

MOONRISE OVER MYTH DRANNOR

by Ed Greenwood

I. The Day of the Drawn Sword

It was hot enough to fry a knight in armor. Delmair began to despair of ever reaching the dale, as he trudged along in the sun-dappled roadside shade, and the day grew old around him. He walked and walked along the winding road through the woods, hoping at each bend to see thinning trees ahead, and some sign of his goal. At each bend, the road disappointed him.

Delmair's feet ached, even in the good boots he wore. His pace fell to a crawl. The deep woods on either side of the road began to seem somehow sinister, as if they were awaiting the night, when he'd have to sleep among them and take his chances. He walked more slowly, even as he told himself he must hurry on.

Hurry? He could barely walk. Delmair sighed, and came to a halt by the side of the road. And then he heard it.

A thudding, a low, broken drumming sound barely audible above his own weary breathing. He leaned his head to one side. Yes. Hoofbeats, many of them, coming towards him on the unseen road ahead. He stepped up onto a high bank beside the road, staring all the while at the next bend, as the hooves came nearer.

The din grew suddenly louder. Delmair threw up a hand, clearing his throat, as low branches at the bend suddenly danced and shed leaves. "Pray excuse me!" he called, his voice high and loud in his ears. "Excuse me — can you tell me the way to Shadowdale? I seek the sage Elminster!"

In the next moment, the first riders of a proud company of knights in full, gleaming plate armor thundered into view. As the first whipped past, whirling his words away into nothingness in the fury and hubbub of a hard gallop, Delmair saw in the huge, grim-faced warrior's ready-gauntleted hands a china teacup and saucer. The warrior held the one daintily above the other as he charged by, raising clouds of dust.

Delmair turned to stare after him, astonished. The second rider thundered past, and a third. They, too, held teacups. "Excuse me!" he shouted desperately as another group of knights came into view. "Excuse me!" he bellowed again as loudly as he could, amid the tumult of snorting mounts and crashing hooves. "Pray pardon, but could you possibly spare me — ?"

Then they were past and gone, leaving him amid the rolling dust, the drumming of hooves dying away amid the trees. Delmair sighed, standing in the road and

looking after them — and then hastily turned and leaped out of the way as a fresh thundering announced the arrival of yet another rider.

Delmair had time for one glimpse of a beautiful, frowning, sharp-eyed maid in full armor galloping towards him as though the Realms themselves hung in the balance, long hair flowing free about her shoulders. He opened his mouth to speak — and she bent in a flashing of curved armor.

Then she was gone, and Delmair found himself holding an empty teacup, delicately balanced on its saucer. . . .

"Where have they gone? Off to save the Realms again, of course. Know ye *nothing* about the Knights of Myth Drannor? Recall from time to time that ye're one of them, lad!" The old man fixed Mourngrym with a clear, blue-grey stare, wagged his head in mock despair, and vanished up the chimney in a puff of smoke. Mourngrym groaned. The disaster was complete. Tomorrow was definitely *not* going to be a good day.

The sun sank low as Delmair trudged along. A thought came to him: what am I still holding this teacup for? In sudden irritation, he dashed it to the ground.

The teacup started earthward, and then bobbed in midair like a cork upon water, and came up by itself to float silently beside and just ahead of him, in midair. Delmair stared at it, dumbfounded.

Then he looked wildly at the trees all around. Nothing unusual. Behind him, down the road — and, by the gods, there hung a line of teacups in empty air, floating slowly towards him. Delmair turned and ran, cursing.

He was gasping for breath and stumbling in weariness by the time he noticed a sort of glow from beside him, a pale white light. He spared a glance — and nearly fell. The teacup he'd thrown was keeping pace with him, floating serenely along as he ran. Panting, Delmair came to a despairing stop and looked back. Sure enough, the line of teacups was there, all of them glowing faintly as twilight stole up in the trees around him. Shaking his head, Delmair walked on into the gathering darkness, towards Shadowdale. The cups would give him light to see by, whatever source their magic came from. Not for the first time, he wondered why he'd ever ignored the wilder stories about the dale, close by the haunted ruins of Myth Drannor. Late at night in taverns, people had whispered about the skeletal dragons and scaled, spiked things that were rumored to lurk in Myth Drannor. It was a city of riches no one dared to take — because the price was one's life.

Still, the men of Shadowdale were good warriors, he'd heard, and kept the dale safe. They always needed soldiers, he'd heard more than once. As night came

upon him, and he walked on with the glowing lights trailing behind him, Delmair suddenly thought for the first time about *why* a dale would constantly need new soldiers, and fear joined him on the long walk through the night.

