

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

SPELLFIRE

ED GREENWOOD



AT THE SIGN OF THE RISING MOON

Neglect not small things, for all ruling and war and magecraft are naught but small things, one built upon another. Begin then with the small, and look close, and you will see it all.

Seroun of Calimport
Tales of Far Travels
Year of the Rock

It was a good inn, but sometimes Shandril hated it—and this was one of those times. She cried at the pain of her scalded hands, tears running down her chin and arms into the suds as she washed a small mountain of dishes.

It was a hot Flamerule noon. Sweat stood out all over her like oil, making her slim arms slippery and glistening. She wore only her old gray tunic, once Gorstag's. It stuck to her here and there, but only the cook, Korvan, would see her, and he would slap and pinch even if she were bundled in furs.

She blew out sharply. Lank blonde hair parted

reluctantly in front of her eyes. Tossing her head to fling the drenched tresses aside, Shandril surveyed the stack beside her and concluded with a sigh that three hours' worth of dishes remained.

More than she had time for. Korvan was starting the roasts already. He'd want herbs cut and water brought soon. He was a good cook, Shandril allowed grudgingly, even if he was fat and stank and had hot and sticky hands. Some folk stopped at the Rising Moon just because of Korvan's cooking.

Korvan had once been a cook in the Royal Palace of Cormyr in fair Suzail. There'd been some trouble (probably over a girl, Shandril thought darkly, perhaps even one of the princesses of Cormyr), and he'd had to leave in haste, banished upon pain of death.

Shandril wondered, as she eyed a soapy platter critically, what would happen if she ever managed to get Korvan drunk senseless or knocked cold with a skillet and somehow dragged him through the Thunder Gap into Cormyr. Perhaps King Azoun himself would appear out of thin air and roar to the Cormyrean border guards, "*Here he is!*" and they'd draw their swords and hack off Korvan's head. She smiled. Perhaps he'd have time to plead for mercy or cry in fear as the blades flashed up. Perhaps.

Shandril snorted. Great chance of *that* ever happening! Korvan was too lazy to go anywhere, and too fat for most horses to carry him. No, he was trapped here, and she was trapped with him. She scrubbed a fork fiercely until its twin tines gleamed in the sunlight. Yes, trapped.

It had been a long time before she'd realized it. She had no parents, no kin—and no one would even admit to knowing where she'd come from. She had always been here, it seemed, doing the dirty work in the old roadside inn among the trees.

It was a good inn, everyone said. Other places must be worse, but Shandril had never seen them. She couldn't remember having been inside any other building—ever. After sixteen summers, all she knew of her town of

Highmoon was what she could see from the inn yard. She had thought of running away but was always too busy, too behind with her work, or too tired.

There was always work to be done. Each spring she even washed the bedchamber ceilings, tied to a ladder so she wouldn't fall off. Sharp-eyed old Tezza did the windows, all those tiny panes of mica and a few panels of blown glass from Selgaunt and Hillsfar. They were far too valuable for Shandrill to be trusted with.

Shandrill didn't mind most of the work, really. She just hated getting bone-tired or hurt while the others did little or, like Korvan, bothered her. Besides, if she didn't work or fought with the others—all of them more necessary to the running of the Rising Moon than Shandrill Shessair—she'd upset Gorstag. More than anything (except, maybe, to have a real adventure), Shandrill wanted to please Gorstag.

The owner of the Rising Moon was a broad-shouldered, strong man with gray-white hair, gray eyes, and a craggy, weathered face. He'd broken his nose long ago, in his days as an adventurer. Gorstag had been all over the world, swinging his axe in important wars. He'd made quite a lot of gold before settling down in Deepingdale, in the heart of the forest, and rebuilding his father's old inn. Gorstag was kind and quiet and sometimes gruff, but it was he who insisted that Shandrill have a good gown for feast days and when important folk stopped at the inn, though Korvan said she'd serve them better by staying hard at work in the kitchen.

