



CROWN OF FIRE

ED GREENWOOD



PRoLoGUE

Something flashed as it moved—aye, there! Brann stepped up to the grassy crest of the hill where his flock was pastured and looked east, shading his eyes against the bright forenoon sun. Whatever was moving caught the light again, flashing against the dark, tree-clad lower slopes of the mountains opposite him. Out of habit, Brann looked quickly around at his flock, counting without thought. He found nothing amiss and peered back to the east again, looking for that moving glint to show itself again.

The mountains stood high and dark, like a row of stone giants frowning down on easternmost Cormyr. The Thunder Peaks, men called them, named for the fierce storms that often rolled and broke among them. They were hard and grim and splendid, and sometimes Brann just sat and watched them for hours.

Much as he was watching them now. They towered over him like a dark, many-spined fortress wall, forever hiding Sembia from the high meadows where he stood. Rich, splendid Sembia, a land where fat merchants lay at ease among

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piles of gold coins, glittering like that spot on the mountains. Ships full of coins from all over the Realms—even far, sinister Thay, where wizards kept slaves—came to its shores every day.

He'd not always be just a shepherd. Someday he'd go to Sembia's docks and meet with adventure, Brann promised himself . . . not for the first time. He sighed at that thought, shook his head with a wry smile, and glanced about at the sheep again. His count was right, and none of them was straying, shifting, or even looking particularly awake. Brann stared at the sheep in growing exasperation. They ignored him, as usual. Oh, for a little excitement! Nothing here seemed amiss—also as usual. He sighed again, and looked east.

The sky was bright and clear, and every boulder and stand of trees on the familiar flanks of the Peaks was as it had always been, unchanged—except . . .

Except for that little winking flash of light, far away over the rolling, grass-clad hills near the Gap. Something shone back the sun at him again, something descending through the high meadows, where he spent most days alone with his flock. It was something—or someone—that wore or carried metal. It wasn't on the road through the Gap, so it couldn't just be another trading wagon hung with pots and pans. Perhaps it was a knight of Cormyr—perhaps even one of the Dragon Knights, who were the personal swordguard and messengers of Azoun, the Purple Dragon, king of all this land. With quickening interest, Brann watched for another flash.

There it was again. Metal, surely, and bobbing in short, choppy moves—so it wasn't a horse, or someone riding. It looked . . . as if some splendid knight in gleaming armor were marching afoot across the hills toward him. Brann leaned on his staff and shaded his eyes for a better view.

Then his mouth fell open. A dwarf—a *real* dwarf, with an axe and a beard and a mail shirt, and all! Brann stood frozen in wonder. A tiny voice inside him chuckled at his awe and reminded him that this was what he'd wished for. Adventure was striding to meet him, after all.

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Staggering, actually. The dwarf stumped along on one side of a girl who was being carried, and a slim young man struggled along on the other. The dwarf was bearing most of the girl's weight on his broad shoulders, but he was so much shorter than the man that the two were having trouble moving straight forward with their burden.



"Keep on, lad," Delg grunted. "There's a guard post not far ahead . . . two hills ahead, and we should see it." Sweat dripped from the dwarf's dusty beard as he spoke.

Narm nodded grimly, saving all his breath for carrying his lady. Shandrill was slim and shorter than most; she *couldn't* be this heavy. She hung loose between them, senseless. Narm stumbled, caught himself with a wordless hiss of apology to Delg, and shook his head impatiently; stinging sweat had run down into his eyes again. He looked ahead—and stiffened. Through the blurring of sweat he saw dark, moving blobs on the grassy hills ahead. "Ware—" he panted.

"They're sheep, lad," the dwarf said dryly. "Right dangerous, if ye're a clump of grass, I suppose. Aye? Just sheep."

