

Hand of Fire

By Ed Greenwood



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"So, Sir Zhent," Storm said in a voice as cold as the steel against his throat, "you will make demands of me in my own cucumber patch now, is that it?"

The warrior felt the cold prickling of his own enchanted steel choking him as he tried to swallow.

Fear, rage, and incredulity warred and wrestled in him: This woman should not have the strength to hold him back! The magic on his blade should slice her weavings like cobwebs -- or that snakeguts priest of Shar had lied to him!

Lied . . . well, of course . . .

"Have you any last words?" the Bard of Shadowdale murmured, her hand tightening around his neck. Steel to slice his throat in front, her fingers like stone talons behind . . .

Whimpering, the Zhentarim shuddered in her grasp, teeth chattering.

"Can you give me good reason not to end all your deeds now?" she asked softly, her blood still running down her breast in streams from the slashes he'd dealt her at his first strike.

Nuthland of the Zhentarim met her eyes almost pleadingly, and firmly shook his head. "N-no," he gasped. "At least I can speak truth to you . . . Lady. Let it be quick, if you can find any mercy."

"That much," Storm Silverhand said softly, "and more." She flung the blade of Shar high into the air and watched it dissolve in a sudden flurry of blue stars and flames as the waiting spirits of Mystra and Azuth savaged it together. "No steel shall shed your blood."

Her fingers tightened suddenly, his neck broke with a wet crunch -- and his head lolled, eyes going dark.

Wearily the lady bard embraced the body, calling up the sacred silver fire to sear away any contingencies or death-magics that might have been cast on this Zhent slayer to endanger her or Shadowdale around her.

Her blood snarled and scorched up into sickening blue fire as those flames did their work. Storm clenched her teeth against brief agony, and then flung her head back and gasped in relief as it slowly died -- leaving her clutching a cooked, smoking, claw-fingered corpse.

Someone cleared their throat behind her, nervously.

Storm whirled around, her smock ashes upon her and her breeches and boots little better, the Zhentarim literally crumbling in her grasp -- and gazed into the face of Sorele, the egg-seller from Thorm Arthauvin's farm up the road, with a full basket of great brown freshlaid eggs.

The plump little maid was trembling in . . . fear? Awe?

Sorele stared wide-eyed at the skull-like, flopping face of the Zhent, and then back up at Storm's frown -- and grinned weakly.

"Is this not a good time, lady? Should I come back later?"

The merchant struck the Trielan alley dirt with a groan, twisting feebly as he tried to claw out the dagger sunk hilt-deep into his back. Just under his belt, around to the side -- where it could not help but be fatal.

He knew it; they could see that in his eyes as he turned himself over to look up at them and gasp disbelievingly, "I . . . you . . . serve you not Thay?"

The two men stared down at him and said nothing in the few moments ere the light of life went away behind the merchant's eyes, a last breath rattled out of a mouth already drooling blood, and he laid his head back in the dirt, and died.

"Gods look down! We've slain the wrong man!" one slayer hissed to the other, who was already kneeling by the body. He snatched away the man's dagger, felt around the neck and then an ankle for a key, found it with a hiss of satisfaction, and unlocked the satchel that was still chained at the merchant's hip.

"Hah!" he said, as he drew a book out of that satchel, riffled its pages, and nodded approvingly. A spellbook, or he was a Lord of Waterdeep! He shuddered at the very thought, and started tugging at the rings on the merchant's hand.

The man had gone to fat; there was no easy way those rings were coming off -- except with a dagger. His own was still handy; he drew it and started sawing.

The slayer bending over him winced and repeated: "We've slain the wrong man!"

"No, we've not," the kneeling man growled. "This one served the wrong Red Wizard, see?"

"High Lady," the weavespinner asked gently, "the Weave still surges wild around this chamber. How do you feel?"

Alustriel smiled thinly and raised a dripping hand from the bath to accept the tankard of rosefire tea he was holding out to her. "Well enough, with all of these warring mages bound to me. Interesting madnasses these Netherese nurse -- thankfully hobbled by wild delusions as to their own peerless power."

She sipped, sighed her contentment, and added, "I'll let them ride me a bit longer, but 'twill be a relief to have Shandrill here in Silverymoon taming them with spellfire whilst I hold them caged and thrust against her flame."

"Holy Mystra forbids their outright destruction?"

Alustriel nodded. "So long as they move not to enslave mages, destroy wards and shieldings, and seize Art to keep to themselves -- and if they do, and my power can be unleashed with Her blessing, 'twill be too late to undo the damage they've wrought."

"And Silverymoon suffers," the mage of Mystra murmured. "Let us hope Our Holy Lady hobbles not this Shandrill with the same restrictions as she has the rest of us."

Alustriel nodded and rose with liquid, unhurried grace, winking at the wizard when he did not hasten to turn away from gazing at her.

Unblushing, he reached for her robe -- but froze when she murmured, "Andras, promise me one thing, will you? If I grow too weak, and these Weave-wraiths escape to rage around the city, call on Elminster and Khelben and all without delay, will you? Shattering Mystra's altar ought to do it, if no one answers your spell-summons."

She looked up when he did not reply -- and found him frozen, mouth agape, staring at her in shock and horror.

"Yes," she said gently, gliding forward to enfold him in a damp but tender embrace, like a mother soothing a stricken child, "things are that bad. 'Tis only right that you know."

Mirt sighed and put down his goblet. "I wonder where she is by now," he growled. "I just can't believe she'll make it whole -- not with the Zhents'n'the Cult'n'all the fell wizards Faerûn can spawn after her like mad, hungry hounds." He shook his head and refilled the tall glass Belarla silently held out to him.

"We all have to die someday, I told her, an' with a slip of a thing like ye, all it'd take would be one thrust of some stray blade, through ye, and all the life and spellfire together would leak out." The Old Wolf's voice was rough. "An' d'ye remember what she said to me then, lass?"

"Yes," Belarla said softly, her next words no less biting for her sad tone. "She said: I wish you would."

They both shook their heads then, and raised their glasses -- which was just about the time Asper burst in, wild-eyed and with her hair a-whirl like flame around her, and the silver-blue fire blazing up around her that meant magic of the Chosen had come down upon them. Belarla was staring and scrambling up -- staring not at Asper, but at Mirt.

And as the Old Wolf gaped back at her, he saw the silver-blue glow racing up his own arms, too.

Hastily he drained his goblet. Just in case it was the last wine he ever got to taste.