

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

Ed Greenwood

The Sword
The Knights of Myth Drannor Book III
Never Sleeps



*From The Knights Who Came To Shadowdale
by Ornstel Maurimm of Selgaunt:*

Although they had beyond dispute saved the life of the wizard Vangerdahast, many lives, the loyalty of the Wizards of War, and the peace and stability of fair Cormyr, Vangerdahast's reward to these brave six was a hasty expulsion from the realm, for the Royal Magician suffered Cormyr to be beholden to none but himself.

Forth then they rode for Shadowdale once more, these six Knights of Myth Drannor.

They were led by Florin Falconhand, a handsome ranger, famed for saving the life of King Azoun Obarskyr. Noble and kingly of spirit was Florin, but as yet young and unsure.

The strongest blade among the Knights was swung by Islif Lurelake, a sturdy fighting lass of Espar, who like many a farm girl was quiet, level headed, unlovely, and large.

Among these adventuring companions, the Art was wielded by sleek Jhessail Silvertree, the smallest of the Knights, flame haired and beautiful.

The quieter of the two holy Knights was Doust Sulwood, priest of Tymora, destined to become Lord of Shadowdale. Like many wise holy ones, he watched and pondered more than he spoke.

The other holy Knight wielded a swifter, sharper tongue and was hight Semoor Wolftooth. As was customary among priests of Lathander, he would later take another name, Jelde Asturien, as he rose in service to the Morninglord.

The most lawless and experienced of the Knights was the only one among them who had not been reared in Espar: the shapely, sharp-eyed, and sharper-tongued thief who preferred to be known only as Pennae. Her wits delivered her younger companions from trouble almost as often as her shady deeds plunged them into it.

Six bumbling adventurers, notorious in Cormyr but unknown outside it—and heading out of the Realm of the Purple Dragon as fast as Vangerdahast could urge them along.

Prologue

It all began with the gruesome murder of Ondel the Archwizard, whose various pieces were found on many stoops, porches, and thresholds up and down Shadowdale.

Or perhaps it began with the finding of the legendary, long-hidden hoard of Sundraer the She-dragon.

Or then again, mayhap it started the night Indarr Andemar's barn exploded in stabbing lightnings and balls of green flame that soared up to try to touch the stars.

Or the morning the best woodcarver in Shadowdale, Craunor Askelo, discovered his wife was not his wife and that for years he'd been sleeping with something that had scales and claws when it wanted to.

Or a handful of days after Vangerdahast, the Royal Magician of Cormyr, had stood inside a dank stone castle sally chamber, seen the Knights of Myth Drannor provided with new mounts, armor, weapons, and much spending-coin by his command, gestured in the direction of the rising portcullis, and given them a firm order of his own: "Tarry within Cormyr no longer!"

Days that had been spent riding and discovering just how hard new saddles can be—and, despite what they looked like on maps, how astonishingly *large* the wilderlands of northeastern Cormyr were.

Not for the first time, Semoor rolled his eyes and asked, "Gods, will these trees never *end*?"

"Picture each of them as a willing wench, arms and lips opening to welcome you," Islif told him, her saddle creaking under her as she turned to smile. "And the ride will seem less endless."

Semoor closed his eyes, growled appreciatively a time or two, then opened

The Knights of Myth Drannor

them again to favor her with a sour look. He shook his head. “My aching shanks remind me that this is not the sort of ride I’d prefer to be endless.”

“You fail to surprise me,” Jhessail said in acid-laced tones of mock disapproval, running fingers through her red hair to rid it of some of the clinging road dust. A small cloud obligingly swirled away in her wake, causing Doust—who was riding there—to wince even more than she did.

Islif shrugged. Dirt had been their constant companion growing up in Espar—dust when dry, and mud when wet. Grime bothered her not at all. Little crawling insects, now, itching in intimate places . . .

Under the hooves of their patient mounts, the Moonsea Ride ran tirelessly on northeast, rising and then falling away again over gentle hill after gentle hill. Around it, as they rode, steadings grew fewer and fewer, and the scrub of abandoned fields and forests ravaged by woodcutters gave way to darker, deeper woods. Cormyr this might still be on maps, but much of it seemed unbroken wilderland, the road spawning small campsites at every trickling stream, but the trees otherwise standing dark and unbroken.

Pennae and Florin rode at the head of their band of six, peering watchfully into the forest shadows on either side. Florin’s searching gazes were almost hungry.

