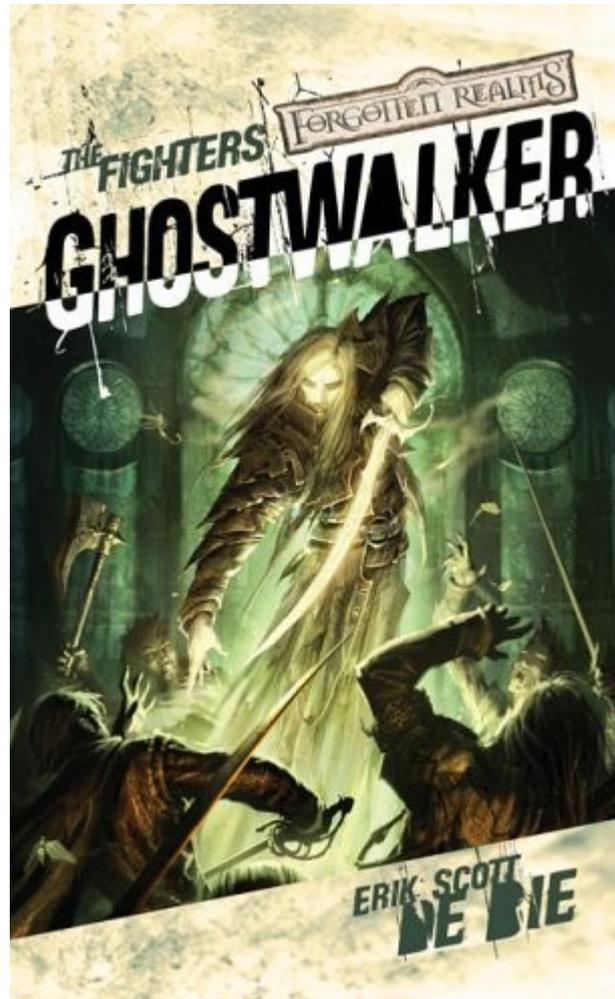


Wayfarer

By Erik Scott de Bie



Greengrass, the Year of the Serpent (1359 DR)

A meaty hand seized his arm, its fingers wrapping all the way around the trembling limb.

"Ye'll keep yer mouth shut, runt," Bilgren rumbled. "Or I'll put me fist down it and me boot up yer backside."

"Indeed," came Torlic's velvet hiss. "You will not speak of this night, my pretty, illegitimate boy, or I'll make you my new squire."

Meris shook his dark curls vigorously. Ordinarily, the bastard would meet their boasts with cold reassurance of the great punishment that would follow should they cross his father, but this time he just couldn't.

Not after this night.

"I-I won't," he promised. "By all the gods in the heavens!"

"Leave off," rumbled Drex from where he sat on the other side of the room. A plume of foul-smelling smoke rose from his mouth, where a stout pipe hung like a hook. "Can't you see the lad's scared enough as it is?"

Torlic disengaged with a sigh and a dainty wave, and Bilgren squeezed harder, leaving bruises on Meris's arm before stalking from the room, pausing only to seize the fearsome gyrspike that leaned against the wall. Meris had always been intimidated by the weapon -- a sword with a heavy chain flail attached to the hilt -- and he was relieved to see it, and its volatile owner, pass from the chamber.

He was left sitting with Drex, and that somewhat calmed the boy of ten winters. Drex Redgill was an uncle of a sort to Meris, and one who had fathered his fair share of bastards. He had taken a shine to Dharan Greyt's bastard for perhaps that reason. He had even instructed young Meris in the rudiments of axe fighting in addition to swordsmanship. Surely, he . . .

"Sir Redgill, my father sa --" Meris started, but froze when he saw the angry gleam in Drex's eyes. He could see the woodsman was outraged by the events of the previous night -- as furious at the sheer and unflinching brutality as Meris was terrified.

