

# Dreaming of Waterdeep

## A Gustin Bone Story

By Rosemary Jones  
Illustration by Warren Mahy



He ran. He ran as fast as he could, through the mud in the yard, past the snarling hound lunging on the end of its chain, waking the two remaining hens roosting in the barn's doorway. Even the old barren sow dug for the butcher before the end of the fall grunted and shifted in her dreams as he barreled past her pen.

He lunged for the ladder on the far wall and scrambled up it. One rotten rung cracked. He slipped, banged his knees painfully against another rung, but kept climbing. When he got to the top of the ladder, he flung himself face first into the musty old straw. There, safely hidden from the world, Gustin Bone gave way to the fury, sorrow, and regret that shook his ten-year-old body and howled like a lost soul.

A long time later, Gustin uncurled, wiping the tickling straw out of his hair and face. Then he walked across the ominously creaking floor to the open barn window and gazed across the moonlit farm, the most desolate and lonely place in all the world. His uncle was gone, nowhere to be seen.

"I'm going to die here," Gustin pronounced. And, liking the sound of his own voice echoing into the rafters, he shouted a little louder, "I'm going to grow old, die here, and nobody is ever going to know my name! It will be a tragedy."

Then he stopped. He wasn't quite sure that something could be a tragedy if nobody else knew about it. But he loved the sound of the word. He had learned it from the widow. She visited on a regular basis to clean out the farmhouse and scold his uncle about the state of Gustin's clothes and general hygiene.

"If you never come clean, boy, it will be a tragedy. Your mother, if she lived, would weep to see the state that you're in," the widow would say, flinging Gustin's shirts and breeches into boiling water while he sat shivering on a stool wrapped in a too-thin towel.

As little as he liked her cleaning methods, he was rather fond of the widow, who invariably ended her session of scrubbing by producing some type of biscuit or baked bread from her basket. But it wasn't her attention to the mud behind his ears that made him screw his face into a frown and shout that night to the uncaring world, "I refuse to die here!"

No, it was the actions of his uncle—that woefully stupid, uncaring, altogether wrong man—that caused Gustin to scramble through the straw to unearth his mother's battered old trunk and thrust open the lid to pull out her even more battered knapsack. Finally, Gustin decided, he would fill that knapsack full and follow the road out into the wide marvelous world, all the way to Waterdeep, that City of Splendors. He had to go now, he told himself, before it was too late.

Only that morning he had smiled and chattered as he walked with his taciturn uncle to the village. Gustin filled the silence surrounding them with his own running observations on the birds in the hedgerows, the likelihood that the hens would survive the winter, and the oft-expressed wish that his uncle might adopt a kitten to keep the mice out of the barn.

"Farhinner's got a litter," Gustin informed him. Farhinner was the tanner and kept cats to keep

the rats out of the leather. "Two tabbies and a ginger-stripe."

"Dog wouldn't like it," grunted his uncle.

Gustin shrugged, a ripple of the shoulders that he'd copied from Farhinner. He liked the man. Since the tanner had no sons, it seemed likely that he might be looking for an apprentice in a year or two. A stinky trade, none smelled worse except the butcher's shop, but it meant a room in the village and no farmwork. At the age of ten, Gustin already spent his days plotting ways to escape from the farm.

"There's strangers," said his uncle, stopping so abruptly that Gustin was two lengths down the road and several words into an argument in favor of kittens before he realized his uncle was not moving.

Then he blinked and saw what his uncle was staring at. There were strangers. Marvelous strangers emerging from the woods and skidding down the embankment toward the road. The first man was dressed in fantastic colors, with ribbons and feathers hanging from his broad-brimmed hat, and a long swirling cape that went all the way down to the heels of his highly polished boots. The dwarf following close behind this dandy bore a highly polished helmet on his head and sported a bright red beard cascading down his barrel-round front. The third stranger, also human and obviously male, wore leather armor, well-cared for but marked with interesting nicks and scars. A long scabbard, very noticeable for its plainness, hung empty from his belt.

"Well met, my friends," cried the man with the broad-brimmed hat. "We are looking for a smith and an inn. My friend has a sword in need of mending and we all have need of a place to stay."