Yet Vangerdahast’s order had been both curt and clear. “Tarry within Cormyr no longer!” The Royal Magician wanted them gone out of the realm before anything *else* befell them and hurled trouble across Cormyr—or as Pennae had put it, “Gave us a chance to save the Forest Kingdom from itself, while nobles and war wizards dither, *again*.”

That sentiment had earned her one of the wizard’s coldest, darkest looks and a slowly rising, menacingly silent finger pointing at the doorway beneath the risen portcullis—not to mention Purple Dragon patrols following them along the road, so far back as to be just clearly visible, for the first few days.

“Subtle, isn’t he?” Semoor had asked everyone then. Several aching days in the saddle later, he stirred himself to ask, “So, are we fated to spend the rest of our lives riding out of fair Cormyr and not making it?”

“Avoid all inns,” Doust said darkly, in the same grand portentous tones favored by priests of Tempus and of Torm, who often visited Espar.

Islif gave that feeble jest the sour smile it deserved, then turned and asked Semoor, “If I answer you, will you say nothing more about our journeying and progress until the morrow?”

Ed Greenwood

The priest of Lathander winced. “Well,” he said carefully, “I’ll certainly try.”

Pennae turned in her saddle to fling a single word back at him: “Harder.”

That smoothly twisting motion made the arrow that sped suddenly out of the trees burn past her cheek without striking anyone.

The second arrow, however, hissed to catch her squarely in the ribs. Sinking in deep, it smashed her, sobbing, right out of her saddle.

Chapter 1

FOR THE GOOD OF CORMYR

Why, down the passing years, have so many Purple
Dragons died?

Why, every day, do courtiers in Suzail lie so energetically?
And why have war wizards and Highknights alike
Slain so many, stolen so much, and destroyed so much
more?

Why, for the good of Cormyr, of course.

The character Ornbriar the Old Merchant

In the play Karnoth's Homecoming

by Chanathra Jestryl, Lady Bard of Yhaunn

First performed in the Year of the Bloodbird





Wizard of War Lorbryn Deltalon sat alone in the small, windowless stone room, staring silently at the carefully written notes spread out on the desk before him. He was no longer seeing what he'd penned these last few months. He was staring past his neat jottings and beholding memories.

Recent memories. A succession of pain-wracked, sweating faces belonging to a lot of tormented nobles. Every one of them staring back at him in wild, mouth-quivering terror.

All too often, the sharp-eyed, faintly smiling visage of the Royal Magician of Cormyr loomed up amongst them. Looking back at him mockingly, Vangerdahast's unreadable gaze seemed a silent challenge. No frightened nobleman, he.

Deltalon sighed and shook his head, seeking to banish the piercing stare of the great mage he served. Yet the weight of Vangerdahast's menacing regard refused to fade.

The veteran war wizard sighed again, passed a hand over his eyes, and tried to stare at the all-too-familiar curves and swashes of his writing. He did a lot of silent staring these days.

Ever since Vangey had set him this task. The slow and distasteful work of spell-slaying all the mindworms Narantha Crownsilver had put into the minds of nobles. Hopefully without killing said nobles or leaving them more furious foes of the war wizards than they were already.

Work that, time and again, left him sitting alone, brooding.

He had now only two nobles left to cleanse: Malasko Erdusking and Ardoon Creth. Young, handsome fools both, who would be improved by a little healthy fear.

Yet Deltalon had something else, now, too: grave misgivings about the whole matter.

The Knights of Myth Drannor

At first, Vangerdahast had commanded several senior war wizards to visit the nobles the ill-fated Lady Narantha had infected and to use magic to slay the mindworms. When some nobles had been left witless or damaged in their wits and bitterly aware of it and one young lord had died along with the mindworm riding him, the Royal Magician had ordered the work to cease.

Yet that hadn't meant dealing with the mindworms was abandoned or unfinished. Rather, Vangerdahast himself had without warning taken over the task of "fixing nobles," abruptly and imperiously whisking himself to mansions and country castles all over the realm.

Vangey's visitations had gone on for most of a month before he'd just as abruptly summoned Lorbryn Deltalon and ordered him to use "all slow, deft care possible" to kill the mindworms still in the heads of a handful of remaining nobles.

Lorbryn Deltalon was a careful, loyal Wizard of War, and several other things besides, but he had never been a fool.

