

FORGOTTEN REALMS

ED GREENWOOD
SAGE OF SHADOWDALE

ELMINSTER
MUST DIE



CHAPTER ONE

DARK DECISIONS

The wardrobe was a cursedly tight fit.

Even for one of the handsomest, suavest, most lithely athletic, and most debonair nobles currently inhaling the sweet air of the Forest Kingdom of Cormyr.

Even a sneering rival would have had to grant that Lord Arclath Argustagus Delcastle was all of those things in the judgment of many a lass, not just his own.

Yet, despite all of those splendid qualities, the heir of House Delcastle could *just* squeeze himself inside the massive oak wardrobe. To keep company with old mildew and older dust. Whose familiar reek reassured him that this was the palace, all right.

Left knee above his left ear and fingers braced like claws to keep his cramped body from slipping and making the slightest sound, Arclath stared into the darkness wrought by the closed door right in front of his nose and prayed fervently that Ganrahast and Vainrence would be in a hurry and keep their secret meeting brief.

So it would end, for instance, before he happened to need to sneeze.

No one ever came to this dusty, long-disused bedchamber high in the north turret—or so Arclath had once thought. He'd found the place after a feast some years ago, while wandering the palace to walk off the effects of far too much firewine before he braved the dark night streets homeward, and had employed it thereafter to enjoy the charms of a certain palace maid in private—a sleek delight since sadly gone off to Neverwinter in the employ of a wealthy merchant—and then as a retreat to sit alone and think, when that need came upon him.

It had come as a less-than-pleasant surprise, moments before, to learn that the Royal Magician of Cormyr, the widely feared Ganrahast, and his calmly

ruthless second-in-command, “Foedoom” Vainrence, favored this same north turret bedchamber for private parleys.

Arclath hadn’t had time to try to dodge into the little space behind the wardrobe, which stood straight and square where the bedchamber wall behind curved. He’d only just had time enough to scramble into the closet, drag its door closed, and compose himself into cramped but silent immobility before the two powerful wizards had come striding into the room, muttering grimly.

They more than muttered after they entered the room.

Arclath felt an itch starting and set his teeth in exasperation. He should have known *someone* went there to discuss confidential and sensitive matters, given the warding spells that always made his skin tingle and prickle on the stair ascending to the uppermost room.

A moment later, a glow kindled in the darkness right beside Arclath’s head, startling him almost into gasping aloud.

He managed—*just*—not to do that.

Instead, he froze, chilled and helpless, as an old spell flared into life right beside him.

A radiance that slowly became a silent, floating scene of a nearby spot he recognized. That same stretch of stair where the wards tingled, looking down from the turret room.

A scene where someone stood silently, hands raised to claw at the wards that were keeping her at bay, eyes blazing in frustrated fury. It was someone who’d been dead for years, a ghost Arclath had seen once from afar.

The Princess Alusair, the ruling Steel Regent of the realm almost a century earlier; familiar and unmistakable from all the portraits and tapestries in nigh every high house of Cormyr, her long hair flowing free and face set in anger—and her eyes seemingly fixed on him.

Arclath swallowed. He could see right through her, armor and long sword at her hip and all, and by the way she peered and turned her head from time to time, it was apparent she could hear but not quite see the two wizards as they stood talking, just outside his wardrobe.

“Grave enough,” the Royal Magician was saying, “but hardly a surprise. You didn’t call me here just to tell me *that*. What else?”

“The Royal Gorget of Battle is missing from its case,” Vainrence replied flatly, “which stands otherwise undisturbed, all its spells intact. And it was there an hour ago; I happened to walk past and saw it myself.”

Arclath raised an eyebrow. The gorget was *old*. An Obarskyr treasure that

had lain in its case, proudly displayed in the Warhorn Room, for as long as he'd been old enough to remember what was where in the palace.

"Elminster again." Ganrahast sighed, slamming a fist against the wardrobe doors in exasperation.

One of them shuddered a little open, freezing Arclath's heart again. However, its movement caused the spell to wink out, restoring darkness and snatching away the furiously staring ghost.