Narm shook his head wearily. His legs felt hollow and weak, his strength draining out of them with every step. He had to—to rest. "Stop, Delg—just a breath," he panted, wiping sweat away with his sleeve. "Just a—"

"No," the dwarf said in tones of cold iron. "If you stop now, boy, you'll never get on again in time. They'll catch up with us and run us down out here like boar, and Shan will have cooked twenty-odd Zhents in vain. Keep moving! We're almost there."



Brann watched, astonished, as the bristle-bearded dwarf in armor and the young man in mage robes staggered past him, panting under the weight of the girl they carried. Her long

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reddish-gold hair dangled along one limp arm as they strode doggedly and unevenly on, up the last hill before the village.

Brann looked east again, a view he knew very well. There was no sign of anyone following them. He turned and stared curiously at the sweat-darkened back of the young wizard as the strangers went over the hill and began to descend out of sight.

His mouth was suddenly dry. His hands, as they dipped to his belt, trembled; he almost dropped the horn. So this is excitement, he thought. Brann shook his head, and blew. The horn call wavered and then grew steady, high, and clear.



The high song of a shepherd's horn was ringing off the walls of houses as the three tired adventurers came down into Thundarlun. Before them rose the watchful stone bulk of the guardhouse, where Delg had known it would be. On benches along its wall, Purple Dragon soldiers sat alert, watching with interest in their eyes as the three approached.

Delg guided Narm down onto the dusty road, and the soldiers frowned and rose, catching up halberds from where they leaned against the guardhouse wall. One shouted into the building as the weary travelers came close enough to see wary faces and ready weapons. A Purple Dragon with a hard face and a gray mustache appeared from within and strode out into the road to block their way. The sword of a guardcaptain gleamed high on the shoulders of his surcoat.

"Halt, travelers!" His voice was deep and level, but not unfriendly. "You seem in some trouble and are come to Cormyr, Realm of the Purple Dragon. State your names and what you seek here."

Delg looked up at him and silently and imperiously gestured at a soldier to approach. The man glanced toward his commander. The guardcaptain appraised the dust-covered dwarf and then nodded. Holding his halberd warily, the soldier stepped closer.

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Delg shifted the limp girl he held into Narm's grasp, staggering just a bit as the burden left him. Under her full weight, the young wizard sank to his knees in the dust. The soldier moved to help; Delg ignored them both. Keeping his hands well away from his axe, the dwarf strode forward to confront the Cormyrean commander. His beard jutted defiantly as he looked around at all of the guards, raising his hand to show them its emptiness before reaching slowly to his throat. He drew something out from under his mail, something that hung from a silver neck-chain, and cupped his hand around it as he showed it to the Purple Dragon guardcaptain.

The man frowned down at it, and then slowly raised his eyes to meet the dwarf's steady gaze. They looked at each other for a long, silent moment, and then the guardcaptain waved to the soldiers on his right. "Take her in, fast." He added, to Delg, "Our wizard's within."



Shandril's head swam. The light had changed; she was inside a building somewhere, being bumped and scraped along a rough stone passage and through a door. Then hard, smooth wood was under her. She slumped down on the seat, too exhausted to even be thankful, and heard the soldiers who'd brought her here go out again, sword-scabbards clanging against stone. Then she saw the flickering blue glow ahead and forced herself to focus and be alert. She was in the presence of magic.

As her gaze cleared, she saw a man sitting at a table in front of her—a stout, fussy-looking man with a wispy beard. He seemed to be alone in this gloomy, bare stone room. Alone until she arrived. He was looking irritably over his shoulder at her, a shoulder that bore the purple robes of a war wizard of Cormyr. The flickering blue radiance—the only light in the room—was coming from a thin, gleaming long sword floating horizontally in the air in front of the wizard.

Shandril let her eyes close to slits and her chin fall to her

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breast. After a moment, the wizard shrugged and turned back to the floating blade. Murmuring something to himself, he reached toward the blade and made a certain gesture. Blue lightning crackled suddenly, coiling and twisting along the gleaming steel like a snake spiraling around a branch. Then there was a brief, soundless flash, and the reaching, blue-white tongues of lightning were gone. The wizard nodded and wrote something on a piece of parchment in front of him.