Drex blew a thick, distorted smoke ring and pulled on his pipe. The smoke stained the Greyt manor ceiling just a bit blacker.

"Your da's got more important problems to wrestle with," the woodsman said. "Gharask -- your grandda -- being a murderer, eh?"

Meris shuddered. He remembered all the children he had seen in Gharask's basement, bled and blackened beyond recognition.

"You just be getting to your bed, lad," said Drex. He slid a sharpening stone along his axe's edge -- still bloody, Meris noticed. "I'll handle Dharan when he gets back."

Meris nodded. He shivered and ran his hands down his arms.

"Where's he gone?" Meris started. "I-I-I want . . . I want. . . ."

What did he want? He couldn't look at his father the same way, not after last night. All those children . . . Should anyone have to see the horrors Meris had seen, and at so young an age? He felt as though he had grown up overnight, and his knees yet trembled.

"Dharan's had enough to think about," said Drex. "You try cutting down your own father, and tell me 'ow it feels. No matter what's in a man's past, that's got to hurt. Bed yourself."

"B-But . . ."

"Away!" Drex cursed. "Or do I have t'make you?" He hefted the axe menacingly.

Meris did not need to be told twice.

The Greyt family manor was cold as he made his way down the hall to his chamber. Always before, when Meris had looked at the cheerful tapestries depicting hunts and noble victories, the statues of armor, the sculptures of fantastical beasts, and the gilded weapons of heroes, he had derived a sense of warmth and pride.

Now, all the fire had gone from the manor -- the events of that night had opened his eyes. In a world where such a horror could transpire, heroism seemed a foolish and outdated concept.

Once again, Meris sought something to put the tragedies out of mind. It seemed as though someone else had done them, and he felt shamed and filthy to have borne witness.

Halfway down the hall, Meris heard a wail of despair from another of the bed chambers, a room he knew well precisely because he had never gone near it. The scream dissolved into frantic weeping, and Meris recognized the low tones of comfort as those of his father. Dharan Greyt's melodious voice drew Meris closer, and he listened at the hated portal.

It was the door to the chambers of Greyt's current wife: Lyetha Elfsdaughter.

Meris had never liked Lyetha. The half-elf, praised as the loveliest woman in Quaervarr, had always been the focus of Greyt's love, even during the days of his earlier marriages and dalliances. She had outshone Meris's own mother -- someone Meris had never known but still loved -- and for that, he hated Lyetha.

He could sympathize, though, with her grief. It wasn't every day one lost a child. If she wished to feel sadness, so be it. He would not begrudge her that.

Indeed, he relished it, as it provided comfort. He latched onto that misery as though to a bit of driftwood in the ocean, because dwelling upon another's pain would not allow him to face his own.

Meris was about to go when Lyetha's door scraped open, and he fell down onto his backside. There, backlit by the lamplight, stood the new Lord Singer of Quaervarr -- Dharan Greyt. New because the old -- Greyt's father -- had died under Greyt's blade that very night.

Looking up, Meris couldn't help but admire his father. Rich of hair with a perfect face tanned in the sun, Greyt was easily one of the most handsome men in Quaervarr, if not in all the North. His voice was beautiful as well -- a tribute to his years as a traveling bard -- and he had sung in the courts of kings, queens, elflords, and dwarf princes. Around Greyt was an inexplicable charm; Meris had never met anyone as dashing, as personable, or as erudite as his father.

It was not, however, like looking in a mirror. Meris's dark curls were those of his Amnian mother, as was his dusky complexion, and though his face might share the Greyt beauty, his brooding voice was not suited for song, nor were his short fingers meant for the yarting. Nor had he, thus far, met his father's skill with the blade -- though Drex had high hopes for Meris.

"What is it?" his father asked.

"I -- ah -- I just . . ."

"I am otherwise occupied, boy. Get to bed and bother us no more." Greyt slammed the door shut.

A heartbeat later it opened, and Greyt slithered out of the room. He grasped Meris hard by the arm, his nails driving into Meris's young flesh, and hissed in his face.