Vangerdahast, he strongly suspected, hadn't killed a single worm. Instead, the Royal Magician had altered their spell-bindings to make them obey him rather than the fell and vanished wizard who'd compelled Narantha to spread the little horrors. And, no doubt, he had commanded them not to gnaw away any more of the brains in which they dwelt.

In other words, Vangey had spent a little less than three tendays crafting a small army of nobles whose minds he could control whenever he desired—for the good of the realm, of course.

The few nobles he'd deemed the least useful—or perhaps judged any meddling with them would be suspected and sought after by wizards hired by their noble kin—he'd assigned to Lorbryn Deltalon for curing.

Deltalon knew he should be flattered. The Royal Magician absolutely trusted the loyalty of rather less than a handful of his Wizards of War—or anyone else. Laspeera, yes, and . . . well, perhaps no one else but Lorbryn Deltalon.

Yet therein lay the problem. For some time Deltalon had harbored growing misgivings about Vangerdahast's mental stability and loyalties.

The Royal Magician grew ever more glib and self-satisfied as bodies fell and rotted, years passed, and the realm endured.

A realm shaped more and more to Vangerdahast's liking. In the humble opinion of Lorbryn Deltalon—an opinion held only within the deep mind-shielding spell he'd found in a tomb all those years ago and ever since had

kept secret from the Royal Magician and everyone else—Vangerdahast was increasingly likely to convince himself that only he was capable of ruling Cormyr for the good of all.

He might already have reached that conclusion. Wherefore Lorbryn Deltalon watched the royal family of Cormyr *very* carefully.

Sooner or later, if Vangerdahast was so deeply corrupted, he would work spells to make the Obarskys mere puppets, or have them eliminated—by “enemies of the realm” of course—so he could “reluctantly” take the throne.

Others held similar suspicions. Several of the elder nobles did so openly, daring Vangerdahast to confront them. The Wizards of War watched and listened to such nobles even more attentively than they spied on the other highborn of the realm—wherefore Deltalon and most other war wizards knew that many who suspected Vangerdahast of seeking the throne had found reassurance in the rebelliousness of the young Princess Alusair and Vangey’s seeming tolerance for her willful nature.

Privately, Deltalon held a much darker view. In his opinion, Vangey was encouraging the tantrums and defiant escapades of the younger princess—and thereby happily allowing his grounds for a future argument (that the Obarskys had become unfit to continue ruling) to grow ever stronger.

“For the good of Cormyr,” Deltalon murmured, staring unseeingly through the notes on the table before him.

He didn’t want to think such thoughts.

He didn’t want to *do* this.

Yet, for the good of Cormyr . . .

His lips twisted at that irony, but he found himself nodding and bringing one of his hands, clenched into a fist, down—slowly and softly—to strike the table. Deep reluctance would claw him with tireless talons, but he could stride on.

He, Lorbryn Deltalon, must make these last two nobles his own mind-slaves. Just in case. And he must do it deftly enough that Vangerdahast must not suspect the worms were in stasis rather than dead, and the nobles would have no inkling of what he’d done. Until the day came—and by the Dragon Throne, let it never come!—when he found it needful to awaken the worms and enthrall the two. Just two, not the dozen-some the Royal Magician commanded.

Of course. Hadn’t Vangerdahast had years upon years longer than he to become truly evil and self-serving? Able villainy takes practice. . . .

The Knights of Myth Drannor

He was strong enough to do this now. For the good of Cormyr.

No longer would he have to trust in a deep shielding spell that faded over time and needed to be cast anew. Now, he had the elfstone.

Small, pale, egg-smooth, and far more ancient than Cormyr. Deltalon had found the gem hidden beneath stones under poor old Ondel's rain barrel, when sent to investigate that archwizard's murder.

Deltalon had carefully neglected to mention it in his report to Vangerdahast, and he'd swallowed it that same night. It remained safely inside him, magically nudged out of his stomach into adjacent tissue, to lodge there behind rehealed skin, hopefully forever.

Ondel had almost certainly recovered it from the hoard of Sundraer the She-dragon—whom he had loved and been loved by, when she took human form—after her death.

Elves had fashioned and enspelled the stone long, long ago. Just which elves, where, and how, he would probably never know. It was enough to know this much: Lorbryn Deltalon could now cloak his innermost thoughts and memories from any mind-probe, spinning false memories at will to deceive Vangey's mind readings.