Then he tugged at his beard for a moment, spoke a single, distinct word Shandril had never heard before, and made another gesture. This time there was no response from the magical blade. The wizard made another note.



Delg squinted up at the Purple Dragon commander. “In a breath or two, I’ll tell you all that,” he said, “if you’ve time to listen by then. There’s near thirty Zhentilar riding on our heels—they’ll be here very soon.”

The commander stared at him, saw that he was serious, and said, “Zhentil Keep? ’Twill be a pleasure, Sir Dwarf, to turn them back.” He made no move to call his men to arms, but nodded his head at the guardhouse into which Shandril had been taken. “So speak—what befell?”

Delg turned to look east. His hand glided swiftly to the reassuring hardness of his axe. “She won time for us to escape, blasting a score of Zhents out of their saddles. Unfortunately, there are more, and all her—ah, magic is gone.”

The captain was not a stupid man. His eyes widened for a moment as the dwarf spoke of magic—younger than most spell-hurlers, that lass. His eyes narrowed again an instant later as he too turned to look at the horizon. His face changed, and he shouted, “Down! ’Ware arrows!”

A hail of shafts answered him, thudding into the turf many paces short of them. Up over the nearest hill bobbed many dark-armored heads, rising and falling at a gallop. The Zhentilar, riding hard and with arrows to waste, had come.

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Faces paled and jaws dropped. Then the men who wore the Purple Dragon were scrambling for crossbows and cover. As the minstrels of the Dales say, they scarce had time for last wistful wishes before death swept down on them.



Shandril heard a faint yell, then another. Somehow she found strength and was on her feet, her head swimming. The world rocked and swayed. There was nothing in her but sick, helpless emptiness. Sweat glistened on her hands with the effort. She swayed and caught at the back of the wizard's chair for support.

Astonished and irritated, the mage looked up into her face. She pushed past, leaned on the table for support, and reached out with weak, trembling fingers. The blade was cold but tingling as she touched it; trembling with weakness and relief, she felt the magic it bore begin to flow into her.

"What're you—that's magic, lass—no—*don't!*" the wizard blurted. Then he stared in surprise; the blade flashed with sudden light and seemed to waken. Pulses of radiance ran down it and up the arms of the young girl, who grasped its hilt in both hands and gasped. She closed her eyes and shuddered as small arcs of lightning leapt from the blade and spiraled around her.

From outside came sudden tumult: thudding hooves, screams and yells, and then, very near, a horrible, gurgling moan.

The wizard tore his gaze from Shandril just long enough to roll his eyes and snarl, "What *now?* Oh, Mystra *aid* me!"

Snatching a wand from his belt, he strode out of the room. What in the name of all the gods was going *on?* The sudden reek of something burning came to him as he flung wide the oaken door of the guardhouse—and stopped in astonishment, again.

Across the threshold, he saw Guardcaptain Ruldel's face twist in pain as he sagged back into the arms of a young man

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in mage robes. Many arrows stood out of the dragons on the warrior's surcoat and shield, and already his armor was dark with blood. Above him stood a dwarf, face grim, bloody axe in hand. The war wizard goggled at them all from the doorway, frozen in disbelief.

As the commander sank into the boy's arms, he groaned, struggled to speak for a moment, and looked up at the dwarf.

The words came in a rough hiss. "Tell Azoun, I . . . we were together . . ." The rest was lost forever in a last rush of blood.

Delg shook his head as he tugged the shield out of the man's lifeless hand; the fool had not even had time to get it properly on his arm. Now he was past needing it. Delg crouched, holding the shield—it was as tall as he was—up to protect Narm. The young mage was drenched with sweat, exhausted from deflecting far too many arrows with a feeble, invisible magic meant for hanging cloaks on pegs or fetching small things from across a room. The spell had failed in the end, and Narm barely clung to wakefulness.