Neither of the wizards seemed to notice either the door or that momentarily visible glow. They *must* be upset.

Through the gap, the young noble saw Vainrence nod and say eagerly, "However, *this* time we've got him. I thought he'd go for the gorget—he seems to prefer the older magics—so it's one of the twoscore I've cast tracers on. We can teleport as near as we choose to wherever he's taken it, just a breath or two after you give the order; the team is ready. Right now, Elminster's in the wildest part of the Hullack, and not moving. No doubt sitting around a campfire with his bedmate, the crazed Witch-Queen, as they melt down the gorget together and feed on its power. Therlon reported in an hour ago; she blasted another steading to ashes, three nights back."

Ganrahast sighed again. "You're right. It's time we dealt with them both. Send in Kelgantor and his wolves. And may the gods be with them."

"Done, just as fast as I can muster them in the Hall of Spurs! They're more than ready for battle—and, mark you, Elminster and the Witch-Queen may once have been formidable, but they're a lot less than that now."

Ganrahast spread his hands, noting, "So others have said, down the centuries. Yet those two are still with us, and the claimants are all gone to dust."

Vainrence waved a dismissive hand. "Aye, but she's now a gibbering mad-woman, and he's little more than an old dodderer, not the realm-shaking spell-lion of legend!"

Ganrahast wagged a reproving finger. "Aye, I know legend has a way of making us all greater lions than we are . . . yet its glory must cling to *something*. Be sure Kelgantor's ready for the worst spellbrawl of his life."

"He is, and I'm sending a dozen highknights with him, if blades and quarrels are needed where spells fail. This time the old lion and his mad bitch are going down. While we still have an enchanted treasure or two *left* in the palace."



A little deeper into the wild heart of Hullack Forest than they remembered it being, the gaunt, bearded old man in dark rags and the tall, striking, silver-haired woman in leather armor came at last to a certain high rock in the forest.

"This is it," Elminster murmured grimly, looking at the upthrust slab of stone. Once it had been the base of the tallest tower of Tethgard, but all other traces of the ruins were overgrown or swept away. Yet despite its innocuous appearance, he'd seen it more times than he cared to remember, in recent seasons, and knew it was the place. "Cast the spell."

Storm Silverhand nodded and stepped past him to find stable footing, as birds called and whirred around them, and the light of late day lanced low through the leaves.

Before them the rock thrust its small balcony out of the trees, spattered with bird droppings, but deserted. On its far side, a flight of stone steps descended into a tangle of wild thorns, stairs from nowhere to nowhere. Storm stared at the stony height for a long moment, like an archer studying a target, then tossed her head to send her long silver hair out of the way, and set about working her spell with slow, quiet care.

She looked as if a bare twenty summers had shaped her sleek curves and brought color to her cheeks. The Spellplague had done that, making her seem young even as it stole much of her magic, a jest as cruel as it was inexplicable. Only when looking into her eyes—and meeting the weary wisdom of some seven hundred years gazing back—did the world see something of her true age.

As she worked, an illusion of the man beside her slowly faded into view atop the rock, shifting from smokelike shadows to recognizable solidity. Not the gaunt Elminster at her elbow, but the Old Mage in his prime: burlier, sharp-eyed above a long pepper-and-salt beard, staff in hand, robes flowing, and arms flung wide in spellcasting.

Atop the rock this brighter Elminster stood, glowing vividly as it looked to the sky and spoke silent words, arms and hands moving in grand gestures of the Art . . . and nothing else happened.

A gentle breeze rose and trailed past them, rustling a few leaves, then faded again. The Realms around them was otherwise silent.

A silence that started to stretch.

"And now?" Storm asked.

"We wait," El said wearily. "What else?"

They retreated to the welcoming trunk of an old duskwood and sat together in the shade, staring up at the empty skies above for what seemed a very long

time before the wizard glanced sideways at his companion—and saw tears trickling quietly down her face.

“All right, lass?” he asked gruffly, reaching out a long arm to drag her against him, knowing how paltry the measure of comfort he could lend was.

