

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE FIGHTERS

# BLADESINGER

KEITH FRANCIS  
STROHM



*Deep the heart's yearning for fairest Cormanthor,  
for the bright leaves of home, where the sun's kisses fall  
upon jeweled crystal spires,  
and summer winds blow through ancient oak bowers;*

*Soft the heart's turning through the long sigh of years,  
to the glades of Varaenae, where the Eadulith flows  
with moon-stippled grace,  
and lilaenril blooms within night's dark embrace;*

*O fairest of homes!*

*Sharp the heart's churning for that now-distant road,  
for the vale of Ny'athalael, where the dryads still sing  
of root-hidden beauty,  
and silver streams carry their songs to the sea.*

*O Cormanthor, Hail!*

*Through the heart's discerning, in shadow and flame,  
we carry the song of your glory within;  
Remember us dearly, your sons and your daughters,  
'till we come once again to your soil.*

*To the bright, golden leaves of our home!*

—from “Aelrindel’s Lament”

*The Year of the Unstrung Harp*  
(1371 DR)

**D**eep among the jagged teeth of the Icerim Mountains—where wild winter winds shriek fell tidings and the snow-blasted dead claw at their ice-blue tombs—an old woman sang. Harsh-throated and cruel, the terrible song echoed among the frost-rimed boulders, not drowned out by the wind but amplified, carried like the rumor of war or pestilence, until even the iron heart of the mountain trembled before it.

Yulda, hathran and sister to the Witches of Rashemen, threw a gnarled hand against the stone wall of the mountain, and the deep rumble of an avalanche answered. A sharp bark of laughter escaped her. No going back now, the witch thought with a thrill. Snow, ice, and stone sealed the treacherous path she

had followed—as she had planned. The spell was simple for one such as her, steeped in the ancient ways of the wychlaran. The very stones and trees of Rashemen were alive with the presence of ancient spirits known to her people as telthor. Those same spirits, shaped by centuries of wild storms and harsh winters, were eager to accede to her request.

The heaving subsided after a few moments more. Yulda started forward, her thick, furred boots crunching across the thin layer of ice-encrusted snow. On any other night, in any other place, the witch would have used the moon's own light to guide her way. Here, in the wilds of the Icerim, with thick clouds blanketing the sky, she gathered her power and sent a golden ball of light ahead on the path she followed. The raking wind tore through her black robes until they rustled around her like the shadow of dark wings, but she paid it no mind. Simple cantrips to keep the cold at bay were one of the first things the witches taught their most junior ethran, or apprentices, and now her devotion to the arcane lore of Rashemen offered her protection enough from the predations of winter.

Thinking of the ethran brought Yulda back to her own apprenticeship, so many decades ago it seemed lost in the fog of time. She had been young and unsure of herself then—all too eager to please the other hathran. It wasn't until she had mastered the witches' arts and became a hathran herself that she began to see the hypocrisy behind her sisters' existence.

For all of their talk of keeping the law and defending Rashemen, the wychlaran were nothing more than glorified hedge witches, like those unproven who, through their own weakness, did not choose the harsh discipline and study of the hathran. The word of a Rashemi witch may be law, but they rarely spoke such a word without deliberation, relying instead on the Iron Lord and his dull-witted thugs to order things. The vremyonni, too,

stung her pride like a thorn. Those male spellcasters known as the Old Ones, laboring in their secret cavern strongholds away from the eyes of the hathran, were an affront to the true dignity of the wychlaran.

Yulda had long since seen the error in such a system. Working through ale-addled men instead of ruling as they should was exactly the reason that the wychlaran were so ineffective. After centuries, danger still threatened Rashemen from its borders. Let the men, and especially those damned secretive vremyonni, truly understand their place in the natural order. Only then would Rashemen attain its true destiny!

