



THE ELMINSTER SERIES
Elminster
IN **Hell**

ED GREENWOOD





One

ROCKS AND A WARM PLACE

There is no greater blasphemy than this.

This is the thing forbidden, for all gods and men, for every living being of this or any world—to shred asunder the stuff of which we are all made, leaving rents of crawling nothingness in Toril. Roiling, weeping wounds for all the Realms to spill out through, and all the cold and gnawing void to rush in. . . .

With all the selfish and headstrong and uncaring fools who'd hurled magic about for all these centuries, it was a wonder this didn't happen more often. This thought offered little comfort.

The worlds roared. White-hot and all-devouring, the torrents of force spilling from the Weave snarled all around the tumbling man, tugging at his robes and old limbs and beard alike as he spun along in a roaring rush of air. What might have been the green trees of Shadowdale turned crazily above his head. Beneath—or was it above?—his booted feet stretched a blood-red, sunless sky. He'd seen it a time or two before and had no desire ever to see again.

Streamers of noxious gas streaked that crimson dome like dirty clouds. They whirled to form what looked like giant eyes staring down, eyes that were swept away before they could focus, only to

form anew, again and again. Beneath the ruby glow lay a dark nightmare land of bare rock and flumes of sparks and gouting flame, where things slithered and scrambled half-seen in the shadows. Mountains clawed the ruby sky. The Land of Teeth, Azuth had once aptly called it, surveying the endless jagged rocks. This was the Greeting Ground, the realm of horror that had claimed the lives of countless mortals. He was whirling along above Avernus, uppermost of the Nine Hells.

“Mystra,” the tumbling man groaned. He called to life all the magics on his body, bringing them to tingling readiness in his fingertips.

Whether the Lady of the Weave heard and assisted him or not, life ahead was not going to be pleasant for Elminster Aumar. He was going to have to spend all of his magic healing this rift, for the love of Toril that so seldom loved him, be burned and blasted in the doing, perhaps fail and be torn apart—and if he succeeded, plunge at the last down into Avernus, bereft of spells and defenseless.

Yet his duty was clear.

Dark, bat-winged shapes were already soaring aloft, beating their menacing way toward him, seeking to plunge through the rift or tear it open farther, ere he could close it. The rift could be closed only from this side, not from the more pleasant skies of Toril—and if he were to do it at all, he would spend his magic so swiftly that he could not help making himself a bright beacon to all infernal eyes.

Those eyes were watching. Oh, yes.

Elminster saw something huge and dark and dragon-winged rise from a distant mountain, spreading leathery wings and trailing a long, long scaly tail as it rose ponderously into the sky of blood. Rose, and turned his way . . .

Nearer at hand, lightning cracked and stabbed out of the edges of the rift. Glistening black devils struggled to pluck it farther open . . . struggling, no doubt, under orders from unseen devils below.

The hurtling wizard saw the blue sky of Toril one last time. A mighty crash of lightning thrust blinding-bright talons through devils. Sleek obsidian and crimson bodies twisted in pain as they burned, their blood blazing up in red flames even as their scorched ashes fell to the uncaring rocks below.

“To Hell with ye all,” Elminster murmured sardonically. He closed his hands into fists and drew forth the silver fire within him, as small

and precise an unleashing of it as he could manage. When the rift closed, he'd almost certainly lose touch with the Weave and Mystra and be unable to regain magical power. Silver fire consumed the rings and bracers and even the vestments he wore.

Strange singings and snarlings filled his ears as enchantments dissolved, flowing through him to spin in glowing blue-white flames around his hands. The racing fires of his magics hummed with comforting power as they crackled, spat, and grew stronger. The Old Mage's clothes became tatters. Ancient metal bands around his fingers fell away in dust and were gone. His hat burst into a blue flame that sank down into his long tresses. He called in its power. A dagger in one boot crumbled, then the boot itself. He said a fond mental farewell to his favorite pipe ere it fell into ash. In its last tumbling moments El spent tiny bolts of his precious magic to guide his fall, turning in the air to swoop back to the rift.

The scar was growing, spitting vicious lightning in all directions across the dark sky of Avernus. Bolts arced across the bloody vault like so many angry stars streaking to fading falls. Far below, many red, glistening eyes looked upward at the deadly splendor.