Gustin's uncle shook his head and turned on his heel, as if he meant to walk all the way back to the

farm rather than talk to the strangers. Gustin, however, was propelled forward by his own curiosity.

"You'll want to follow us into the village," he announced, ignoring his uncle wavering in the background. "We can show you the smith and the tavern. We don't have an inn. But you can probably sleep on the benches at the tavern." It was what laborers from the lord's fields did on the harvest days if they'd drunk too heavily to find their way home safely in the dark.

"Any place with a roof would be welcome," answered the talkative stranger. "We'll take a stable or even a cow's shed tonight. I am Nerhaltan, my large friend here is called Wervyn, and the dwarf goes by the nickname Tapper."

The other two didn't say anything, but the dwarf Tapper glanced once, quickly, at the shadowed woods behind them. Gustin knew the track that they had been following; it led to old ruins, a little hill fort long since crumbled into a collection of tilting walls and a stair that climbed crookedly up to nothing. Village tales called the spot haunted, but every child defied their parents and made their way through the woods to race beneath high arch that once marked the fort's gate.

Gustin had run that race in and out of the ruins earlier that summer. No harm had come from it, although there had been a coldness about the place that he didn't like.

Behind him, his uncle sighed once and then gestured at the strangers. "It's not far to the village," he said. "We go slowly, the boy and I. Step ahead of us if you need to."

"We're happy for the company," said Nerhaltan, pacing along side Gustin. "Your lad seems very bright for his age."

"My nephew," grunted his uncle.

"I'm Gustin," said Gustin. And then proceeded to beguile the rest of the too short journey with dozens of questions for the strangers: How far had they come, what type of sword had the fighter broken, did the dwarf carry a battle-axe, had they ever seen a dragon, did they know how far it was to Waterdeep?

The dwarf turned his bright eyes on Gustin when he mentioned Waterdeep.

"That's a long way from here," Tapper said. "What do you know about the City of Splendors, boy?"

Gustin paused, catching back his next question before it popped out of his mouth. His uncle had paced a little ahead of them, walking with the tall fighter, and the two were discussing the state of the weather and the possibility of a storm before moonrise.

"I have a book," Gustin whispered, reaching into his tunic and pulling out his most precious possession so a corner showed. "A guidebook to Waterdeep."

"Looks a bit chewed," said the dandy on the other side of him. "Like the rats have been at it."

"I found it in the barn," Gustin admitted, "in a pile of rubbish my uncle meant to burn." Papers and other items belonging to his mother, he didn't add. His uncle once tossed everything into the bonfire pit after he caught Gustin snapping open the locks on her old trunk and rummaging through it. But then the widow had stopped his uncle from dousing the lot with oil and started a shouting match about respect for his dead sister. Eventually papers went safely from the bonfire pit to the barn, because his uncle insisted that he wouldn't have "any of it in my house any longer. It will give the boy dreams! And you'll know what will happen then."

Gustin still didn't know what would happen, although he hoped it would take him far away from the farm like his long-lost mother. As for the dreams, they began the first night that he lay curled in his creaking bed and read the enchanting words "Waterdeep, a city of high adventures and dark dearlings" by the light of a sputtering candle.

"Have you been to Waterdeep, goodsirs?" he asked the dandy and the dwarf. Both shook their heads.

"Waterdeep is no destination for a poor man," said Nerhaltan. "I won't go there until I have gold in my pockets."

"Yet some say it is the place for a dwarf or a man to find the gold to fill his pockets," added his short companion.

"It takes gold to make gold," the dandy said. "That is why we are here, after all."

"Quiet," said Tapper with a glance at Gustin that the boy pretended not to see.

They rounded the bend in the road. "Look, goodsirs, our village," said Gustin.

Nerhaltan blinked at the collection of buildings circling a widening in the road. One large oak marked the center of the village, a brute of arboreal pride so big that none had ever figured out how to cut it down, and so the road split around it and the village circled it.

"Well," remarked Nerhaltan, "I have seen smaller. Let's hope the smith knows something about swords as well as farm tools."