A rumbling cough interrupted Yulda's thoughts, and the witch cast around for the source of the disturbance. There, high on an escarpment, shimmering within the golden witchlight, crouched a Rashemi snow tiger. With another deep-throated rumble, it bounded down the steep slope, muscles rippling beneath a pelt of purest white, and halted before the black-robed witch. Up close, the snow tiger shimmered and glowed with its own incandescence, betraying its incorporeal nature.

Yulda pulled back her hood and gazed upon the creature from beneath the confines of her stark white mask, the symbol of her status as a hathran. Even here, poised on the threshold of plans that would mean her own death at the hands of her sisters if discovered, she was hesitant to remove it. She had worn the mask for far too long to cast it off so easily.

"Excellent work, my *dmizny*, my Fleshrender," Yulda purred at the spirit tiger in a voice that held none of its earlier harshness. Truly excellent work, she thought. Without the presence of her telthor companion, she would never have found the cavern that held the key to her plans.

Fleshrender let loose a long growl then fell into place by Yulda's side as the witch continued on her way. She sometimes wondered what the telthor did when not

directly in contact with her; one look at its baleful eyes usually convinced her that she really did not want to know. It was enough that the two were bound together in this dark purpose.

The path led through several old rockfalls, cluttered with ice and drifts of snow, and up a series of steep slopes. Yulda trudged onward for another candle's length, wheezing as she navigated the relentless course. The witch had just climbed over the shattered corpse of an ice-slain tree when her shimmering, golden witchlight winked out of existence, plunging her into total darkness.

She cursed loudly as her knee banged against the frozen stone before her, then laughed at the absurdity of it all. The dispelling of her magic should not have come as a surprise. The witch had, after all, chosen this place for a reason. During the course of its troubled history, Rashemen became the battleground of warring nations, whose mighty spells even now held sway over portions of the land. Yulda knew that no magic would function at all beyond this fallen tree and across a broad sweep of flatland, until the spellcaster reached the entrance to a small cavern at the base of a natural outcropping of stone.

The witch reached into her robe, pulled out a small torch, and lit it with some flint and steel. The flame guttered beneath the heavy wind but continued to cast fitful light. With a sharp motion to Fleshrender and a mental command to wait here, Yulda hurried along the path toward the cavern. Walking through this area devoid of magic set her teeth to itching; she felt only half alive, as if something precious and vital were missing. The torch nearly went out a few times along the way, but she finally arrived at the cavern entrance, breathless from the buffeting of the wind.

Yulda dropped the torch and bowed her head to avoid banging it on the uneven stone as she entered the cave. Immediately, she let out a sigh of relief as her mystic

senses returned. In the dying light of the torch, she could see a shadowed path leading toward the back of the cave. Following it, she stood at last before a wall of stone inscribed with several glyphs. The witch sang softly, almost humming, and purple light flared from the glyphs before the wall shimmered and faded away.

She stepped through and made a sharp gesture with her hand. At once, flames erupted from wooden torches placed roughly in iron sconces around the cave. The gray stone of her rude demesne rippled with incandescent fire as the crystals embedded within the rock caught the newly created light. Normally she would stare at such a spectacle, marveling at the delicate interplay of elements. Tonight, however, she was driven by a dark and terrible purpose.

Ignoring the sharp stalagmites that jutted up from the uneven stone floor like the gray teeth of a giant frost troll, Yulda deftly made her way to the back of the cave, past hastily strewn fur rugs and the detritus of past experiments. She finally stopped before a large alcove covered in darkness so thick that even the combined illumination of the torches could not pierce it. With another word, she banished the darkness—

—and gazed upon the naked form of a vremyonni, held spread-eagled by four obsidian chains that pulsed with a baleful green light. The Old One was ancient even by the standards of his brotherhood. Deeply weathered flesh sagged on the wizard's decrepit bones, drooping toward the floor like melted candle wax. Faint tufts of silver hair sprouted from the creased lines of the man's skull; only his thickset eyebrows and flowing white beard bespoke the Rashemi blood beating sluggishly within his chest.