She shook her head. “These shapings are the only magic I have left.” Her whisper was mournful. “What have we become? Oh, El, what have we become?”

They both knew the answer.

They were husks: Storm shapely and young-seeming, yet with her rich singing voice gone and almost all of her magic with it, and Elminster still powerful in Art but hardly daring to use his spells, because sanity fled with each casting. More times since the Year of Blue Fire than they cared to remember—perhaps more than either of them *could* remember—Storm had guided and cared for her onetime teacher after he’d seen this or that desperate need to hurl spells . . . and had ended up insane for long seasons.

They shared a hunger.

A gnawing, desperate hunger for the power and skill of their youth. Thanks to a crumbling cache that had once belonged to Azuth, they knew how to take over the bodies of the young and strong. By all the vanished gods, the spell was so *simple!*

So Elminster was endlessly tempted. To snatch a new body and build a new life . . . or to die.

It was time and past time for oblivion, and they were so *tired* of the burdens of the Chosen, but somehow just couldn’t give in to the last, cold embrace. Not yet.

Not after they’d hung on for so long, working here, there, and everywhere to set things right in the Realms. An unending task, to be sure, but there was so much more to do.

And there was no one else they could trust to do it. No one.

Every last entity they’d met since the blue fire had cared only for his- or herself, or couldn’t even see what needed doing.

So Storm and Elminster, agents of the mightiest goddess in the world no longer, went on doing what little they still could—a rumor started here, a rescue or a slaying there . . . still at the tiller, still steering . . . the work that had kept them alive the last century.

Someone had to save the Realms.

Why? And who were they to dare such meddlings?

They were the Old Guard, the paltry handful who still saw needs and

cared. More than that . . . even with Mystra and Azuth both gone, *someone* still whispered in their dreams, telling them to go on sharing their magic among the poor and powerless, and working against evil rulers and all who used magic to harm and oppress.

Yet there was no denying they were growing ever weaker and more weary. It was the fourth time they'd come to the ruins that year, and it was only—what?—the fifth of Mirtul. A warm and early spring, aye, but still—

A hawk stooped suddenly out of the sky, hurtling down at the illusory Elminster.

“Well, at least she's not a stinking vulture this time,” Storm murmured, finding her feet with her usual swift and long-limbed grace, and ducking hastily away into the trees. “I'll be back when you light the fire.”

She still moved as quickly as ever; El found himself turning to answer only dancing branches.

So he swallowed his words and shrugged instead. It was good of her to give him time alone with her sister—time that was in short supply these days.

The false Elminster vanished in an instant as talons tore through it.

Then the startled hawk flapped to an awkward landing and stood on the rock blinking, looking a little lost.

The real Elminster swallowed a sigh, pulled the stolen glowing dagger he'd brought with him out of its sheath in the breast of his robes, and crawled out onto the rock as he held the blade out in offering. The feel of the magic would conquer her utterly.

A little meal first, to banish her wildness. When she was herself again, there would be time enough to feed her the gorget and do her longer-lasting good.

A dreadful hunger kindled in the hawk's golden eyes, and she sprang at him, shrieking as her wings clapped the air.

As her beak closed on the blade of the dagger, the hawk melted and *flowed*, an eerie swirling of flesh that spun into a filthy, naked crone, wild-eyed and wild-haired, a bony old woman sucking on the weapon like a babe single-mindedly worrying a mother's teat.

There was a glow in her mouth as she sucked, heedless of the sharp steel—and the dagger melted away. Just as the magic he brought her always did.

She crouched on the rock like a panther, greedy mouth fighting to draw in the hilt, her body becoming larger, stronger, and more curvaceous. Her hair shone; she looked younger . . .

As she always did. For a little while.

For too many years, his Alassra—the Simbul, the once proud Witch-Queen of Aglarond and the single-handed scourge of Thay, the slave empire ruled by Red Wizards beyond counting—had been a frail husk of her former self. Dwelling alone and wild in the Dales, the Thunder Peaks, and the Hullack, shapechanging into endless guises, usually the shapes of raptors as she lapsed in and out of madness.