So if he was careful enough, deep shielding or no deep shielding, Vangey would never know what Deltalon thought of him—or what his oh-so-loyal Wizard of War was up to.

Hmph. Those secrets would be among the very few things afoot in the realm that Vangerdahast did *not* know all about.

Yes. It was high time the Forest Kingdom was protected against its sworn, too-powerful, far-too-tyrannical protector. A check on Vangerdahast's might; a first small step toward finding a balance.

Smiling ever so faintly, Lorbryn Deltalon gathered his notes together, rose, and headed for the door on the other side of which Malasko Erdusking waited fearfully.

One more scared noble, who'd forgotten what nobles must never be allowed to forget: For the good of Cormyr, we must all sacrifice a little.



“More wine,” Rhallogant murmured to himself. “That’s what I need, just now.”

Yet he put off seeking it to continue pondering, not wanting to lose his quickening path of thought.

The Obarskyrs and their bootlicking Wizards of War worked tirelessly to rein in and frustrate the powers of all nobles. Everyone knew that.

Most nobles considered that reason enough to justify any amount of treason against the Dragon Throne, and Rhallogant Caladanter was proud to count himself among their number.

Getting caught meant an unpleasant death. Short of such capture, anything done to frustrate the decadent royals and the lawlessly skulking mages who served the tyrant Vangerdahast—the *true* ruler of Cormyr—could only be a service to the realm and all Cormyreans henceforth.

Long after Vangerdahast had been shamed and executed, the philandering King Azoun and his icy queen swept into “accidental” graves, and their two wayward daughters married off to nobles fit to lead the Forest Kingdom, Rhallogant Caladanter had every intention of happily standing among those “all Cormyreans henceforth.” With gold coins bulging in his coffers and the good regard of fair ladies all across Suzail.

A little treason was a small price to pay for such a bright life in a brighter realm.

Few even among the nobility knew who he was, yet. The son of a minor upland noble, Rhallogant was young and only recently ascended to his title—and hadn’t intended to be anything more than a wild young blade, enjoying the amusements of Sembia and perhaps Westgate or even fabled Waterdeep, for years yet. His father’s trusty Firelord had changed all that early one morning; the war-horse had thrown Lord Caladanter and then had fallen and rolled on his longtime master.

Rhallogant intended to be a trifle more subtle than Firelord had been. For a long time he’d idly contemplated treason against the Dragon Throne—but like most young highborn schemers, he had done nothing but contemplate and talk over his contemplations with other nobles of like age and opinions, over copious fine wine.

Such indiscretions, albeit trifling, made Rhallogant wince now. Just how well did the war wizards know him?

He was far from the only noble thoroughly frightened by the fates of the Lords Eldroon and Yellander—vanished and widely rumored to have died under prolonged magical torment at the hands of the Royal Magician—and

The Knights of Myth Drannor

of Lord Maniol Crownsilver, also now gone from public view and said to have become a suicidal, empty husk of a man under the constant care of ever-vigilant priests and war wizards. Yet Vangey's skulkers would doubtless deal with more important nobles first, leaving the "young puppies" (as he'd heard a scowling senior war wizard refer to a rather noisy hall full of young nobles deep in revelry, which had included one Rhallogant Caladanter) until later. They might be moving down their rolls of the doomed toward his name even now.

Two of the nobles who'd so excitedly put their heads together with him over steaming larrack wine in that upstairs club in Saerloon were dead already, in a trade dispute in Westgate that Rhallogant didn't *think* had anything at all to do with a few whispers of treason. The knives that had killed them, wielded by professionals of Westgate, had been poisoned, and Lord Eldarton Feathergate had happened to be aboard a ship just gliding into Westgate harbor when those knives had struck. He'd found the bodies and had disposed of them, before any war wizards could poke and pry them with spells and uncover things they shouldn't.

Which left, aside from Rhallogant himself, just one other conspirator in this particular sordid little conspiracy: Eldarton Feathergate.

Dearest Feathergate. Useful, efficient Feathergate. Feathergate who knew far too much about Rhallogant's ambitions and current business. Tall, as swift-witted as a viper, and the sole son and heir of a highborn family just as minor—but far wealthier—than Rhallogant's own. Neither a fool nor an easy target, he.

Which is why only Rhallogant's most trusted bodyguard was good enough to kill Feathergate.

The bodyguard Rhallogant had just summoned with a firm, decisive tug on his private, personal bell pull. Boarblade would arrive in three breaths or less, as quiet and as impassive as always.