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The evening grew late, past sundown was past his uncle's usual bedtime, but the three adventurers kept them talking at the tavern, insisting on buying them a meal and, for his uncle, a tankard of ale, in return for conversation about the village and the ruins up

the road. Gustin did most of the talking and his uncle did most of the eating and drinking. Eventually Gustin's uncle slumped in his chair, snoring lightly before the fire.

Gustin felt no urge to sleep. His brain was fizzing with the stories that the three strangers told in return, about stolen maps and lost treasures, risks taken and rewards won.

"Oh, I wish I could go adventuring," he said and then blushed at sounding so young. To cover his embarrassment, he reached for the slice of bread on his plate, crumbling it between his fingers and then making it disappear altogether in a shower of red sparks and a few tinkling notes of music.

Tapper's head reared back. "Well, now," said the dwarf. "That's a neat trick. Most small boys just eat the loaf to make it disappear."

Gustin shrugged. "It's just something I do to entertain the little children," he said with all the pride of a lad who owned ten years of age. As far back as he could remember, he could make small things disappear or shift around. Such tricks made the widow laugh when she came to clean the farm and she'd taught him ways to twist his fingers and words to whisper to add sparks or dancing lights to the effect.

"Hmm," said Nerhaltan, also staring intently at him. "Can you do other tricks?"

"A few," Gustin admitted. "Like making my voice come from someplace else." That sentence caused the fighter Wervynn to start in his corner, as Gustin's voice sounded behind his head. Like Gustin's uncle, the big fighter had been dozing in his chair.

The dandy and the dwarf laughed. "Oh, very good. Do another."

"Do you have a cloth and a coin?" Gustin asked. This was a fairly new trick for him and he'd been practicing to impress the widow.

Nerhalten pulled a handkerchief edged with lace out of a hidden pocket. Wervyn produced a well-worn copper coin.

With a few waves of his hand, Gustin passed the coin through the cloth. Then he crumpled up the handkerchief and shook it out empty.

"Humph," said the fighter. "And where's my money?"

"Why in your pocket, goodsir, just where you had it," said Gustin.

The big man slid his hand under his vest and produced the copper coin again.

"Quick fingers?" the dandy questioned his companions.

"The boy never came near me," the fighter observed.

The trio stared hard at Gustin. "So, how did you do it?" Tapper said.

Gustin shrugged. "I've always been good at tricks," he admitted.

"A boy like you, a brave boy," began Nerhalten, "could be a great help to us."

Gustin slid forward on his chair, eager to hear what the dandy had to say.

"Leave him alone." His uncle's flat voice, harsh and loud, startled them all. The man was awake and scowling. "No more tales. No more tricks."

His hand dropped hard on Gustin's shoulder. He pulled the boy out of his chair with one yank. "We are going home now. Stay away from us. Stay away from the boy."

"Uncle!"

"Goodsir," said Nerhalten, following them into the twilight gloom outside the tavern's door. "It's growing dark. Let us buy you a bed for the night. We meant no harm and could perhaps come to some prosperous . . ."

"No!" shouted Gustin's uncle, lurching down the road, dragging a reddening Gustin after him. "No tales. No tricks. No more!"

Halfway back to the farm, his uncle's hand finally loosened enough on his collar to let Gustin wiggle free.

"I wanted to hear what they had to say," he protested, feeling very brave because the moonlight was dim and he could barely make out the deep frown scoring his uncle's face.

His uncle wheeled around, grabbing his shoulders, and shook him the same way that the farm dog would shake a rat when it caught one.

"Stay out of village until the strangers are gone. If they come near, do not speak to them. Do not look at them."

"But --"

"And no more silly spells," yelled his uncle. "How many times must I tell you! No magic at all!"

"I only do simple ones to make people laugh," protested Gustin.

"No more!" roared his uncle. "And no more trips to village. Not until you learn more sense."

They were in sight of the farmhouse. The dog set up a volley of harsh barks, awakened by his uncle's shouts. The farmer turned and yelled at the dog to be silent.

"Tomorrow, I'm burning your mother's books," he said in a quieter, more sober tone, turning back to his nephew.

"No!" Gustin sprang away from his uncle, racing toward the barn where her trunk was still stored.