Lightning clawed the air nearby, and the gaunt old wizard sent forth blue fire from his fingertips to snare it, or some part of it, to turn that raging energy to his task.

The bolt plucked him from the sky like a gnat caught in a gale, whirling him away. His teeth chattered, his hair quivered on end, and the hoarse beginnings of a scream froze in his throat. Caught in its grip, Elminster of Shadowdale could not have moved even a finger. Fires charred him black. Surging, searing force flung his arms and legs rigid into a scorched star, and then threw him across the sky.

When he could see again, tiny lightnings streamed from his nose. The rift was a bright, distant fire in the red sky. Its flames were suddenly blotted out by a black and grinning form, horn-headed and bright-eyed, racing through the air with claws outstretched to rend stricken wizards.

"Tharguth," Elminster murmured, recalling an old grimoire's name for such devils—abishai, these were, for he saw a second and third swooping along in the wake of the first.

Then there was no more time to think; the abishai rushed at him like a striking hammer.

It tore at the air eagerly with its claws as it came, its poisonous tail curled up beneath it to stab if need be. Elminster looked into the devil's exulting eyes. He felt a rush of warmth and the vinegarlike tang of its hide as its jaws gaped wide. Its head turned on an angle to bite out his throat. He fed it fire, searing claws and head alike to nothingness in an instant and letting it tumble away into the rocky darkness below.

The second abishai was coming too fast to veer; El twisted away from one sky-raking claw and sent a tiny blue-white bolt of his magic into the howling mouth of the third winged devil. Its head exploded. Its racing body arched back and clawed the air in silent, spasmodic agony as it rushed past.

A flight spell was one of the few left to the Old Mage; fearful the magic roiling within him might twist and shatter it, he cast it with infinite care. Another tiny tithe of power gave him greater speed than the spell alone could furnish. He needed to get back to the rift, swiftly.

He did not need to look back or hear the snarls of rage to know that the second abishai had turned to come after him. The sky was full of tharguth now—black and green and even the larger, more cruel red abishai. Their eyes blazed like pairs of ruby flames as they rose to hunt him. Their cries of rage and glee rose into a roar that overtopped the thunder of the rent. It grew larger . . . and larger. . . .

Elminster Aumar was not the least of Mystra's Chosen, but neither was he a great and vigorous creature of battle. Like a tiny blue-white star, he raced across the sky of Avernus.

Dark red dragons glided now among the devils, biting and pouncing like great cats, preying hungrily on this flock of flying food. Little spike-studded gargoyle-devils, spinagons, were in the sky, too, darting and ducking aside from the tharguth. Looking back, El saw the abishai that pursued him gutted from belly to throat by something winged and hungry. It flew away almost faster than he could turn his head.

His gaze fell for a moment to the land below and its twisting ribbon of red that could only be a river of blood. His attention flicked

up again to the swift beat of those elusive wings. The flying slayer was slowing to a halt, standing on air to watch him. Their eyes met.

El found himself looking into the eyes of a lone devil beating feathered wings in the sky. She was sleek and graceful and deadly, dusky-hued and more beautiful than any mortal woman: an erinyes, doubtless a spy for a greater devil dwelling deeper in the Nine Hells.

My, but he was popular. Avernus must furnish poor entertainment, for a lone human wizard to attract such interest.

Well, no. He set aside proud thoughts. It was undoubtedly the rift that was drawing the devils aloft.

El saw more bat wings tumbling helplessly across the sky, caught by more lightning bolts from the torrents of force where world met world and clawed at each other.

Another bolt rushed at him, and Elminster was ready. Spreading his hands, with magics crawling between them in a blue-white chain, he plunged into its raging heart. With a wordless shout, he drank in power until it rose hot and choking within him. He was forced to rear up out of its flow and into the ruby sky again, gasping and trembling.

He'd been driven back only a little way this time, and his limbs were blazing bright with energies. In the distance, winged devils tried to drink in the power of the bolt as he had done but plunged to their dooms as the bolts consumed them in brief gouts of red flame.

A dragon saw him and wheeled from its sport of tearing apart tharguth and devouring them. It came thundering down at him like a great wall of scaled flesh. It spat fire, the ravening flames that did so little to devils but could cook and doom a mortal man.