The day dawned bright and clear, gentle breezes rustling the trees around him as Mourngrym, Lord of Shadowdale, walked alone in the woods of Shadowdale. Birds sang in the warm morning, and from afar he could hear the faint lowing of cattle. It was a morning that, had it befallen on any other day, would have lifted his heart into song, and brought a smile onto his face.

But the Lord of Shadowdale walked along with his face dark and closed, and his thoughts plunged into grey despondency. For this day was The Day of the Drawn Sword, with all the gaiety, hubbub and crowding that inevitably accompanied its festive event — and he faced it all alone, without his lady to both gladden his eyes and set all the folk, proud and low, at ease together.

Shaerl was gone to Suzail, to bury an uncle taken by the gods, and she'd taken with her Aseel Tarnriver, Chatelaine of the Tower. For a tenday now Mourngrym and all the folk of the Tower had suffered under the hard hand and sharp-edged tongue of Orlindea, the Underchatelaine, and the Lord Mourngrym had more than once felt moved to draw steel and end common misery — and the busy wagging of her biting, shrewish tongue — together. But scions of noble houses of Waterdeep and Lords even of small dales don't cut down lone women in their blood, just for being themselves. And so Mourngrym walked alone in the early morning, his sword still in his sheath, and anger burning in his heart.

Even the Knights of Myth Drannor had left him, riding off in haste yesternoon at a word from Elminster, who had come down the chimney as a grey swift and left again by the same way an instant later, as a plume of grey smoke — quite spoiling Mourngrym's highsun tea. They'd all left him alone to face all the tumult of The Day of the Drawn Sword.

Once a year the festival came, in highsummer, a day of feasts and spectacles and contests-of-arms, when the Lord of Shadowdale thanked and fêted his militia, and took on new men-at-arms to defend the dale, from those who'd shown well in the contests. Tales were told of the dangers of lost and ruined Myth Drannor, rising dead in the dark heart of the woods to the east. Now that the elves were gone, it was the haunt of creatures that should have been dead — and worse. Whenever a patrol or a curious boy strayed too close, death came for them, bloodily. The Knights of Myth Drannor spent much of their time heading off treasure-seekers from swift and certain death in the ruins. Mourngrym worried all the time about the monsters of Myth Drannor deciding someday that Shadowdale was close enough, and full of easily caught folk, to eat, and . . .

During the Festival, by tradition, some brave soul had to go and spend the night in Myth Drannor. Usually they were never seen again. Who would go this time?

There was always Elminster, of course; his spells would keep him safe. But you could only do that once, and Mourngrym didn't want to use up the Old Mage's turn yet. Better to have him still in reserve . . . so, who?

That problem was only part of what weighed down Mourngrym's spirits. His head was beginning to ache already. The common folk for several days' travel around invaded every nook and cranny of the Tower, laughing and shouting and breaking things, eating his larders bare and drinking his cellars dry. A sizeable number of small, easily-concealed objects always seemed to go missing in their wake, too, and the Lord of the Dale was expected to play the genial host through it all, toasting and greeting old dodderers by name, giving squalling and noisome brats kisses for good luck, and suffering the supercilious giggles of small girls and the mischievous peltings of small boys armed with ready missiles — nuts and spiced, shelled eggs from the feast-tables, usually — with good-natured smiles.

Mourngrym heartily hated the whole festival. He'd gone out this early purely to have some quiet moments to himself before all the shouting started.

But it was not, gods willing, to be. Ahead of him, where the trees thinned to give way to the small mill-yard, he heard young voices raised. Already. Mourngrym sighed and looked about, but the trees stood thick all about, and the path led nowhere else. He went on, hand going to sword-hilt out of habit.

"I — I am Florin the Tall! Taste my steel, foul Zhent!" The joyful, high-pitched bellow was followed by a very real shriek of pain and fright. Mourngrym hastened around the last bend of the path, and nearly charged into the midst of a small pack of boys.

They turned startled faces to him, gasped, and in a few moments erupted into full, crashing flight.

"Hold!" Mourngrym's stern command fell upon empty air. Curved branches and stout cudgels bounced and rolled on the turf in their wake, and the Lord was alone once more.

Well, not quite. In the mud on the pond-side of a grassy hillock lay a huddled form in torn leather. It sobbed quietly, and Mourngrym hastened to it in sudden apprehension.

He took hold of a shoulder gently, and rolled the boy over, evoking another short scream of fear.

"No! No!" came a terrified voice, through the mud and what seemed like a lot of hair. Mourngrym shifted some of it aside with a finger, and discovered that he was staring into the tear-filled, astonished eyes of a young girl.