Gorstag also had insisted she have a last name. Years ago, the chamber girls had called her "a nameless nobody," and "a cow too runty to keep, so someone threw it away!" The innkeeper came into the room and said in a voice that had made Shandrill think of cold steel and executioners and priestly dooms: "Such words—and all others like them—will never be spoken in this house again."

Gorstag never hit women or spanked girls, but he took off his belt, as he'd done when he thrashed the stable boy for cruel pranks. The girls were white-faced,

and one started to cry, but Gorstag never touched them. He closed the door, set a chair against it, and walked over to the whimpering girls. Saying nothing, he swung the belt high and brought it crashing down on the floorboards. Dust curled up, and the door rattled. Then he put his belt back on, took the shocked Shandrill gently by the shoulder, and led her from the room, closing the door behind him.

He led her to the taproom and said thickly, "I call you Shandrill Shessair, for 'tis your true name. Do not forget. Your name is precious!"

Shandrill asked, voice quavering, "Was I so named by my parents?"

Gorstag shook his head slightly and gave her a sad smile. "In the Realms, little one, you can take any name you can carry. Mind you carry it well."

Yes, Gorstag had been good to her, and the Rising Moon was like him: kind and good, well-worn and bluntly honest, and lots of hard work. Day after day of hard work. It was her cage, Shandrill thought fiercely, reaching for another dish while the sweat ran down her back.

She saw with surprise that there were no more dishes. In her anger she'd washed and scrubbed like a madcap and now was done. . . . It was early yet, time enough to change to her plain gown and peek into the taproom before cutting the herbs.

Before Korvan could come give her extra work, Shandrill vanished. Her bare feet danced lightly up the narrow loft stairs to her trunk.

She washed her face and hands in the basin of cool water she'd left for Lureene, who waited tables and shared the sleeping-loft with her, save for nights when she had a man and Shandrill was banished to the cellar for her own safety. She changed swiftly in the familiar gloom and crept downstairs to the deserted taproom. The flagstones felt cool under her feet.

Gorstag had started the evening fire, ready for a party of adventurers from Cormyr. The taproom was warm and smoky. Light blazed on the crackling hearth and on torches mounted on the walls, hooded with grim black

iron. Shadows leaped along the great beams that ran low overhead, bearing the floors above on their mighty backs. In the ever-shifting play of light, the scenes on faded, flaking paintings seemed to live and move—high deeds of heroes and glories of battles long past. Massive oak tables crowded the room, surrounded by plank benches and stout chairs covered in worn leather.

Over the bar hung a two-handed broadaxe, well-oiled and sharp. Gorstag had borne it in far-off lands in days long gone and adventures he would not speak of. When there was trouble, he could still toss it from hand to hand like a dagger and whirl it about as if it weighed nothing. Shandrill imagined it in Gorstag's hands on sun-drenched battlefields or amid icy rock crags or in dark caverns where unseen horrors dwelt. It had been places, that axe.

The bar boasted a small, gleaming forest of bottles of all sizes and hues, kept carefully dusted by Gorstag. Some came from lands very far away, and others from Highmoon, not half a mile off. Below these were casks, gray with age, that yielded drink to thirsty Moon patrons by means of brass taps. Gorstag was very proud of those taps. They'd come all the way from fabled Waterdeep.

Above the bottles and the axe hung a silver crescent moon: the Rising Moon itself. Long ago, a traveling wizard had enspelled it to never tarnish.

The house was a good inn, plain but cozy, its host respected, even generous, and Highmoon was a beautiful place.

Yet to Shandrill, it seemed more and more a prison. Every day she walked the same boards and did the same things. Only the people changed. The travelers, with their unusual clothing and differing skins and voices, brought with them the idle chatter, faint smells, and excitement of far places and exciting deeds. Even when they came in dusty and weary from the road, snappish or sleepy, they had at least *been somewhere* and seen things. Shandrill envied them so much that sometimes she thought her heart would burst right out of her breast.