Not that it had been a bad plot, if he did say so himself. Frame Baron Thomdor Obarskyr, Warden of the Eastern Marches, as a traitor to the throne, portraying him as a jealous lout aided, goaded, and controlled by Vangerdahast. Set swords to swinging and nobles, Obarskyrs, and commoners alike to raging, with the intent of getting rid of Vangey and as many war wizards as possible. Many of those hated wizard spies would be butchered by common folk across Cormyr, led by one loyally outraged

Rhallogant Caladanter, enthusiastically commanding his bodyguards to use their swords on these “traitors to the realm.” He’d had those speeches written for *months*.



The third arrow glanced off Florin’s shoulder as he was clawing at his shield buckles. It smashed the wind out of him and spun him around sideways, all in one whirling instant.

He reeled in his saddle, fighting to find breath enough to shout hoarsely, “Spread out, ride hard, and *get down!*”

Around him the Knights’ horses were snorting and bucking, Pennae a gasping heap in the road dust under their dancing hooves.

The volley of a dozen or more arrows sleeted out of the trees, sending two of the horses down to join Pennae. Another bolted with Doust shouting and tugging vainly at it to stop—until he fell off. The rest reared, spilling their riders, and fled.

The Knights found themselves wallowing in the dust of the Moonsea Ride in the company of two very large and pain-wracked horses, who were wildly rolling, writhing, and kicking.

“Holy naed!” Semoor swore, skidding his chin along rather stony mud as an iron-shod hoof lashed the air just above his head. “Down on my tluining face eating dirt with some tluiner trying to kill me *again!*”

“You sound surprised,” Islif grunted, rolling hard away from the horses in the opposite direction from where the arrows had come. “Really, holynose, you should be getting used to it by now!”

Florin staggered to his feet, clutching at the arrow standing out of his shoulder. His arm felt on fire, and he couldn’t feel the hand at the end of it at all, even when he clenched his fingers into a fist. The shaft had struck his chest and glanced along the armor over his heart to go in under the edge of his shoulder plates. The fire seemed to grow hotter. He winced. At least it wasn’t his sword arm.

Taking a few steps, as if he could walk away from the pain, he snarled defiance at the trees, hoping the sudden lack of arrows meant that the unseen archers had run out of them.

It seemed he was right, judging by the armed men who answered his snarl

The Knights of Myth Drannor

by bursting out of the trees with swords and daggers drawn and nary a bow in sight. Much good that it would do him.

“Up!” Florin barked to his fellow Knights. “Up and together!” He spared not a glance for them, his eyes never leaving the grim faces of the men charging at him. They were all in well-worn fighting leathers adorned with no hint of badges or house colors. Outlaws—or men trying to seem outlaws.

Movement to right and left; the ranger shot swift glances in both directions and saw Islif clambering to her feet, her sword singing out, and Doust limping back to rejoin the Knights, mace in hand.

From her knees, Jhessail snapped out a battlestrike, sending magical missiles streaking at the ambushers in a hungry swarm of glowing blue darts. Men stiffened and cursed as they were struck—Cormyreans, by their accents—but none fell or fled. There were more than twelve of them . . . a score or so.

Florin wrestled with the arrow in his shoulder, trying to snap off its shaft before an outlaw could reach him and grab hold of it, but—

He was out of time. Swords came swinging at him in a steely rain.

He ducked away, parrying furiously, and heard ringing steel and Islif grunting as she did when putting real might behind a slash. More clanging and clashing of swords, then a shout of pain—an outlaw—and Jhessail unleashing another battlestrike. Semoor was casting something, too, calling on Lathander for aid in smiting.

Smiting was something Florin had to take care of himself. His blade bit deep into the side of a screaming outlaw’s face, lodging in bone, and he couldn’t—couldn’t—

The swords that thrust into him then, under the edges of armor plates low on his side and high on his neck, burned like fire and chilled like a deluge of icy water.

Florin staggered back, dragging the man he’d slain with him—but the weight of that toppling body snatched his sword from his hand, leaving him with nothing to parry a grinning outlaw’s wicked roundhouse slash.

“Die!” another outlaw shouted, hacking with the dagger Florin was trying to snatch out of his fingers. “For Cormyr and Yellander! *Die!*”

Those words echoed strangely around a rising, pounding dark flood that seemed to race through his ears, wash through his head, and back out to blind him as grinning men closed in, and fire and ice lashed Florin again . . . and again . . .