He stirred at Yulda's approach, gazing up at her with eyes that still shone brilliant gold, despite his treatment. The witch nearly stopped in her tracks. Power resonated from him, sharp and bright, so different from her own

magic. She felt a wave of desire crest over her all at once—wild and desperate. With an iron discipline honed by nearly a century of study, the hathran mastered her body's need.

The Old One was dangerous still. His lore was deep; it burned within him, the very animating force that pumped each beat of his ancient heart. It had taken all of her cunning to lure the wizard into her trap and overwhelm his arcane defenses. She would not falter now and allow a single misstep to ruin her plan—not when she was so close.

“Have you reconsidered my offer?” Yulda asked in a voice not far from the purr she had offered her telthor companion earlier.

The vremyonni ignored her, staring steadily into her eyes.

“Where is the boy?” he asked at last, his deep, rumbling bass echoing in the frigid cave.

“The boy?” she replied with little comprehension—then she remembered the wizard's pupil, a lad of less than twelve summers, with soft, smooth skin and golden hair. “Ahh . . . I remember now. He's dead.”

The news seemed to deflate the vremyonni even more than his cruel bonds. The Old One bowed his head, but Yulda stepped forward and pulled the sagging wizard's head up violently to face her.

“I will have your secrets, old man—and those of your pathetic brotherhood.” She nearly screamed the last words.

He gazed at her for a few moments then said softly, almost whispering, “Before I will betray the very oaths that give me life, I would see the face of my captor.”

Yulda stepped back as if struck. No one gazed upon the naked face of a hathran, least of all a man, yet her path these past decades had led her far beyond the ways that blinded her tradition-bound sisters. Reaching carefully, almost tenderly, up to her mask, the witch



slowly removed it, revealing the weathered lines of her own countenance. She watched as the Old One's face changed—first in disbelief at the moment of recognition, then in horror as his gaze fell upon the gaping hole where Yulda's left eye should have been, a hole that now pulsed with an obsidian energy that seemed to draw the very light of the cavern into it.

“You . . .” the Old One stammered. “What have you done?”

The question hung in the air between them, and for a single moment Yulda felt free of the compulsion that had driven her for nearly half a century. The horror of her own actions came alive within her and cried out for justice. Here was an open door, an opportunity to step from her treacherous path.

The moment passed.

With a snarl, the hathran threw her white mask to the floor and shattered it with a single stomp of her booted foot.

“I have done what I must,” she finally answered the vremyonni's question. “Now,” she asked almost sweetly, “what will you do for me?”

“I will never betray the oaths of my brotherhood,” the Old One said, “especially to a durthan pawn.”

At that, Yulda laughed, a terrible sound, like the cawing of a crow.

“Do you think I have anything to do with that dark sisterhood?” she asked at last, nearly spluttering as she tried to catch her breath. “The durthan are nothing more than toothless crones. They scurry and scuttle in the shadows of the Erech Forest, clutching their little secrets and spinning webs of intrigue like bloated spiders, too full of themselves to realize true power.

“No,” the witch continued, drawing blood as she ran a sharp nail down the Old One's gaunt cheek. “I am far more than wychlaran. I am free—and nothing will stop me before I have worked my will upon the world.”

“Then I am truly sorry,” the vremyonni replied. “The freedom you have is a terrible burden. Who can survive it?”

The Old One’s words were spoken mildly, but their sorrowful tone awoke a fierce flame within Yulda’s heart. Who was this broken wizard, this *man*, to feel sorrow for her? She turned from him and with a single shout sent an arcane message spinning across the breadth of Rashemen to the one person she trusted. The witch’s forces would begin to gather. Her time was at hand.

“If you will not offer me the power that I seek,” Yulda said fiercely as she returned her attention to the captive wizard, “then I will reach into your very heart and rake for it.”

Quietly at first, and then with greater intensity, the witch gave voice to the spell that had taken her eye to learn. Black power billowed from her ruined eye socket like smoke, forming a cloud that gathered around the chained Old One. A final shouted incantation sent the cloud rushing at the chained wizard with enough force to extinguish the guttering torches. The cave plunged into darkness as the Old One’s screams kept company with the night wind.