Elminster swooped and drank in that dragon fire, setting his teeth and grimly riding out the fierce but brief pain, quelling its heat with his own gathered magic.

Gasping, he prevailed. The Old Mage was full almost to bursting now. His body trembled with the effort of holding such force. He was no longer its vessel but its heart, wrestling with its surges and flows merely to move as he desired to and not be torn apart by its raging.

Or by draconic jaws. The great red dragon, thrice the size of any he'd seen on Toril—even old Larauthtor, who'd filled the sky like a moving mountain—swooped, fangs gaping.

Elminster threw his hands behind him and let tiny jets of flame spurt from his fingers, hurling him up, forward, and away—beyond the reach of even a frantically twisting wyrm.

It clawed wildly at the air in its haste to turn. Snapping its jaws vainly at him, the dragon flapped its great wings so hard that the air cracked like thunder. Caught in a trio of rift bolts, the wyrm stiffened, scales melting into smoke. It was too racked with pain even to scream as it died. Its eyes burst into flame and smoke that trailed from dark sockets and loosely flapping jaws. The wyrm fell away into the jagged darkness below.

None of this was getting Elminster back to the task of healing the widening rift, looming like a weeping eye in the sky of Avernus. Elminster called up a half-remembered snatch of a bawdy song as he banked on wings of his own spell flames. He raced, singing merrily but badly, to meet his doom.

Bolts stabbed out to meet him. He spun chains of snarling magic around them and dragged them around in roaring, sky-shaking arcs. They plunged back toward their source—a racing flood in which he joined. Falling headlong into the blinding brightness, he thrust his hands out before him.

All sound died away in the echoing roar. Elminster became a racing dart among mighty flows of force. They rolled ponderously past him, a great chaos of surges that battered and tore at him, threatening to whirl him away into bone-shattered, bloody pulp.

When searing force burnt away his fingertips, he sent forth spell-fire to cleave it and master it, plunging on to the roiling edge where Toril began. He plucked and swooped and wove, surfing surging torrents of force to knit the blue sky together again.

Devils screamed as they were torn apart or blasted to shreds somewhere behind him. Elminster scarcely heard them. He gazed hungrily at the world he must wall himself away from to save. He looked longingly down at Shadowdale, a little green gem far below, ere he flung himself across the sky, stitching its ragged edge in his wake with teeth-jarring, surging force.

“The bards could never find words for this,” he gasped. Red sky and blue slipped and slid and battled for supremacy overhead. He raced along the raging line. Sickening force slammed through him like the

sword that had once plunged down his throat and out his backside in one icy moment. . . .

Long ago, that had been, and with rather less hanging in the balance. A memory among far too many, always beckoning him for a wander among their shadows. The offers were more enticing as Elminster grew ever more tired—and weariness rode his shoulders like a heavy, clinging cloak these days. . . .

Suddenly he was done. Energies veered away to complete what he'd begun, reshaping what had been shattered and cloaking bright Toril from his view. The roar of the sky died, and he was falling, a dwindling star, into the deep ruby gloom of Avernus.

He'd done it. Dazed and exhausted, he knew that much. Toril was saved and his own doom sealed.

"Have my thanks, Great Elminster," he told himself with dark humor, toasting himself with an imaginary goblet as black fangs of rock rushed up to meet him. "Fair Faerûn has seen thy greatest victory—though none know it, or care. Welcome to the waiting dunghill."

With the last of his weary will, Elminster made himself into a lump of stone and hurled to one side, so that his fall would become a plunge deep into what was probably the Lake of Blood. Let its warm and fetid waters take his fall. The rotting flesh that cloaked its bed would hide him. Perhaps he could lie unnoticed there, until he had strength enough again to—

After such a fall, even a stone hits water as hard as a smith's hammer. His brutal shattering of the surface would have made Elminster gasp—if he'd had anything to gasp with. Warmth bubbled past as he sank, tumbling in the warm, wet depths, slowing now as . . .

Something dark and snakelike coiled out of the red depths and snatched him. The tentacle lashed around him with the searing bite of a drover's whip . . . and then he was being dragged back up again.

Well, in the Hells it was hardly to be expected that there'd be any rest for the wicked. So—let the torment begin. Mystra preserve and forfend. Please.