"We will speak of this later," his father said.

Meris couldn't help himself. Tears leaked from his eyes.

The Lord Singer looked down on him with something akin to pity, but laced with contempt. Meris was a constant disappointment to his glorious father -- a dusky bastard, born of a woman who had fled the Moonwood, never to return, after only a year with Dharan.

"I apologize," Greyt said, so unexpectedly that Meris blinked. When he continued, it was in one of his rhymes. "I know tonight was a strain, and I'm sorry for your pain. Trust me that you will smile again."

Meris nodded dully but was not comforted. He had noted the hatred in Dharan Greyt's eyes when Gharask's blood dripped from the golden rapier, and he could no longer trust his father.

Seeing that his youngest son was not about to respond, Greyt nodded, assumed a calm, woeful face, and went back to Lyetha. Meris caught a glimpse of spun-gold hair and gleaming blue eyes, cast in a face that could have been porcelain. Meris drank her tears greedily.

Then Meris was alone again, his mind even stormier than before. Clutching at his temples to keep his roiling thoughts inside, Meris slinked to his room and shut the door behind him.

Once inside, he shed his sweat-soaked tunic and had the presence of mind to examine it. To his horror, he saw spots of red, and that reminded him. With a little cry, he bunched up the fabric and threw it into the fire that had been laid in preparation of his arrival. It had burned down to coals, but flared up again when the gossamer fabric fell upon it. The room filled with the acrid smell of burning silk, and Meris watched the flames for a long time. How dark and treacherous they were, consuming the damning tunic and concealing the horror he did not want to remember.

The green tunic turned black, and words came unbidden into Meris's mind.

"Black covers all things," he murmured. "Black hides all hurts."

He would never wear black. Black was a cruel, murderous color, and he would have nothing to do with it.

Meris was so intent upon the flames that he failed to notice the figures emerging from the shadows behind him.

He became aware of them only when a pair of rough hands seized his shoulders and sent him spinning toward the bed. Meris tried to control his fall, but ended up splayed out on the covers. A wiry body leaped atop him, holding down Meris's flailing arms and legs. A yellow-haired, green-eyed face leered close to his, offering a lip-smacking that might have been a kiss. It was a girl, just on the verge of womanhood, with very familiar features.

"Getting to bed late, eh, little bastard?" a crackling voice asked from beyond his attacker. "Enjoying the ladies at the Stag, perhaps -- or something else?"

Reldra and Tetlan. Of course.

Meris mentally evaluated them, with the skill only the child of a broken home can.

Cruel-lipped Tetlan came from Greyt's first marriage with some Cormyrean -- his wife of only two seasons, seventeen seasons ago. After that had come the Sembian wench, Reldra's mother. Dark-eyed Reldra was born only days after the Cormyrean's tragic death under the hooves and wheels of a wagon.

Tetlan and Reldra were not more than a year apart and had the advantage of growing up together as brother and sister. Both had inherited the Greyt beauty, and they looked so much alike that one would think them full siblings.

And, if Meris's resentful thoughts were true, they looked sufficiently friendly that one would think them a wedded -- or perhaps just bedded -- couple.

"What do you want?" Meris cried. "I don't know anything! I don't know --"

"You know why Father's so upset," Tetlan reasoned. "He took you with him yestereve, along with Lyetha's brat. We want to know why."

"Tell us, an'mayhap we let you go," Reldra purred in his ear. "Or mayhap we don't."

Meris's eyes flashed to his engraved hand axe, its dark steel curved and curled in the elven style. His father had given it to him for his tenth naming day, not two tendays past. He already knew the grip like it had been melded to his hand since birth. Too bad it was five paces distant, on the far mantelpiece.

Tetlan drew one of his twin short swords -- the boy was a student of Torlic's -- and lay the point on Meris's cheek. The bastard flinched away from the cold steel, so Tetlan pressed it deeper, drawing a dark bead.