In deep winter, night in the Icerim Mountains lasted a very long time indeed.

*The Year of the Lion*  
(1340 DR)

**A**elrindel watched as the river burned.

He stood utterly still beneath the arching canopy of leaf and branch, caught in that silent space between breaths, that moment when life and death cease their endless dance, poised in a single embrace—watching.

Flaming wrecks of wood and iron floated aimlessly across the river's broad back, caught in its bloodied current. Thick plumes of oily smoke rose from the shattered hulks like incense to a dark god, their black and terrible shapes bruising the soft spring sky. On the far bank, obscured by the columns of smoke, trebuchets and small catapults stood in various stages of disarray—the castoff toys of a malicious giant. Everywhere, the bloated bodies of the dead and dying bobbed sickeningly in the water as a

shadowed convocation of crows cawed raucous symphonies before plunging downward to feast.

Aelrindel watched it all with eyes that had gazed upon a hundred mortal lifetimes of joy and sorrow, had witnessed the world's fragile beauty suspended on a single silken strand of time, spinning out across the ages on an unending pilgrimage—and refused to look away.

“Animals,” a voice to his left barked, interrupting Aelrindel's sorrowful reverie. “Filthy barbarians, that they would kill and leave their dead to rot in the sun.” The words were harsh, sharp edged despite the lilting, cadence with which they were delivered.

The golden-maned elf turned a thin, angular face toward his companion, squinting almond-shaped eyes against the rapidly brightening day. The exclamation hung in the cool morning air. He heard the anger in his friend's voice—and more. The weight of history pressed down upon their hearts, of centuries spent in war and strife with the humans in this part of Faerûn. Even though an uneasy peace had reigned for nearly as long, the memory of sword and steel, wrack and ruin, lay across a generation and more of his people. Anger, sorrow, and bitterness—for the bright weavings of the *Tel'Quessir* cast into shadow, the songs stilled, and if he was honest with himself, for the extinguishing of human life—clung to the spirit of his people like a feeding wraith.

“Peace, Faelyn,” he said at last, placing long, graceful fingers upon his companion's shoulders. “We are here as eyes and ears, not swords.”

Faelyn scowled, but held his tongue. The elegant, angular cast of his features was sharper than Aelrindel's, more severe, like blades cutting through the air. Faelyn wore his thick, raven-black hair pulled back in the style of the *laeriaen*, bound with the finely wrought silver clasp that identified him as a bladesinger.

As he gazed at his friend, Aelrindel felt a prick of sadness. From as far back as he could remember, Faelyn had been a true companion and sword-brother, steadfast and loyal, but where Aelrindel opened his heart to the world in studied contemplation, seeking wisdom, the dark-haired bladesinger perceived only threat from almost every aspect of life. It had always been so. Though both of them had been forged by centuries of training as living weapons for the defense of their people, blood, war, and unrelenting pride had tempered Faelyn into a bitter metal indeed.

Aelrindel's hand moved from his friend's shoulder to his face, tracing the light webbing of scars that marred the otherwise bronze perfection of his skin, and was surprised to note a small shock of white hair beginning to grow at his temples. Had it truly been so long, he thought, since they were both *tael*, apprenticed to their masters and learning the rudiments of their art?

Faelyn reached out and gently put a stop to Aelrindel's exploration.

"You rebuke me, *kaer'vaelen*. Without words, you rebuke me," Faelyn said, casting his gaze to the ground.

Aelrindel heard the accusation. *Kaer'vaelen*. First Hilt of the bladesingers. This is what lay between them. It was a hard thing, a stone that had dragged on their friendship ever since Cauladra Brightwing had passed her sword, and her authority, to him before she journeyed to the groves of Corellon Larethian.

He was about to respond when a soft cry sounded in the morning air. Faelyn's head shot up and his hand strayed to the sword sheathed at his side.