Every night folk came to the taproom to smoke long

pipes, drink Gorstag's good ale, and listen to gossip of the Realms. Shandrill liked best when the grizzled old men of the dale told of their youthful feats and the legendary deeds of older heroes. If only she were a man, strong enough to wear coat-of-plate and swing a blade, to send foes staggering back with the force of her blows! She was quick enough and fairly strong, but not like these great oxen of men who lumbered, ruddy-faced, into the inn to growl their wants at Gorstag. Even the long-retired veterans of Highmoon, shrunken with age, seemed like old wolves—stiff, slow, and hard of hearing, but wolves nonetheless. Shandrill suspected in their huts, old blades hung in places of honor, too.

If ever I get to see any other house in Highmoon, 'twould be a wondrous thing, she reflected sourly.

She sighed, her scalded hands still smarting. She dared not smear goose-grease on them before getting the herbs, or Korvan would fly into a rage. His aim with kitchen steel was too good. Smiling ruefully, Shandrill took the basket and knife from behind the kitchen door and went out into the green stillness of the inn garden.

She knew what to cut, how much to bring, and what was fit to use, though Korvan made a great show of disgust at her selections. He always sent her back for one more sprig of this and chided her for bringing far too much of that. Still, he used all she brought and never bothered to get more himself if she was busy elsewhere.

Korvan was still absent when she returned. Shandrill fanned the herbs out neatly on the board. Turning, she lifted the wooden yoke and its battered old buckets.

I'm used to this, she realized grimly. I could be forty winters old and still know nothing but lugging water.

Korvan was coming down the passage, grumbling loudly about the calm thievery of the butcher.

Shandrill slipped out the back door and darted away, holding the yoke-ropes with practiced ease to keep the pails from banging together.

She felt eyes on her and glanced up. Gorstag had come around the corner of the inn. Trotting head down, she'd nearly run into his broad chest. He grinned at

her startled apologies and danced around her, making flourishes with his hands as he did when dancing with grand ladies of the dale. She grinned back and danced to match him. Gorstag roared with laughter, and Shandrill couldn't help giggling.

The kitchen door banged open, and Korvan peered out angrily. Opening his mouth to scold Shandrill, he closed it again with an audible snap as the innkeeper leaned over to smile at him.

Gorstag turned back to Shandrill and asked, for Korvan's benefit, "Dishes done?"

"Yes, sir," Shandrill replied, giving a slight bow.

"Herbs cut and ready?"

"Yes, sir." Shandrill bowed hastily to hide her growing smile.

"Going straight out for water. I like that . . . I like that indeed. You'll make a good innkeeper someday. Then you will have a cook to do all those things for you!"

Korvan sniffed, and the kitchen door slammed.

Shandrill struggled to swallow a fresh flood of giggles.

"Good lass," Gorstag said warmly, giving her shoulder an affectionate squeeze.

Shandrill smiled back through the hair that had fallen over her face. Well, at least *someone* appreciated her.

She hurried off down the winding path of beaten earth and exposed tree roots. Tonight would be busy. If Lureene did not bed with one of the travelers, she'd have much to tell as Shandrill hissed questions in the dark loft: Who came from where, bound where, and on what business? News and gossip . . . the color and excitement of the world outside.

Gratefully Shandrill waded out into the cool stream, her bare feet avoiding the unseen stones. She filled the old wooden buckets. Grunting with the effort, she heaved them up onto the bank and stood for a moment, hands on hips. She looked up and down the cool, green passage of the stream, through Deepingdale's woods. She could not stay long or swim or bathe, but she could look . . . and dream.

Past her feet, the Glaemril—Deeping Stream, some

called it—rushed laughingly over rocks. Farther on, it joined the great river Ashaba, which drained the northern dales and then turned east to slip past rolling lands, full of splendid people and wondrous things . . . lands she would see, someday!

“Soon,” she said firmly. A heave, a momentary stagger under the great weight, and she began the long climb up through the trees back to the inn. Soon.