"Including that daft guidebook you keep in your shirt!" yelled his uncle after him. "Don't think I don't know about that! No more foolish tales, boy, no more tricks! This time, I mean it!"

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Upstairs in the barn, Gustin stuffed the battered knapsack as full as possible with his mother's papers, scrolls, and books. He would leave nothing behind for his uncle's bonfire.

Down the barn ladder he crept with more caution than he had hurled up it. The farmyard was a tangle of shadows. The hound shifted, paws churning in some dream of a hunt, and rattled its chain as he crept past, but the old dog did not wake. It knew Gustin's footsteps in its sleep.

Gustin was out the gate and halfway down the road before he stopped to consider where he would go. Everyone in the village knew him. His uncle would look there first.

The three adventurers had talked about going back to ruins, just as soon as the fighter's sword was mended. After that, who knows where they would go? Waterdeep, as he had always dreamed, or some other destination equally splendid. Surely they would want a clever boy, a boy like him who knew more than a few magical tricks, to help them on their way.

Gustin turned off the road, following the track that led to the ruins. Being tired and mindful of the night shadows whispering through the tall grass, he decided not to go into the ruins by himself. Instead, he slid down into the bracken at the base of a tree, curling himself around the knapsack stuffed full of his mother's papers.

The three adventurers found him there, dozing in the late afternoon stillness and dreaming of Waterdeep.

The dandy poked him awake with one pointed toe. "What are you doing, boy?" he asked but his eyes were bright with laughter and he looked as if he knew what Gustin would answer.

"I've come to help you to find the treasure," Gustin said as boldly as he could with grass sticking out of his hair and a few dry leaves itching their way down his shirt as he scrambled to his feet.

"How do you know we are looking for treasure? Or your help?" said the dwarf and his face was harder and more suspicious than his companions.

"You said . . . last night . . . well, I thought," Gustin mumbled a little, staring at his toes, wondering if he'd been a little rash.

"Oh course, we are after treasure," said Nerhaltan. "What else would three like us be doing here? The boy's too bright for us to deceive." The dandy nodded high over Gustin's head at his companions. "We welcome your help, young wizard, welcome it indeed."

"I'm no wizard," Gustin quickly answered. "But I do know these ruins."

"Does your uncle know where you are?" asked Wervyn. The fighter looked concerned and frowned when Gustin shook his head. "Maybe you should go back to your farm, boy."

"Nonsense," answered Nerhaltan for him. "The boy's got too much adventure in him to be content on some farm. Lead on, lad, lead on. There's plenty for all if we can find our prize."

Gustin led the three men toward the ruins. The woods buzzed with the usual noise of warm autumn afternoon, birds calling to mates, the deep rumble of frogs, the chittering of insects. It sounded so normal that Gustin paused.

"What is it?" asked the dandy.

Gustin shrugged. He felt as if a dozen ants were marching up and down his spine. A prickling of his skin unlike anything he had ever felt before.

"Are we going forward or going back?" said Tapper.

"Forward," replied the dandy, giving Gustin a slight shove between the shoulder blades. "Go to, sirrah, go to."

"There's something wrong," said Gustin.

"What?"

He shook his head. Suddenly he wondered if he should have listened to his uncle and stayed home. And then he was ashamed of his cowardice. Here he was, so close to discovering a lost treasure, and he stood trembling, afraid of a few birds singing in the tangled branches over his head.

Even as that thought tumbled through his head, Gustin let out a great sigh of relief and enlightenment.

"It's the birds," he said to the three adventurers staring at him. "The birds. It's the wrong time of year. They should not be singing like that."

And the minute he said it, the woods fell silent. Not a cheep or a chirp could be heard.

The fighter drew his repaired sword out of the scabbard with a well-oiled hiss.

"It is close," he said to his friends.

Tapper peered from side to side. "Keep everyone together now. No one out of sight."

Gustin stared at the three now surrounding him in a tight knot.

"What is it?" he asked with a sinking certainty that he would not like the answer that he would receive from the adults.