The cry came again, just as soft. This time, Aelrindel's sensitive ears caught the direction of the sound. Without a word, he stepped out from beneath their hiding spot, confident that his companion strode right behind him, and moved in search of it.

The sun had risen over the site of battle and Aelrindel counted at least a score of bodies that had washed ashore and nearly twice that many lay dead and bloodied upon the ground. Carefully he picked his way down the slope that led to the heart of the destruction, avoiding the snapped points of blades, congealed pools of blood, and the feathered shafts of spent arrows that sprouted from the slick earth like gruesome flowers.

His senses were alert for the slightest sound, as, he knew, were Faelyn's. Death often called more than just crows to its sickening feast. So it was that the figures leaping from behind a small jumble of rocks and small boulders did not surprise the two elves.

There were nine of them, Aelrindel noted, adorned with mismatched armor—pieces of metal, strips of boiled leather, and hardened cloth. All were human, though barely recognizable as such beneath the gore and grit that covered their skin. Some were missing teeth or fingers, and one, a particularly emaciated figure whose bones stood out beneath a thin layer of skin, had only a single ear. They held steel in their hands—a motley collection of pitted swords, bloodied axes, and evil-looking dirks—and had a hard glint around the eyes.

Aelrindel felt his lithe form relax, the tension brought on by surveying the destruction of human war melted away beneath the promise of action. Distantly, somewhere deep within his heart, the elf heard the gentle strains of the Song begin.

“What have we here?” one of the scavengers, a burly man with a grizzled beard and a wicked scar running from temple to throat, asked in exaggerated good humor. “Two pretty maids from the lands of the bleedin’ elves?”

His accent was short and clipped, difficult for Aelrindel to understand.

“*N Tel'Quessirscum!*” Faelyn proclaimed behind him.

The First Hilt held up his hand, to leash his friend's anger as much as to show these rude humans that they meant no harm.

"We are here in peace," he said slowly in the human tongue. His own mouth formed the unfamiliar syllables slowly. "We do not seek to hurt you."

That last brought a round of harsh laughter from the brigands.

"Been no peace in this land for quite some time," a weasely faced man barked out.

"An' that's just the way we like it, isn't it, lads?" the burly human asked, to the roaring affirmation of his companions. He moved closer to Aelrindel, close enough that the elf could make out the blackened stain of rot on his teeth; his breath stank like carrion. "'Tis you who should worry about getting hurt," the burly human said with a cruel smile. "Now hand over your swords and the pretty little things that you and your 'lass' here no doubt decorate yerselves with."

Aelrindel simply stood there, watching the man's smile slowly fade as the elf made no move to comply with his commands.

The grizzled human took a step back.

"Kill them," was all that he said—was all that he would ever say again.

Twin elven blades sang from worn leather scabbards, catching the sunlight along their gleaming lengths. A single spray of blood erupted from the burly human's throat as Aelrindel's sword, unleashed at last, cleaved through muscle and bone in a single cut. The man fell, headless, to the ground.

Behind him, Aelrindel heard the sound of Faelyn's Song, and joined it with his own in fearsome harmony. Four more scavengers fell within moments. A fifth, the weasel-eyed man, began to cast a spell. The First Hilt parried a clumsy axe swing and caught the rhythm of the wizard's spell. It was one with which he was well

familiar. Using his free hand, the bladesinger mirrored his opponent's casting then sent his considerable power out to surround the overmatched wizard, binding it to himself. Argent energy flew from the human's outstretched hand only to fizzle into nothingness as the bladesinger quenched the spell.

The brigands were obviously fearful now. Their earlier swagger gave way to wariness, and Aelrindel could see two of them already surveying their escape routes. Using skills honed from centuries of combat, the two elves wove a deadly net of steel from which none of their opponents could escape. Two more scavengers fell. One threw his dirk hard at Faelyn. Aelrindel batted the makeshift missile away with the flat of his own blade, while his companion slid forward to drive the point of his weapon into the man's chest. The second, perhaps the most skilled fighter of the lot, parried the snaking steel of Aelrindel's blade twice before a quick feint left his guard open. The bladesinger took the advantage, and the man fell backward with a deep tear in his stomach.

