empty, of course. Isparla ducked down beside the relative safety of the corpse and shouted, "Fools! Get bows and hunt him down! Light the place with torches, and don't shoot each other! Go to!"

In the rushing confusion that followed, no one noticed a brief flourish of sparks in the flames of one tall candle, and the pair of thoughtful eyes that then briefly appeared in the candle flame, peering about as Isparla muttered curses and the last of the Moonclaws rushed this way and that, to catch an enemy thief.

A hand flashed out of the empty air, and Isparla spat a curse and bounded to her feet, blade glimmering out -- only to freeze like a statue, alongside all others in that hall, as the hand completed its gesture.

And grew into an arm . . . a robed arm that gestured a second time. Up in the balcony, the young Prince of Athalantar's raging fear faded as he found he could move again. He had barely time to step forward for a better look at that arm -- which seemed somehow familiar -- when a sudden tingling made him look down at his finger.

Tassabra's ring was gone. El gaped down at his finger as the same whispering voice he'd heard at the tomb came out of the dark and empty air by his left ear. "She wears it again -- and lives. Go to the tomb, Prince, if you'd find Farl and Tassabra alive again. Touch no foe here."

El knew he'd see nothing, but couldn't stop himself from whirling around to peer into the darkness anyway.

Nothing was there, of course. After a few long, tense breaths he turned slowly away and went down the broad stair to where all the thieves stood like statues around the baths, amid guttering candles.

He looked around at their unseeing faces, shivered, and moved with sudden haste, yet kept as soundless as he could. Hearing a faint sound from a distant corner of the hall, El spun around, fearing death from a Moonclaws blade after all this . . . but the thieves still stood motionless. He peered at Isparla, quelled an impulse to plant a kiss on her frozen lips -- and then recoiled: dust was settling on her!

Threading his way carefully between the unseeing figures, he reached the door, made ready to roll out in case a sentinel was waiting with a bow, and looked back. The Moonclaws still stood frozen in the last, flickering candlelight. Elminster shivered again and left that place.