"You'll tell us about this night, or we'll have us some fun, eh, little bastard?" Tetlan said. "I wonder if that pretty skin's dark underneath, thanks to that Amnian whore." Reldra cackled in his ear and pressed hot lips to his flesh.

Meris's eyes went cold.

"Get off me," he said in a voice as low and as menacing as he could manage. "Take the sword away."

"Or what?" Tetlan laughed. "You'll weep us to death, little badger? You'll lose control and demonstrate your love of our sister?" Reldra tittered and pressed herself against her bastard brother with a husky moan.

"No," Meris said coldly. "I'll shout for father. He and I are quite close, now, and he will not hesitate to make you sorry he ever looked at your flipskirt mothers."

That got their attention. Though Tetlan showed no reaction, Reldra looked at Tetlan uneasily, and Meris knew he had won. He stared hard at his half-sister, and Reldra released his wrists and rolled off his bed. Her face tight, she scampered over to Tetlan for reassurance, but he cuffed her alongside her head with a growl.

"You don't scare us, little bastard," Tetlan said. "When you're not looking -- I promise. Maybe when you get to sleep, eh? We'll see how well you cry out around a gag -- or without a tongue at all."

Meris did his best to keep his fear off his face and stared back at Tetlan with an expression colder than the High Ice his father sang about. Cowed, Meris's older half-siblings stalked away, leaving him in peace.

Exhausted, Meris flopped back on the bed. The events of the night came flooding back to him and combined with the threats of the last few moments. Not a candle's span had elapsed since he had watched his grandfather fall in a duel with his father, and he had already been threatened, cajoled, and mocked by three grown men, two older and stronger siblings, and his murderous father. Then there was that other thing he had done -- the one that should have crushed him. . . .

It was all too much for Meris. A plan came to him, and he acted upon it without thinking. He heaved himself up; wrapped his thin, sweaty frame in a white tunic; stuffed some clothing and a tinderbox into a satchel; belted on his hand axe; and was out the door.

It was the time just before sunrise, when Faerûn is at its darkest, and the cold is at its deepest. Two bells had tolled in Quaervarr -- one when he had left, and one, now, in the distance -- and Meris found himself deep in the haunted Dark Woods of the west.

Perhaps madness had driven him here, or perhaps a desire to face death. He wanted to take his mind from what had transpired, wanted to forget, and there was no better way than to go into the woods he had feared since childhood, where every snap of a twig would set his mind projecting untold dangers.

Or so he had reasoned before leaving Quaervarr. Now, lost, cold, and alone, Meris's thoughts followed an altogether different path.

Fear had begun to creep into him half a bell ago. The farther he walked into the woods, the darker and colder it became. Meris had spent time in the woods, but never without Drex teaching him woodcraft, or Saernnus Quickleaf leading him along deer tracks or to secret pools sacred to the fey.

Meris felt vulnerable and out of his element. He wondered which deity he should pray to -- Mielikki, the lady of the forest, for protection, or Malar the Beastlord, for strength? His masterful hand axe, a gift from his father, seemed revealed for a lie -- useless and mundane . . . just like him.

He paused. This was ridiculous. Why should he be so frightened? It was just a forest. Stories of ghosts were just that -- stories. Why would he . . .

Him . . .

A chill swept through Meris's body. Had he just heard something?

"Wha-what? Is-is someone there?"

The wind seemed to laugh. Well met, wayfarer . . .

He had definitely heard that, though not with his ears. And though Meris would know many faults over the course of his life, excessive valor was not one of them. His walking stick fell from his trembling hands and he ran back toward Quaervarr.

The voice, however, was not so easily left behind.

My wayfarer . . . the wind seemed to whisper. Where do you wander? What do you seek?

"Leave me be! Leave me!" Meris shouted.

You wander, you do not find. . . .

"Stay away from me!" Meris screamed, looking over his shoulder.

He ran right into a low hanging branch -- or, more accurately, an extended arm.