Magic always made her intellect and control brighten for a time, so for many seasons Elminster had been making these visits to the lady he loved. Or what was left of her.

Stealing, seizing, and digging out of ruins an endless stream of magic items, he had brought them to the rock, for her to subsume and regain fleeting control over her decaying wits.

The Spellplague had not been a kind thing.

The dagger was gone, its pommel a brief pearl on her tongue that died with the last of the glow. Then her eyes were upon him, and she was in his arms, weeping.

“El, oh, *El*,” was all she could say between her foul kisses. Her stink almost overwhelmed Elminster as she clung to him, wrapping her limbs around him, running her long fingers over all of him she could reach and clawing at his worn and patched robes to try to reach more of him.

“So lonely!” she gasped, when at last she had to free his mouth so she could breathe. “Thank you, thank you, *thank* you!”

She buried her face against his neck as the tears came, managing to gasp, “My love!” through their flood.

Elminster held her both tightly and with great care, as if cradling something very precious and fragile. As she clung to him and writhed against him and tried to bury herself *inside* him.

“My love,” he murmured tenderly as she started to really sob, her body shaking. It was always thus, and he smiled in anticipation of what she’d say next, knowing she’d not disappoint him.

“Oh, my *Elminster*,” she hissed fiercely when she had mastered her tears. “I’ve been so *lonely*!”

“So have I,” he muttered, brushing the silver-haired crown of her head with his lips, “without ye.”

That brought fresh sobs, but they were soon conquered; when her wits were her own, Alassra Silverhand was acutely aware of how precious every moment was. “What . . . what year is it, and what month?”

"The fifth of Mirtul, of the Ageless One," Elminster told her gently, knowing her next question before she asked it.

"What's been happening, while I've been . . . wandering?"

El murmured replies and comforting words of love as he held her in one arm, feeling among his pouches with the other. He fed her some rather squashed grapes from one, then strong and crumbling Aereld cheese from another, and finally the ruined remnants of some utterly crushed little raisin tarts.

"Ahhh, I've missed those," she said, savoring every crumb. Then a look of disgust passed over her face, and she peered around at the droppings and tiny bones strewn all over the rock. "What," she whispered, "have I been eating?"

"The usual," El told her soothingly. "Never mind that, my lady. We do what we must."

She shuddered, but that shudder became a nod. She let out a deep sigh and clung to him, arms tightening. "Oh, I've missed you, El. Don't leave me again."

"I've missed ye, too. Don't leave *me* again, Lady mine."

The slayer of hundreds of Red Wizards smiled thinly through fresh, glimmering tears. "I'm through making promises I can't keep," she hissed. Her fingers clawed at him, at his tattered clothing.

Elminster's chuckle as he drew her back from the rock into the little hollow cloaked in moss was soft and teasing. He almost managed to keep the sadness out of it.



As night came down over the Hullack Forest, Storm turned back into the trees to make another stealthy circle around the stones of Tethgard, one more patrol guarding the couple abed in the moss. As she slipped between the dark trunks like a watchful shadow, she let her face go wry for just a moment.

Alassra had always been the hardest of her sisters to love, though Storm'd worked hard to keep things trusting and not too distant between them. And as long as his beloved Witch-Queen lived, Elminster would treat Storm only as a friend.

She wanted so much more, but neither El nor Alassra would learn that from her. Ever.

She held some measure of power over both of them, if she'd been the sort of worm to seek to wield it. The Simbul had been torn witless by the Spellplague, magic ravaging her mind; ever after only magic made her sane.

Magic she'd accept only from Elminster. Magic he could only give her by letting the fires within her consume the frozen fires of enchanted items he brought her—because the Spellplague had marred *him*, too. Casting spells plunged him into madness on the spot.

Unless one person—just one, in all Faerûn, for all she or he knew—healed him, with almost the only magic the Spellplague had left her. Storm Silverhand, the Bard of Shadowdale no longer. Now she was Elminster's healer, though they'd taken great care the Realms never learned that. By touch and will she could heal his mind, pouring her vitality into him shaped by the paltry Art left to her, to bring him back to sanity almost as fast as he lost it, if she stood with him. Time and again she had done so.