Arrows hissed and hummed past them, reaching hungrily through the air close by . . . toward the open door of the guardhouse.

The war wizard stood there, still looking astonished as the shafts tore into him. Irritation joined puzzlement on his face before he gurgled and toppled slowly sideways, an arrow through his throat. Errant shafts cracked off the stone wall beside him.

There was a barked command from whence the arrows had come. Through the sudden stillness that followed, one man came riding, trotting up to confront the young man and the dwarf. The frightened faces of villagers peered from windows. All around the Zhentilar, the soldiers of Cormyr lay sprawled in blood, pinned down by many arrows. One warrior hung limply out the open window of a cottage that was already crackling into rising flames.

As he reined up in front of Delg, the dark-armored Zhentilar swung a drawn long sword lazily through the air, trailing drops of fresh blood. He looked down at the grim dwarf, over

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at the sprawled wizard in the guardhouse doorway, and then around at the frightened, watching faces, and his cruel face brightened in satisfaction. He rose in his saddle with insolent grace and brandished his bloody sword again.

“Come out, wench!” he bellowed at the open guardhouse door. “Come out, or we’ll burn this village, and you with it!”

A murmur of fear went up. The bewildered folk of Thundarlun could not believe so many strong, capable Purple Dragons—a soldier for every three villagers—could be slain so quickly and easily. In numb silence, they looked down again at the still forms and the blood. Had the gods forsaken Thundarlun?

The Zhentilar beckoned impatiently without looking behind him; one of his men obediently rode up with a blazing torch in hand. With a cold smile, the Zhent swordmaster looked around at the stunned, fearful faces of the watching villagers. Slowly and deliberately, he wiped his blade on the flank of his horse—it snorted and shifted under him—and he sheathed it. Then he reached out, took the torch, and brandished it like a blade, trailing rippling flames through the air.

His horse rolled its eyes in fear; the Zhent pulled back sharply on the reins to prevent it from bolting and swung his new weapon in arcs of flame. “Come out!” he snarled, “or taste fire!”

Silence fell . . . and lengthened, hanging heavy on the smoky air. Villagers murmured in fear as the wait continued, and the swordmaster’s face grew stony. He raised the torch and sat his saddle like a statue of impending doom. The silence stretched. The fire he held on high spat and crackled.

The dwarf stood watching it, eyes narrow and shield raised over the kneeling form of Narm, who had grown pale and seemed to be having trouble swallowing.

And then a slim girl in dusty travel leathers stood in the doorway. Yellow-white fire seemed to dance around her eyes and hands, blazing like the torch in the swordmaster’s hand.

“You called for me, Zhentilar?” The words were calm and cool, but flames flickered from her lips as she spoke. At the sight, Zhents and villagers alike murmured and fell back.

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Then the girl shuddered, and her face creased in pain. It cleared again. She straightened almost defiantly, looking up at the Zhent swordmaster, her hands going to her hips.

An arrow sang toward her. The swordmaster's furious order was too late to halt its flight—but Shandril looked at it calmly, not moving. Under her gaze it caught fire, blazed like a tiny, leaping star, and was gone in drifting sparks and smoke.

The moan of awe and fear from the watching villagers was louder than the startled oaths some of the Zhentilar uttered.

"You called me out," Shandril said in a terrible, hoarse whisper. Her eyes, blazing with fire, fixed on the Zhentilar swordmaster. As she glared, flames roiled around her face—and then lanced out.

The Zhentilar's face paled as hissing flames leapt at him. He flung up an armored arm to shield his face. The flames swelled to a sudden, savage roar.

Then the swordmaster cried out in sudden pain, twisting in his saddle. Smoke rose from the half-cloak about his shoulders. His mount reared under him, neighing, and the torch fell from his smoldering hands.

Shandril raised one blazing hand, and in her eyes he saw his death. "By all the gods," she said in fury, flames rising around her hair in a leaping crown of fire, "you'll wish you hadn't."