"Nothing to worry about," said Nerhaltan with a strained smile. "Go on, boy, go on. There's a hole, you see, down by the base of the wall. It's too small for us, even Tapper won't fit, but if you can wiggle your way in —"

A shout sounded to their left. It sounded uncommonly like his uncle calling "Gustin! Gustin!"

Out of habit, Gustin almost started toward the shouts, into the thickest part of the woods, but Tapper grabbed his shirttails and pulled him back. "To the wall, boy, to the wall."

Silence fell again. Gustin listened but he heard no more from his uncle. Perhaps he was turning away and searching toward the village road.

They reached the walls of the ruin. The place seemed colder than before and more menacing than he remembered, the shadows clustering at the base of the wall and making a gloomy twilight inside the roofless rooms of the abandoned fort.

High above his head, a kitten mewed, a lost sound. Poor thing, thought Gustin, it must have climbed the wall and gotten itself stuck. Fond of cats, he chirped, hoping to draw it into the open.

"Hush!" Nerhaltan clapped a hand over Gustin's mouth. "Don't call to it."

Gustin wiggled his way free and eyed the dandy with suspicion. "Why should I be afraid of a stray kitten?"

"Not a cat," muttered Tapper, nervously looking around. "It just sounds like a cat. When it's not trying to sound like your mother."

"Or a group of birds," that from the fighter, who had put his back to the ruins' wall and was staring out at the woods.

"Now, about this hole," said Nerhaltan. There was a hole at the base of the wall, newly dug as Gustin could tell by the fresh clods of dirt lining its rim. As the dandy had said, the opening was small, the stone blocks of the wall preventing it from being enlarged beyond the current opening.

Gustin went flat on his stomach and peered within. He snapped his fingers, concentrating on a useful spell that the widow had taught him, and made a light. The little glowing ball rolled away from his hand and dropped down the hole. It disappeared into a chamber located just under the wall.

"A safe room. All these little hill forts used to have them. A place to hide treasure," explained Tapper leaning over Gustin's shoulder. "The original way in . . . well, we couldn't use that. So I came around to the other side of the wall and broke in through the roof. But it's too narrow a route for us to wiggle down and back."

The air issuing from the hole smelled stale, dank, and uncommonly like a grave to Gustin.

"Is there something down there?" Gustin asked. For the end of his sensitive nose caught another scent, a stink like an animal but no animal that he could identify.

"Nothing down there now," said Nerhalten.

"Now that it is out here," added Wervynn. The fighter was facing away from the wall, looking up the broad stone staircase that wound around the tower to the guards' walk at the top of the wall.

"Go on, wiggle in," the dandy gave Gustin a little push from behind. "Look for a box, a little gold box with brilliants around the edge of the lid. That's all we need to pay our way to Waterdeep."

The late afternoon shadows stretched from the trees to the base of the fort, like long black fingers reaching for the adventurers standing over Gustin. "Hurry," said Nerhalten. "We should be out of here as quickly as possible."

For the very first time in his ten years, Gustin wished that he was back at the farm and his uncle was yelling at him about his neglected chores.

He slid headfirst into the hole, plunging his arms in front of him like a swimmer to drag himself forward. His feet kicked the air outside until somebody grabbed his ankles—Nerhalten probably—and shoved him all the way in. Gustin slithered forward, concentrating on his light spell. A faint glow began to strengthen before him.

"What do you see?" The shout sounded very far away and muffled to his ears.

"Nothing!" he yelled back.

Then he popped like a cork from a bottle, tumbling out of the tunnel and onto the littered, stinking floor of the room under the wall. Piles of debris cushioned his fall. For which he was grateful until he put his hand onto the half-rotted corpse of a mouse. With a yelp of disgust, he rolled away, only to land on a much larger pile of bones that crumbled and cracked under his slight weight.

Gustin sprang hastily to his feet and spat a hasty command to his spell. By the glowing light that he now made float in the center of the room, he could discern rib bones, leg bones, and a few vertebrae. After a squeamish moment, he came to the conclusion that these were the remains of a lost sheep or, possibly, a calf. It certainly could not be a ten-year-old boy. After all, if somebody his age had gone missing from the village, he would have known. Even if it had been years and years ago. Or so he told himself firmly.