They stared at each other for a moment, the girl's quick, ragged breathing the only sound between them. Mourngrym's practiced eye saw that she might be rather beautiful, without the tears, errant hair, and all the mud. She might have seen eleven summers — certainly no more.

"Are you all right?," he asked gravely, offering her his hand. She rolled over slowly, wincing. The hilt and rusty blade of an old sword, broken off short long ago, fell from the folds of the too-large leather jerkin she wore. Mourngrym plucked it away; she shivered, and bit her lip. His fingers found the torn and sliced leather of the cut it had made, probed beneath, and came back to him with their tips red with blood. Mourngrym growled, and the girl shrank back from him with another, involuntary sob.

"I'm — I'm all right, sir."

Mourngrym held up his bloody fingers for her to see. "I fear not," he replied, and reached for the lacings of her jerkin rather grimly. "How did you come to be here? Who swung this sword?"

"I — we were playing at defending the dale, sir." Mourngrym saw only a small stain on the tunic beneath, and felt some relief. Only a small cut, then. His fingers probed again, gently. Yes. She'd be fine. He took her hand, wadded the tail of her tunic into a ball, and guided her hand to press it firmly against the cut. She sniffed.

"With a *real* sword?"

The girl sniffed again. "It's Nern's, sir. He found it, by the bridge. He thinks it's the one the Lord Mourngrym broke, fighting off the Zhentilar."

Mourngrym's eyes went to it, lying old and worn in the grass beside them. "No," he said shortly. "That was never mine."

The girl stiffened in mid-sob, and shrank away from him. Her eyes were very round. She gasped. "You — you — Lord Mourngrym?"

Mourngrym rolled his eyes, sighed, and nodded. "Aye, I'm Mourngrym. How are you called?"

"A-Alyth, Lord."

Mourngrym nodded. By now, he knew, they'd be looking for him from top to bottom of the Tower. Soon enough his soldiers would be sent all over the dale to seek him out. He looked down again at the terrified girl, bleeding in the mud.

"Up, then, Alyth," he said firmly, and hauled her to her feet with an arm about her shoulders. "Tell me, now: how came this Nern to strike at you?"

"Please, Lord — Pheena and me, we're always the Zhents. The boys make us. They play the Knights."

Mourngrym shook his head, and picked up what was left of the old blade. "I must go, Alyth," he said with a sigh. "You know what this day brings." The girl nodded.

"I lay this command upon thee," he said then, formally, his eyes seeking out hers and holding their wondering gaze steadily. "Go, without tarrying or turning aside to any other task, to the white and green pavilion closest to the Tower walls, in the Meadow, and say that I sent you. Understood?"

Alyth nodded, in silence. Mourngrym patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Good. Don't delay, now — and keep that hand pressing against where you're cut; don't try to look at it!"

Alyth nodded, sniffing again. Mourngrym gave her a smile and then ran back the way he had come. Gods, not morningfeast yet and *already* things were going wrong! The glimmerings of an idea made him smile despite all, as he sprinted through the trees back towards the road. He looked back once, to wave at the girl to follow. She was coming after him. Good.

"Where have they gone? Off to save the Realms again, of course. Know ye *nothing* about the Knights of Myth Drannor, lad?"

The old man fixed the young boy with a clear, blue-grey stare. Orthin shifted uncomfortably under the level gaze and allowed as how he'd heard time enough about the Knights and all they did for the dale, to keep its folk safe.

"But we need them not," he blurted, "my pa says, while Shadowdale still has old Elminster."

The beard hid most of the slow smile that answered him. "'Old' Elminster, now, is it?" came the familiar and crotchety, yet grand old voice. "Thinks thy sire I grow feeble with age, and weak of mind and Art?"

"Uhh . . . no, sir," Orthin said uncertainly. "Leastways, he's not said so . . . that I've heard," he added carefully. The old sage nodded.

"Good, good," he said approvingly. "Stick ye always to what ye've heard, and can read in the voice and the looks of folk, and take care not to fill in the gaps with what ye fancy they might be thinking. 'Twill stand ye in good stead, as the years pass. Now help me carry this bundle up to the Tower, for its safe deliverance there will also stand ye in good stead, as the years pass."

Orthin sighed and rolled his eyes, behind Elminster's back. It was not the first time he'd heard such grand and fateful statements from The Old Mage.

Elminster turned suddenly on his heel to fix Orthin with a hard stare — and then solemnly rolled his eyes just as Orthin had done. The lad shrank back with a gasp. So it was true! The old man *did* have eyes in the back of his head! He quaked, awaiting dire magical punishment.