He was up out of the blood-water now, dripping. Unfamiliar magic raged around him, darting into him in little numbing jabs. He was changing, forced under its goads, flowing and unfolding and becoming . . . himself again, a human with arms and legs and—eyes.

Eyes that swam even as grunts and rending groans and a shrieking symphony of squeals told him he was growing ears. Then all at once, the world spun and shook and came to a halt, amid shocking clarity.

Elminster was standing on warm, sharp rock, and his feet were bare. He had feet, and legs . . . and his own old, gaunt body, even to the beard. He was standing in a little hollow in a great waste of rock, with foul streams of gas curling around him, burning his legs as they sighed past. Atop the rocks, bare, thorny branches of stunted trees stabbed like despairing fingers up into the blood-red sky. The ground trembled. From somewhere near at hand a flame shot up, raged briefly amid scorched rocks, and fell away out of sight again.

El became aware that something was standing in the deep shadow at the far end of the cleft. It strode forward, stepping around many teeth of rock. Flame-yellow eyes met his with the force of a striking serpent and held him in thrall as their owner advanced leisurely, giving Elminster a smile that was a long way from pleasant—and at the same time promised many things.

An eyebrow lifted, mirroring curving horns above, and a softly hissing voice asked almost gently, “Don’t know me, little cringing wizard? I favor a more splendid shape, these days!”

Magic curled around Elminster’s throat, choking any answer he might have wanted to make, and the devil’s smile widened. “Like my gentle talons spell? Nothing to touch the great and mighty magics you’re wont to hurl, of course, but it serves me . . . aye, it serves.”

The horn-headed devil turned its head and smiled, those flame-yellow eyes still transfixing Elminster like the tines of a gigantic fork. “Still know me not, Old Mage? You *must* be tired.”

Elminster gazed at the burly devil, wondering just when he’d become, in this unholy creature’s eyes at least, any sort of expert on the diabolical.

His captor was a naked humanoid whose skin was seal-smooth and mottled gray, shot through with hues of brown and darker gray . . . very like the shadowed stones of Avernus that rose around them both.

A few scales glinted on the fiend’s neck and ankles. Its humanlike head sported two curving horns. What had seemed at first glance to be a cloak drawn around the devil could now be clearly seen as a necklace of tentacles. One shot forth to curl around Elminster’s bare

shoulders, thrusting like a vengeful eel through tatters of drifting vapor—a good thirty feet or more—as the eyes that held Elminster’s became a little redder.

“Know, then,” the devil said with grotesque formality, sketching a little bow—and forcing, with his tentacle, the dazed and exhausted Old Mage to match it—“that you are the guest of Nergal, most mighty of the outcast lords of Hell.” His smile broadened, and his eyes were now as red as old coals. “You may greet me.”

El struggled to speak, finding his throat dry and stiff. Nergal’s smile became a smug, crooked thing. “Body a mite rebellious, great wizard? How sad. You will already have noted that my poor and paltry magics have served to return you to your true shape, and you’ve already felt my gentle talons. They ensure that any magic you cast or unleash is drained to strengthen my bonds upon you—oh, you may see them not, but bound you are, and shall be for as long as it’s my pleasure to keep you so. You’re wrapped in spell bindings linked to my mind; you’ll never escape me unnoticed.”

Nergal’s lips curled in a sneer as he added, “None have broken my mind yet, Elminster, though you’re welcome to try. Attaining freedom is a laudable goal for any sentient being.”

The ground trembled again, and a flame shot up over their heads, searing a squalling imp. Nergal’s smile broadened as he withdrew his tentacle—and the shuddering of the rocks beneath Elminster’s baking feet made him stagger and almost fall.

“Laudable,” the devil added gloatingly, “but nigh impossible. You see, I’ve spent much time observing your exploits, Old Weirdbeard—and I have uses for you. Oh, yes.”

The archdevil’s tentacles were suddenly writhing above his shoulders, like the limbs of an excited and gigantic spider.

“You will, of course, attempt to escape, perhaps even to harm me. Such failures will make little difference to your torment—and they *will be* failures.”

Tentacles stretched forth almost lazily, and a diabolical smile widened.

“You see: You’re in *my* cozy little dale now, wizard.”

And wearing that same welcoming smile, Nergal reached out with a tentacle and tore Elminster’s right arm off.