Adventurers were staying at the Rising Moon this night; a proud, splendid group of men hight the Company of the Bright Spear. Lean and dangerous in their armor and ready weaponry, they laughed often and loudly, wore gold rings on their hands and at their ears, and drank much wine.

Gorstag had been busy with them all afternoon, for as he told Shandrill with a wink, “It pays to keep adventurers happy, and it can be downright dangerous if you do not!” They’d be in the taproom now, Lureene flirting and flouncing saucily as she brought them wine and strong cider and aromatic tobacco. Shandrill promised herself she’d watch them from the passage while Korvan was busy with the pastry.

Shandrill kicked the rusted pot by the back door so the cook would hear and let her in. The chain rattled as Korvan threw the half-bar and snarled, “Get *in!*”

The expected pinch and slap came as she staggered across the uneven floor. “Don’t spill any of that! Dishes await, sluggard! *Move* that shapely little behind!” Korvan rumbled, ending with his horrible, barking laugh.

Shandrill set her teeth grimly under the yoke. Someday she’d be free of this!

The evening grew cool, as it often did in the dale after a hot day, mist gathering in the trees. The Rising Moon’s taproom filled quickly; townsfolk had done business with the Company of the Bright Spear, and veterans had come to take their measure and perhaps swap some tales.

Shandrill managed one quick peek and saw the adventurers holding court, all boisterous jests and laughter, at the central tables. A scattering of local veterans sat nearer the bar, and at the small tables along the wall

were other visitors. Shandrill noticed two lady adventurers nearby—noticed and stared.

They were beautiful. Tall, slim . . . and free to do as they pleased. From the shadows, Shandrill gazed at them in wonder. Both wore leather and plate half-armor without colors or blazon. Long, plain scabbards at their hips held swords and daggers that looked to have seen heavy use. Their cloaks were also plain, but of the finest cloth and make. Shandrill was surprised at the soft beauty of the two and the quiet grace of their movements—no red-faced oxen, these. What struck her most was their calm self-assurance. They were what she longed to be.

Shandrill stared at them until Korvan came out of the kitchen with a roar. He grabbed a fistful of her tunic and roughly hauled Shandrill down the passage and into the kitchen.

“Do *I* stand and gawk? If I did, what would the guests eat *then*?” Korvan snarled in a fierce whisper, his stubbled face an inch from hers.

Shandrill feared for her life. If there was one thing Korvan cared about, it was his cooking. For a wild moment, as he thrust a bowl of potatoes at her, Shandrill considered attacking her tormentor with a kitchen knife, but that wasn’t the sort of “adventure” she wanted.

Under Korvan’s hot glare, she washed and cleaned out three hares. She’d had more than enough of this treatment. She was going to do something to get out of here. Tonight.



“A good place, I’ve heard,” said the mage Marimmar in the last blue light of dusk. Ponies carried them through the trees toward the lanterns of Deepingdale. “Mind you, say nothing of our business or destination, boy. If asked, you know nothing. You are not even all that interested in Myth Drannor.”

Narm Tamarath nodded in weary silence.

His master turned on him sharply in the gloom. “Do you hear, boy? Answer!”

“Aye, Lord. I . . . nodded, not thinking you would not see. I beg full pardon. I’ll say nothing of Myth Drannor.”

Narm’s master, Marimmar “the Magnificent” (Narm had heard him called other things occasionally, but never to his face), snorted. “‘Not thinking!’ That’s the problem, boy. Well, *think!* Deep but sharp, boy, deep but sharp—don’t let the world around escape your notice, lest it stick a blade in your ribs while your wits are off considering Xult’s Seven Sigils! Got that?”

“Aye, Lord,” Narm replied, sighing inwardly. It was going to be one of *those* evenings. Even if this inn was nice, he’d scarce have the chance to enjoy it, with Marimmar holding forth on Narm’s many shortcomings.