As Meris lay dazed in the mud, he looked up from the heavy brown boots in front of him, his eyes gliding up tan breeches to a black woodsman's jacket, and from there to a pair of short swords, then up to a sneering face.

"No," Tetlan said. "We're not going to stay away. You're going to talk, or you're going to die." He reached for his swords.

"What? What are you --?" came Reldra's voice.

Meris did not hesitate. Something inside him snapped -- something deep, dark, and savage. All he saw in his half-brother was a threat -- the promise of a swift doom -- if he did not act. He had seen too much inaction, too much vain hoping for mercy, earlier that night. He needed to act.

And act he did.

Propelling himself up and out, Meris slammed into Tetlan's stomach as hard as he could. The older, bigger boy did not fall, but he staggered back with a confused yelp. Meris fumbled at Tetlan's belt and pulled one of his half-brother's blades. Two swords against an axe wasn't fair -- an axe fighter had to be really good to defeat a swordsman, Drex had always told him -- but sword against sword, at least he stood a chance.

"Put it down," Tetlan said as he stood with Reldra's help. He gave Meris a fierce glare.

Meris did not respond. A hero in one of his father's stories would challenge Tetlan then, would command him to "draw, if thou be a man," but Meris said nothing. He stalked toward Tetlan, genuinely hoping his half-brother would not draw. It would make bashing his pretty face with the sword's hilt easier -- at least, that's what Meris told himself he would do.

"Put it down, bastard!" Tetlan stammered. "You can't beat me!"

Meris shook his head but did not reply. Now he wanted Tetlan to draw, just so he could fight him and show the snotty boy his progress at blades. He knew this to be irrational, but he wished it all the same.

He thrust at his older brother -- just a feint, to make him draw his weapon. Meris hadn't counted on the terrain, though, and as he tripped over a high root, the feint jabbed into Tetlan's shoulder.

Tetlan obliged him then. With a roar, the older boy tore his sword free of its scabbard and fell upon Meris with a storm of clumsy slashes, hacking at him as though Meris were an incompetent serving wench to which Tetlan was applying a switch. Meris eluded most of the strikes and parried a few -- those not so clumsy that Torlic would be ashamed. The short, thin blade was too elegant a weapon for slashes, and the weight was wrong. Was Tetlan a lackwit?

Moreover, did this boy think he had skill? Meris almost laughed. How foolish he had been to be intimidated by a brightblade's boasts -- even six seasons younger, Meris exceeded Tetlan in bladework. The only advantage Tetlan had was age and strength, and that Meris invalidated with footwork he had learned from Dharan Greyt himself.

A left cross came in, which Meris ducked. At the same time, he jabbed out and cut a small hole in the thigh of Tetlan's breeches. The boy yelped and backed away.

Meris took the opportunity to slide a hand through his dark curls.

"I don't want to fight you, brother," he said. "Since I've taken first blood -- twice -- I suggest you walk away now. I promise I'll only dirty your honor a bi --"

Then Reldra leaped on him with a cry and bore Meris to the ground. His face struck a treeroot, breaking his lip open, and the impact blew the breath from his lungs. Meris struggled, but the wiry girl was too strong. The sword was beneath him, and he could not get at his hand axe. His left hand reached for something -- anything like a weapon. Tetlan came charging in, his blade held high, and Meris could hardly turn it aside with the girl on his back.

"No!" Meris cried. Not like this -- not a stupid mistake . . .

There. His scrabbling free hand caught a rock, which he brought up and around, dealing Reldra a blow to the temple. The girl moaned and rolled away, and Meris threw himself back. Tetlan's sword stabbed into the ground a hand's breadth from his cheek, and he raised the weapon for another stab.

Meris's free hand fumbled at his belt and found the hilt of his hand axe just as Tetlan stabbed down at his back.