Gustin began kicking through the trash strewn about the room, looking for the gold box that Nerhalten described. Nothing glittered or gleamed. After one quick turn around the room, he decided the search was hopeless and that he would rather be above ground, no matter what lurked among the trees.

Crossing back to the hole where he had entered, Gustin found that it was just out of reach. Even pushing the larger bones, dead leaves, and other bits of rubbish in the room into a pile under the hole didn't help. The material was too unstable. Every time he climbed up, the pile collapsed under his feet.

"Help!" he yelled. "I need a rope!"

There was no answer.

Gustin called again, louder and more urgent.

A faint cough sounded far above his head and then he heard Nerhalten call, "Where are you, boy? Where have you gone?"

The dandy's voice was muffled and strangely distorted and, Gustin shivered despite himself, altogether too eager for an answer. Especially for a man who should know exactly where he was. After all, Nerhalten had pushed him down this hole.

All the magic Gustin possessed tingled up and down his spine. Something was out there and it meant him harm.

Something sniffed at the hole leading into the safe room. Something scratched at stone and dirt, as if something too big for the hole was trying to dig its way in.

Gustin drew a deep breath and concentrated as he had never concentrated before. Then he opened his mouth and let his voice sail out and away from him, using the very same spell that had so startled the adventurers in the tavern, "Here I am! Here I am!" his words should be sounding from the very top of the hill fort's crumbling tower if his spell worked.

He held his breath, keeping perfectly still. Faintly, distantly, he heard the scrape of a heavy body moving away.

"We found a way but we could not use that," Wyvern had said. Not a lock, not a barred door,

Gustin decided. But a creature hunting in the tunnels under the fort? Is that what had driven the adventurers above ground and to this second, futile attempt using him to rob the safe room?

He dashed across the room, running his hands across the dank and soiled walls. Solid stone scraped his palms. He ran a circuit of the room, banging heavily against walls, kicking at the foundations, looking in the waning light of his spell for any sign of a door.

When he found it, he practically tumbled through it. Rotted wood painted to look like stone gave away before his frantic blows. He kicked a hole large enough to crawl through and found himself at the base of a bare stone stair twisting up toward the fort's main gate.

With as light as step as possible, Gustin speeded up the stairs to arrive panting at the top. By the slant of the shadows covering the courtyard, he had been below ground for barely an hour, perhaps even less. But he was acutely aware of the unnatural stillness of the woods beyond the ruins. Not a bird chirped, not an insect buzzed.

Above his head, he heard a cry, almost startling him from his crouched hiding place at the top of the stairs. Then he realized it was his own voice, still echoing among the stones: "Here I am! Here I am!"

"Where are you, boy? Why are you hiding?" A great shadow passed overhead as something huge and beastly clattered along the guard's walkway along the top of the fort's wall. The voice was Nerhalten's but the shadow cast by the dropping sun upon the weed-choked courtyard was too large to be that slender man.

Gustin crept under the broken arch of the main gate. He slid around the gate's main pillar, hugging as tight to the wall as he could, hoping whatever prowled above him would not glance down.

The woods were very close, he told himself firmly. He only had to sprint a short distance with no cover at all before he could lose himself in the friendly shadows under the trees. Whatever hunted at the top of the wall surely could not leap down and catch him before he reached the trees. All these arguments made perfect sense in his head but he could not persuade his trembling body to leave the relative safety of the wall.

Then he remembered Nerhalten pushing him down the hole with uneasy glances toward all sides.

Gustin stared in the direction of the hole where he first entered the hill fort. He could easily see the loose dirt piled outside the wall from where he stood. Equally easily, he could make out the distinct shape of a man's boot leaning against the wall. It looked very much like Nerhalten's leg. As for the rest of the dandy, there was no sign. Just the one leg leaning against the blood-splattered wall.

Fighting back the bile rising in his throat, Gustin prepared to run as he had never run before. Directly above him, he heard the beast cry out in Nerhalten's voice, "There you are, clever boy!"

Another shout sounded across the meadow: "Gustin!"