Narm could see now why the Mage Most Magnificent had so readily agreed to take on an apprentice. Marimmar needed someone to belabor, and few stayed long to listen. His master’s Art was good; Narm had learned enough magic to be certain of that. But Marimmar ruined the delight of any adventure—or even daily chores, for that matter.

Narm turned into the yard of the Rising Moon pronouncing silent curses on his master. Perhaps there’d be pretty girls inside. . . .



After the hares and four pheasants and too many carrots and potatoes to count, Shandrill stole away for another look at the guests. The adventurers might talk of their deeds or even show off some treasure. Moreover, she might learn who the two ladies were. In her greasy tunic, Shandrill flitted barefoot down the passage and peered out into the noise and bustle.

Across the smoky taproom sat an imperious man in fine gray robes. His fat fingers waved a thin pipe to emphasize the words he imparted to his companion, a much younger man. This one was handsome, even in overlarge gray robes. He was dark-haired and slim, with a very serious face. His eyes stared intently at the cup of wine he clasped on the table.

Shandrill was turning away when his gaze suddenly met hers.

Oh, his eyes! Belying that stern face, they were dancing. They met hers merrily and did not ridicule her wild-tousled blonde hair and greasy garb, but winked at her as an equal—one lucky to be in shadows and not facing a barrage of questions.

Shandrill flushed and tossed her head . . . and yet could not go. Snared by his gaze, by being regarded as a—a person and not a servant, Shandrill stood watching, mute, hands clenched in the folds of her apron. Abruptly, the youth's gaze was jerked away as a hooked fish is pulled from the water regardless of its will to stay. The older man had snapped his fingers.

Shandrill stood alone in the shadows, trembling with excitement and hope. These folk who traveled about the world outside were no greater than herself. Oh, they were rich enough, and had companions and business of import, and experience . . . but she could be one of them. Someday. If ever she dared.

Shandrill turned back to the kitchen, railing at the fear that held her there, despite the endless pots and scalding water . . . despite Korvan.

"Get *in* here!" Korvan rumbled, red-faced, as she returned to the kitchen. "There's onions to chop! I can't do it all!"

Shandrill nodded absently as she walked to the chopping board. Korvan pinched her bruisingly and roared with laughter, but she hardly noticed. The knife rose and fell in her hands, twinkling.

Korvan stared at her. Shandrill had never before hummed happily while chopping onions.



It was hot and close in the low-beamed room. Narm blinked wearily. Marimmar showed signs of neither weariness nor relaxation in the cozy warmth.

I suppose all inns are the same, more or less, Narm thought, but to take this—his gaze strayed again around

the noisy camaraderie of the room—all for granted!

Before Marimmar snapped at him to mind his studies and not the drunken locals, Narm noticed that the girl who'd stared at him from across the room was gone. The darkness didn't seem right without her. She belonged in that spot, somehow, and yet . . .

"*Will* you heed?" Marimmar snapped, really angry now. "What's snatched your senses, boy? One drink and *this*? You'll have a short life indeed if you gad about like this in the wilds! Some creatures'll see you as a quick meal and not wait for you to notice them!"

Obediently, Narm faced his master and dragged his attention back to queries on casting spells: casting in the dark, casting when the proper components were lacking, casting (Marimmar added acidly) when drunk. Narm's head swam with the vision, his forever, of the girl gazing into his eyes from the shadows. Longingly. He almost looked to see if she was there, but his master's eyes were stern.



One of the adventurers had chanced to spill a platter of food, so Shandril was there when it happened. The Company of the Bright Spear numbered six, led by an important, square-bearded young giant of a man named Burlane. Gold gleamed and winked in the firelight at his ears and throat, fingers and belt. He belched and chuckled and reached vaguely for his tankard.

To his left sat a real dwarf, the worn and baggy leather of his breeches not a foot from Shandril's bent head as she scrubbed beneath the table. The breeches smelled of wood smoke. The dwarf was called Delg, "the Fearless," as one of his companions added mockingly, to everyone's amusement. Delg wore a dagger strapped to his leg just above his boot; its hilt shone enticingly inches from Shandril's face. Something rose within her. Trembling, but with infinite care, she reached out. . . .