So the feared Witch-Queen needed magic to regain sanity for fleeting times, magic she trusted only Elminster to give her, and Elminster needed Storm if he was to work magic at all.

The very sight of Storm sometimes enraged Alassra when she was less than lucid, and El, damn him, trusted Storm as a friend, road-companion, and fellow warrior. Not as his lady.

"I am Storm Silverhand," she told the nearest tree in a fierce but almost soundless whisper. "And I want more. So much more."



They had lain together in each other's arms and had watched the dusking sky above them . . . as one by one, the stars had come out.

She was asleep, and dreaming. Moving against him, clinging to him for comfort, murmuring, and caressing. Alassra was dreaming of making love to him again.

As still as he could keep himself, his arms going numb around her, Elminster lay awake, staring grimly up at the coldly twinkling stars.

A wolf howled, far off to the north, and there had been nearer hootings and rustlings from time to time, but El feared no foraging beasts; Storm was somewhere near, standing sentinel. She'd stolen out of the trees to stand silently looking at them both a little while earlier, tears glimmering in her eyes as she stared down at her sister—but had gone again, a softly hastening shadow, when Alassra had stirred.

Leaving Elminster alone with his brooding.

How long would she stay herself this time? He needed to find more powerful

magic and have done with this business once and for all.

He was *tired* of feeding her little oddments of Art to win her a mere handful of days and nights of sanity, then doing it all again for another paltry handful a few months hence. If he could lay hands on something *truly* powerful that hadn't been twisted too wild by the Spellplague, he might be able to make the Simbul whole and sane again. There was risk, but he knew how.

The gorget he'd brought with him wasn't enough. It should buy her days, perhaps a month or more, and when she sank into deeper dreaming he'd feed it to her. When she'd have some time asleep for it to work its way through her.

Aye, he needed mightier magic. Not that he didn't need powerful enchanted items—whose wielding, unlike the casting of a spell, wouldn't plunge him into madness—for other uses. Such as destroying or at least blunting some of the more pressing dangers of the Realms.

Foes he once would have been able to blast at will or misdirect into doing good they did not intend. Back when he dared use magic, back when he still had a body that would obey him.

Back when he was still someone.

The worst of it was that he knew where so much powerful magic was . . . or had been. Yet the greater part of it was lost or buried or walled away beyond his failing strength or hidden from his fading senses. The mighty Elminster couldn't steal much more deftly than a good thief, these days; he was reduced to picking up fallen battle-spoils or plucking whatever was left unguarded. Or swooping in after someone else did the finding for him.

Someone like that young fool Marlin Stormserpent back in Cormyr, who was seeking the nine ghosts he thought would swiftly slay all the war wizards and loyal Purple Dragons and rival traitor nobles alike and deliver the Dragon Throne into his idle lap.

Lovely Laeral was gone, so there weren't nine deadly ghosts to be had. Yet there were still six, possibly seven—and if a certain Elminster commanded them, he could hurl back the shadows in Sembia and make the Forest Kingdom bright and strong again, a bastion for Harpers and those who had a talent for the Art but lacked training. A land where he could make mages trusted and respected again, and from which he could send them forth to deliver the rest of Faerûn from so much of its lawless, bloody chaos. New guardians to take up the burden of defending the Realms from all who'd cheerfully destroy it while conquering it.

Or he could let Alassra consume the ghosts, and be restored.

That much power and that many memories would be enough to make her whole again, the twisting taint burned right out of her, to stand strong at his side, his lady love once more bright in all her power and fury. Together they could tame the Realms and set it to rights.

So, the Crown . . . or the Mad Queen?

Ah, dark decisions . . .

Easily made, this time.

His Alassra.

Soft lips found his throat in the dark, just above his collarbone. She was still asleep, loving him in her dreams.

El smiled thinly. He loved the Obarskyrs and the Land of the Purple Dragon dearly, but it could all be swept away in scouring fire in an instant if that was what it would take to make his Simbul herself again.

To have his Alassra back, he would do anything.

Anything.