The remaining two humans dropped their weapons and began to plead for their lives. Still holding his blade easily in one hand, the First Hilt pointed a slender finger away from the battleground.

"Go," he commanded, "and leave the dead to the gods."

The two babbled their thanks and hastily retreated, tripping repeatedly over one another as they ran up the slope and back toward the human settlement. Only when they moved out of the range of his elf sight did Aelrindel start cleaning his blade. Once it gleamed again, free of the blood of his enemies, the bladesinger held it flat between both of his hands, bowed low in the way of the *laeriaen*, and placed it back within its scabbard.

"They deserved to be punished for what they did—attempted to do," Faelyn said when he, too, had finished the ritual.



"I know, my friend," he replied, expecting another session of wrangling with his embittered companion, "but we shall let the humans deal with them."

"Eyes and ears indeed . . ." came the reply, with a surprising hint of humor.

Aelrindel laughed softly at the jest. It was good to laugh.

The child's cry came again, breaking the moment. It was close, just beyond the jutting rocks from which their attackers had leaped. Aelrindel gave his companion a final smile then moved toward the sound. As he drew near, he saw a pile of corpses, each bloody and awkwardly bent. When the wailing came again, the bladesinger knew that it originated from beneath the corpses. He motioned Faelyn to help, and between them, the two bladesingers carefully separated the dead from their eternal embrace. The bodies were cool and stiff.

There, cradled in the rigged arms of a woman and protected from the elements by the press of bodies and a simple bloodied cloth, lay a screaming child. Its skin was red and splotchy from its exertion and its tiny fingers were balled into fists, beating the air in obvious fear and frustration.

Aelrindel gazed at the creature for a long moment, noting by the cast of its distorted face the moon elf blood that flowed within its veins. That and something more.

Or less.

The child had a roundness to its face, a solidity to its tiny frame that bespoke of other parentage, human parentage, if Aelrindel could judge these things right. It was one of the *a Tel'Quessir*, the Almost People. He sighed for the wailing child, caught forever between two worlds, and now, but a little while after its birth, already standing at the doorway to the gods' realm. He reached out his hand and stroked the child's cheek. Pale blue eyes opened wide, and the babe made a soft, surprised sound.

It stopped crying.

Aelrindel knelt before the child and started reaching for it with both hands.

“What do you think you’re doing, Ael?” Faelyn asked, the incredulity behind the question clearly reflected in his voice.

“We cannot leave the child here to die,” Aelrindel responded, not taking his eyes from the babe.

“Why not?” Faelyn continued, “Let the gods care for it. It is—”

“An abomination?” the First Hilt interrupted bitterly.

Faelyn swore. “Gods, Ael! Do you think I really believe that?”

Aelrindel shook his head—though there were some among their community who did see the *a Tel’Quessir* as abominations.

“Even so,” Faelyn went on, “we cannot take this child in. Remember the Oath. We are what we are. Besides, it is an ill-omened foundling. The signs—”

“Damn the signs, Faelyn. I know them well: ‘Born from battle, bad for luck.’ Those are nothing but superstition,” Aelrindel said with finality.

Inwardly, though, he sighed. Faelyn was right. No one had ever brought an outsider to the community, yet what were thousands of years of tradition in the face of this one helpless half-elf child? He had made his decision.

He reached out again to the foundling.

“Ael, don’t.” He could hear the strain in Faelyn’s voice.

“Enough,” Aelrindel snapped in a voice full of command. “The choice is mine, Faelyn, and I have made it.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw his friend respond to the tone of command, stiffening as if he’d been struck.

“As you wish,” came the flat response.

*Kaer’vaelen.*

It would always lie between them.

Aelrindel reached out to the child and gently, with great care, gathered the foundling into his arms. Staring into its soft, wide eyes, he didn't see the glint of anger flash across then settle in Faelyn's eyes.

All around them, the river burned.