One of the veterans of the dale, Ghondarrath, a stern-eyed old warrior with white fringes of beard edging his

hard jaw, was telling of the treasures of the ruined City of Beauty, Myth Drannor.

Shandril listened, scarcely daring to breathe. She took hold and pulled ever so gently. The dagger came free, cold and hard and heavy in her hand.

“. . . So for many long years, the elves kept all others away, and the woods grew over the ruins of Myth Drannor. The Fair Folk let it alone; not a harp or spellbook or gemstone did they take. There it all lies in the wood still, not a week's ride north. Waiting for the brave—or foolish—to try for it, for 'tis guarded by devils . . . and worse!”

The old man paused, his audience intent on his every word. He raised his tankard. His free hand suddenly darted across his chest like a striking snake.

One of the adventurers, a thin man with short blond hair and a ratlike face, had been passing behind him, but paused.

Old Ghondarrath grunted, set down his tankard, and raised his other hand. All could see the adventurer's wrist clasped within. In that captured hand was Ghondarrath's purse.

“Well,” Ghondarrath said dryly, “Look what I've found.”

The room fell silent, save for the crackling fire. No one moved.

Shandril clutched the dagger fiercely. She knew she should creep away, lest the dwarf reach for his blade . . . and yet, she couldn't miss this!

With his free hand, the thief whipped a slim dagger out of a sheath behind his neck and stabbed down.

Ghondarrath jerked him coolly sideways to crash helplessly onto the table. Ghondarrath's free hand came down on the back of the thief's neck with a solid crash, like a tree falling.

“Dead?” asked a daleman in a hoarse whisper.

For a second, there was silence. Then with a roar the Company of the Bright Spear were on their feet.

“Get him!”

“Sword the graybeard!”

“He's killed Lynxal!”

The dwarf nearly took Shandrill's nose off as he kicked back his chair and sprang to his feet. Chairs overturned and men shouted.

Adventure, Shandrill thought ruefully as she scuttled on hands and knees beneath the table, is upon me at last.

"They'll kill you, Ghondar!" said one of the old warriors, face white. Beside him, Ghondarrath stood defiant, his chair raised. He had no other weapon.

"I was never one to back down," he said roughly. "I know no other way. Better to die by the blade, Tempus willing, than grow old shamed and craven!"

"So be it, graybeard!" said one of the company's warriors viciously, striding forward, blade out.

"Stop!" the old man bellowed with sudden force, startling all there. "If there's to be a fight, then let us go outside. Gorstag's a good friend to us all—I'd not see his house laid waste!"

"You should have thought of that a breath or two earlier," sneered another company member through the mocking laughter of his fellows. They surged forward.

Shandrill reached her feet just as Gorstag and Korvan pounded past her. The cook swore, a cleaver in his hand. Two more blades flashed in the firelight as, catlike, the lady adventurers leapt in front of the old man. One of their swords glowed and shimmered with blue-white fire.

A rumbling gasp of wonder shook the room.

"I apologize to this house and to its master for drawing steel," said its silver-haired owner in a clear, lilting voice. "But I will *not* see butchery done by young fools with quick tempers. Put up your blades, 'company'—her voice twisted that into a shaming quotation rather than a rightful name—"or die, for we shall surely slay you all!"

"Or," her companion added pleasantly over the point of her own ready blade, "this can be forgotten, and all keep peace. The thief was caught and drew steel. The fault is his and his alone, and he's paid. That's an end to it!"

With an oath, one of the adventurers plucked at his belt, meaning to snatch and throw a dagger. The man

grunted and then cried out in fury and frustration, but his hand was gripped by another as unmoving as iron.

Gorstag said quietly, "Drop your blade. All others, put away your weapons. I will not have this in my house."

At the sound of his voice, everyone relaxed, the dagger clattered to the floor, and blades slid back into scabbards.