Emerging from the trees, his uncle ran toward him, shouldering the heavy crossbow that he kept over the mantle for winter's wolves and other raiders of the chicken coop.

Behind his uncle strode the widow, her hands alight with flame. "Get down!" she yelled even as his uncle dropped to one knee and fired an iron crossbolt over Gustin's head.

Gustin flattened himself in the weeds at the base of the wall. He heard the beast above cry out in pain, no longer disguising its voice, but screaming with a ferocious roar of frustrated bloodlust.

The widow spat out the words of a spell and long ropes of flame streamed from her outstretched fingers. The beast howled louder. The stench of scorched flesh and fur rolled over the gagging Gustin as he crawled as hastily as possible away from the base of the wall.

His uncle reloaded the crossbow and shot again. The second bolt also struck home. The beast coughed and called out weirdly in the voice of the dandy: "Ah, the blood, the blood."

A heavy body crashed down from the guard's walk at the top of the wall. Gustin rolled over and stared down the length of his body. Framed between his boot toes was a hideous mix of a stag's legs with a lion's body and a giant badger's head. A tufted tail lashed from side to side as the wounded creature struggled to its hooves. It kicked out at Gustin but a blaze of fire from the advancing widow drove it briefly away from the boy.

Gustin scrambled to his feet. The badger head swayed back and forth, the open mouth blowing out a carrion breath that made him gag. Bony ridges lined the inside of its black lips, clearly visible far too close to his nose.

Raising his own hands, Gustin repeated the spell being shouted by the widow. It was louder and longer than the one that she had taught him to light a candle. Smoke rather than fire blossomed at his fingertips. Cursing his fumble of the spell, he flung the smoke at beast's eyes. Baffled and choking on the thick black smoke streaming from Gustin's hands, it wheeled around, racing away from Gustin to the safety of the trees.

A third crossbolt from his uncle's bow pierced the creature's throat. It tumbled over its hooves, crumbling into the grass.

With three strides, Gustin's uncle reached him and swept him up in a hard one-armed embrace. Then he dropped Gustin with a thump. "I told you to stay away from magic," he growled. "I told you to stay away from those men."

"Ah," said the widow, crushing Gustin in her own mint-scented embrace. "Leave the boy alone. How was he to know there was leucrotta in these ruins?"

Gustin wiggled his way out of the widow's hug. "Where are they?" he said, looking around for the tall fighter and his dwarf companion.

"Run off!" snorted his uncle. "We saw them on the road."

"He's been searching for you all morning," the widow whispered in Gustin's ear.

"But why?"

"Because you are family," grunted his uncle, shouldering his crossbow and stepping around the dead beast in the meadow.

"That's worth something," the widow said, pointing at the leucrotta's body.

His uncle shrugged. "Send them out from the village to fetch it. It's magic and I'll have none of it."

"It wasn't magic that killed her," the widow said. "And it won't be magic that kills this boy."

His uncle shook his head and stomped off. The widow sighed. "There goes a stubborn man. It wasn't magic, that's what I keep telling him."

"Who? Who died?" But even as he asked, he knew the answers. It was as close to his heart as her book about Waterdeep.

"Your mother was always twice the wizard that I was," said the widow. "And restless with it. That farm was far too small to hold her. But it stole the laughter from him when she took to wandering. She was all the family he had."

"He has me," Gustin knew even as he said it that the day was coming when he would follow his mother's footsteps out of the village. The adventurers might have tricked him, even run off and left him, but it didn't make their tales any less appealing. He would go to Waterdeep and see the City of Splendors for himself.

"Make me a promise," said the widow as they walked through the woods. "The next time you leave, tell us both good-bye. Don't make her mistake and go running off without a word."

"I promise," Gustin said, and with a whisper of magic, he made his words echo from all the treetops.

#### *About the Author*

Rosemary Jones is the author of two FORGOTTEN REALMS stand-alone novels, *Crypt of the Moaning Diamond* and *City of the Dead*. Her short stories can be found in the *Realms* anthologies *Realms of Dragons II* and *Realms of the Dead* as well as other science fiction and fantasy books. For more on her latest projects, check her website at [www.rosemaryjones.com](http://www.rosemaryjones.com).