Not far away, Jhessail screamed as a hurled sword spun at her face. She ducked, and it tumbled through her hair, slicing open her cheek and catching fast in the tree behind her, still tangled in her hair.

Clawing at the enemy steel to get it away from her eyes, she saw Islif beset by six outlaws. One staggered and went down, sobbing and spraying blood—but was followed by several of Islif's armor plates that went flying aside as she reeled and then toppled, two swords buried in her.

Islif down, a bare breath after Florin's fall . . .

Muttering words that sounded more like curses than prayers, Doust clawed aside a sword and bounced his mace off the face of the outlaw wielding it, hard.

That face exploded into a burst of teeth and gore. Doust slammed his mace into the throat beneath it before whirling to meet a one-eyed outlaw who'd come leaping from the fallen Islif to hunt red-haired spellhurlers.

Almost casually the outlaw hacked Doust aside, her lifelong friend crumpling and spitting blood, and came right for Jhessail, swinging back his sword to chop—

Nothing at all, as Semoor swung away from busily battering an outlaw to the ground to bash in one side of the one-eyed outlaw's head. The man crashed to the ground, dashed senseless, his arms and legs jerking like fish flapping when pulled out of a river.

"Over here!" Semoor panted at Doust, who was still doubled up, one bloody hand clutching his stomach. "Over to Jhess, here, to stand over her, so she can either rescue us all with some bright spell or other . . . or we can at least die together. *Thuinig* Vangerdahast! I'll bet he's behind this! Where's that Dragon patrol that was riding at our heels? *Hey?*"

Doust nodded but managed only a groan by way of reply, as Jhessail grimly clutched the sword that had arrived in her hair. She had no spell left that could deliver them from so many foes. Dark and dripping blood, her two friends loomed above her as they came together, back to back.

They were standing guard over her, for the last few breaths any of them were likely to take. Around them, on the dusty Moonsea Ride, their ambushers closed in.

Not hurrying now, the outlaws—or whoever they were—formed an

The Knights of Myth Drannor

unbroken ring around the last three Knights before slowly, in unison, striding closer.

White-faced, Jhessail stared at them. They looked back at her, showing their teeth in grim, unfriendly smiles.

Then with slow care, they closed in, cruel grins widening.

“Know any holy spells that’d be really useful about now?” Semoor shouted desperately over his shoulder.

“No!” Doust shouted back. “Do you?”

They stepped apart long enough to turn and stare at each other, as if some divine deliverance might be found written across the face of one of them for the other to discover.

Jhessail looked helplessly up at them, clutching the heavy and unfamiliar sword she so hoped she’d not have to try to use. They were going to die. Here, a few breaths from now. This wasn’t some bardic ballad, where an improbable rescue would burst upon them all.

She could see that same realization in the faces of her two friends, as they peered at each other, found no up-any-sleeve escape . . . and let all hope drain out of their eyes.

“*Thuin!*” they snarled, in emphatic unison, and spun around to slam shoulders against each other once more. Waving their maces and staring at the battle around with empty, despairing faces, they prepared to die.



Telgarth Boarblade slipped through the study door, glided to a halt in front of his employer, and bowed, saying nothing. Aside from his eyes, asking an eager, wordless question as to how he could tender service, his face was an impassive mask. Rhallogant Caladanter might be an unobservant fool, but from time to time rather more sharp-witted folk had been known to visit him.

Boarblade already knew why he had been summoned and Caladanter’s intentions regarding him, but he let nothing of that show in his expression or manner. Letting one’s guard drop or getting careless had meant death long before he’d ever come to Cormyr and let the foolish young Caladanter heir “discover” him.

Caladanter was reclining in his favorite chair, one glossy-booted leg up on a footstool carved into quite a good likeness of a snarling panther. The decanter

Ed Greenwood

beside it was already almost empty, and the ring-dripping hand that waved that huge goblet so jauntily trembled visibly. Drunken sot.

“Boarblade,” Rhallogant greeted him almost jovially, leaning forward like a bad actor broadly overplaying a sly conspirator. “I’ve a task for you. A dangerous task. A *secret* task.”

“Lord?” Boarblade murmured, taking a step closer to signify that he heeded his employer’s lust for secrecy, and bending forward to show how eager he was to hear the great secret that might be imparted.

“I need you to kill a man.”