"Have I your peace while you stay at the Rising Moon?" the innkeeper asked.

The company members nodded, said "aye" in reluctant chorus, and returned to their seats.

Across the room, the silver-haired bard sheathed her glowing blade and turned to Ghondarrath. "Forgive me, sir," she said simply. "They were too many. I would not shame you!"

The chair trembled in the old man's hands.

"I am not shamed," he said roughly. "My friends sat all around, and when it came to the death, I was alone, but for you two. I thank you. I am Ghondarrath, and my table is yours. Will you?" He gestured toward a chair.

The two ladies clasped hands with him. "Aye, with thanks. I am Storm Silverhand, a bard, of Shadowdale!"

Her companion smiled, too. "I am Sharantyr, a ranger, also of Shadowdale. Well met."

Gorstag passed them wordlessly, reached the bar, and turned. "The night has turned hot," he said to the crowd, "so the house gives you all chilled wine from far Athkatla." There was a general roar of approval. "Drink up," he added, as Lureene hastily started around with flagons, "and let this incident be forgotten." He lifted the limp body of the thief, its head dangling loosely, and carried it away.

Across the room, Marimmar removed a restraining hand from Narm's arm. "Well done, boy," he said. "Continue to hold your peace, and life will be far easier for you."

"Aye," agreed Narm dryly. His master had certainly given him much practice in holding peace.

All around them laughter and the clink and clatter of eating built up again. Tempers had been restored, and it was too soon to talk of the near-brawl. The company

seemed in fairly good humor, as if the thief hadn't been liked much anyway.

Narm looked about for the girl he had locked eyes with earlier, but she was nowhere to be seen. There was something about her. . . . Ah, well . . .



The Company of the Bright Spear drank much and went up to their room late. Rymel, his lute left upstairs with their travel gear, had led the locals in a score of ballads with his fine voice alone. Delg the dwarf had lost his favorite dagger somewhere and was moody and suspicious. The burly fighter, Ferostil, was very drunk and traded coarse jests in a slurred voice. The wizard Thail, grim and sober, guided him up the stairs with many a jaundiced look.

"Lend me a hand, Burlane," he pleaded, as Ferostil nearly fell atop him. "This lout is nearer your size!"

"Aye," their leader said good-naturedly. "We've lost enough tonight!" He leaned back to grab Ferostil's shoulder. "Come then, Lion of Tempus," he said, hauling hard. "Now, where's that room?"

"This one," the wizard said, and threw the door wide.

Within, all was as they had left it: packs strewn about, cloaks thrown over racks. A single lantern had been lit.

"My spear!" Burlane roared suddenly. "Where is the Bright Spear?" They peered all about, alert, but no place in the room could have concealed its flickering radiance. Their greatest treasure was gone.

"By all the gods!" Burlane bellowed. "I'll have this inn apart stone by stone if need be! That thieving bastard of an innkeeper! Delg—quick, run to demand it of him! Thail, look to our horses! Is anything else missing?"

"Aye," said the wizard thickly. His hands trembled above his opened pack. "My spellbooks!" His face was ashen; he sat suddenly on the bed and stared at nothing, dazed.

"Thail!" Burlane roared, shaking him. "Come, we must—"

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“My axe also,” the dwarf’s sour voice cut through Burlane’s rage. “Moreover, I see no sign of our charter from the king, nor Ferostil’s shield. Rymel?”

The bard was standing sadly by his pack. His shrug and empty hands told them his lute was gone as well. The men of the company stared at each other mutely. Everything dearest and of most value was gone.

Into the shocked silence came a knock upon the door.

Delg was nearest. Dourly he flung the door wide, expecting trouble. Over his shaggy head they all saw the pale, solemn face of a young girl with large, dark eyes. In one hand, she held their charter from the king of Cormyr. In the other, she gripped a spear that flickered with a pale blue light.

She stepped calmly into the room past the astonished dwarf, cleared her throat in the tense silence, and said softly, “I understand you need a thief.”