Meris brought his sword around, slapping the thrusting blade aside. Meris's blade went wide to the right, driving Tetlan's sword into the dirt. Meris's knuckles split against a rock, but he did not hesitate. He whirled to his left, slashing the short sword in his right hand in a thin line across Tetlan's stomach, and bringing his other hand around, continuing his spin . . .

"You bastard! You bloody bas --!" Tetlan stopped when Meris's backhand sunk the hand axe halfway into the center of his chest. He gave a little sob.

"Never again," Meris said, spittle and blood from his split lip running down his face. "Never again."

Tetlan fell without a word, though his face -- once again that of a child -- was roiling with accusations.

Shaking her head, Reldra looked at them and her eyes widened. Then she screamed and bolted into the woods.

Just like a woman, Meris reflected distantly. Screaming and running. He would have to find her, to silence her before she mouthed off about this.

Meris stood in the grove as though the world had stopped, his mind empty. He was not himself. Or perhaps he had forgotten who he was before and had only just remembered. Had his entire life been a lie until this moment?

When he looked down at the body of Tetlan beneath him, Meris quaked with horror. What had he done? The axe yet stood in his chest, and the once handsome muscles had slumped into a bloody pulp, looking not so much like the chest of a boy but rather like a haunch of rothé meat. He had . . . had killed him!

Killed him, like all those children . . . bodies piled unceremoniously beneath Gharask's rooms in the manor. . . .

But it had been in his own defense, hadn't it? Surely no one would hold him responsible. Surely no one would hold him to justice or demand satisfaction. Surely his father would . . . would . . .

Meris shut his eyes. No. He could not trust his father. Not after the horrors he had seen that night. Never again. He cleansed himself of dependence upon the Lord Singer. He would grow worthy of the Greyt name -- even more so than Dharan himself.

Meris knew he was better than his father.

Wayfarer . . . the wind whispered.

Yes.

"I am Meris Wayfarer," the bastard who would no longer allow that name to touch him declared to Quaervarr. Righteousness filled his chest, and a desire for vengeance -- to avenge himself upon the world, for all the mockeries, the petty injustices, and the destruction of his youth. "Let any who would deny me speak now."

Tetlan opened his eyes wide and screamed.

Meris almost leaped in shock, but descended upon his brother furiously, slapping and kicking, trying to get Tetlan to shut his mouth before all of Quaervarr and the Moonwood should hear.

When that wouldn't work, he fell upon Tetlan's throat and mouth, closing his hands around both to stop the awful, damning screams.

Even though he knew that no sound should come forth -- not without air to drive it -- still the gurgles of horror and pain leaked around Meris's fingers.

Then, Tetlan gave a final jerk and fell silent. His body relaxed, and Meris knew he was dead. He glanced around furtively, hoping no one had heard the sounds. There were no running footfalls and no clomping boots. He was safe, shrouded in the darkness of the trees. The Dark Woods were eerily silent.

There were two deaths in the woods that night, and two rebirths.

Meris retrieved his axe -- it left Tetlan's flesh with a squishing sound -- and looked down at the hulk that had been his half-brother. He hadn't wanted to do it -- truly, he had not -- but necessity was a different thing.

He stared hard at Tetlan and searched his heart. He felt nothing. Agonizingly, he felt nothing. That was what frightened him most. There were no tears, but his body burned and froze both at once.

He had never killed anyone before, nor had he ever wanted to, but now that he had, he could not identify the feeling that saturated him. His veins tingled and he felt fully, absolutely alive. It was how he had felt earlier that night, but those moments paled in comparison. Was this true horror or exhilaration?

Did the Greyt family blood make him a killer?

Did it matter? Meris wondered with a chill. All the pain of the past night was gone -- he had suppressed it, forgotten it, and discovered precious freedom.

Meris was free.

As Meris lifted bloodstained hands from around his half-brother's throat, he heard a lonely wolf's howl. It startled him, calling to mind all the terrors of darkness and shadow.

After a heartbeat, Meris cursed. With eyes half mad, he howled back.