Elminster chuckled softly. "Take care also, young Orthin, not to show in thy face what ye would not have hurled back at ye. Keep it hidden, for thine own safety. This, too, will stand ye in . . ." His voice trailed away, ever so softly, and Orthin found himself mimicking the end of the sage's oft-repeated phrase by himself, in sudden silence.

Fearfully, he looked up, but the sage's eyes were grinning, even if his mouth was not. Wordlessly Elminster pointed to the other end of the long, hard bundle. Sighing, Orthin took it up. Under the rolls of cloth, it felt like a scabbarded sword. Orthin wondered briefly what famous magical blade he was carrying — and then decided he'd really rather not know.

The Old Mage grinned at him, as if reading his mind. Orthin rolled his eyes again — and had to laugh when he saw that Elminster was doing it too, in unison.

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Delmair smiled wearily, and rubbed red-rimmed eyes. At last! Ahead, the trees rolled back and the sun shone on a fair green valley. A weathered, rocky height rose on the left — the Old Skull he'd been told about, no doubt — and the road came to a bridge over the River Ashaba. He had reached Shadowdale, and before highfeast, too!

He grinned at the bright morning all around — and noticed with a start that the line of floating teacups had vanished. He had only the one in his hand left. He shivered — and then shrugged wearily and went on.

Ahead, on the bridge, stood guards in gleaming chainmail. The silver and blue arms of Shadowdale shone proudly on the breasts of their surcoats as they lowered their spears in warning. One came forward to meet him, an iron rod in her hand. "Well met, Delmair Rallyhorn," she said calmly, bowing. "You are welcome in Shadowdale, and expected at the Tower by the Lord Mourngrim."

"I am?" Delmair asked, blinking. The guardcaptain grinned at his dumbfounded face and said gently, "Elminster told us you'd be coming. Worry not — he has the power to astonish all of us still . . . and we live here."

Beyond her, Delmair saw nods and grins of agreement as the spears rose upright again in smooth unison.

"Ah, my thanks," he managed to say. "D-do I go straight there?" He waved at the Twisted Tower, visible now behind the last trees on this side of the river, rising in front of the Old Skull. There seemed to be a lot of folk wandering about, near it; market day?

The guardcaptain smiled. "It's the best way to reach it," she said, chuckling. "Good fortune, Delmair. I am Elassa — Elassa Thintrel. Enjoy your visit."

Delmair nodded in a sort of daze, and found himself on the path to the Tower.

Then he remembered the teacup and saucer in his hand, wrapped in his handrag against the road-dust. "Ah, I was handed this on the road," he said, turning back to Elassa and unwrapping his burden. "By a lady — the last of a group of warriors, riding west as if to war."

Elassa looked down at what he held, and smiled. "Give it to Lord Mourngrim when you see him — he'll be happy to get it back. You met with the Knights of Myth Drannor on the road, riding west to speak with your king."

"Oh," was all Delmair could find to make answer. He shook his head, and turned towards the Tower.

At its doors, he found his way barred by two men. One was a stooped, nondescript figure in an old, patched cloak, its hood thrown forward to cover his face. The other was a tall, broad-shouldered, grimly dangerous warrior in magnificent armor, with an even more magnificent mustache bristling gray in the bright sun as his cold eyes drilled into Delmair.

The cowed figure pointed. "That's him."

Delmair hadn't even time to draw breath before the warrior's hand shot out, and gripped his arm with fingers that felt like immovable stone.

"How do you know we can trust him?" Thurbal, Captain-of-Arms for Shadowdale, managed the feat of squinting suspiciously at Delmair and glaring his question at the cowed man at the same time. But then, there was little the old veteran seemed incapable of.

The cowed man shrugged. "My magic, of course. I'd not have led him here if I thought him . . . unsuitable."

Thurbal sighed. "All right. What, boy?"

Delmair had swallowed noisily, and now managed to find his voice. "You led me . . . the *teacups*?"

The hood nodded. "Aye."

"How — ?"

"Boy," Thurbal began, "*never* ask —"

A wave of the old man's hand brought instant silence. Out of the shadows under the hood, a bearded mouth smiled at Delmair. "A simple spell from my days as an apprentice. It's known as Elminster's Travelling Teacups, of course."

Delmair stared at him, round-eyed. "You? *Elminster*?" He didn't wait for a reply, but promptly fainted, teacup clattering as he toppled.

Thurbal looked down at him, and then again at the Old Mage. "Are you *sure* this one's suitable for the Guard?"

"Wherever have you been, Lord? The people have been asking since the horns sounded at sunrise!" Orlindea's voice was shrill. "The militia *cannot* parade without you! And until the parade is done, the archery contest cannot begin, nor the quarterstaff bouts or javelin-throws. They, in turn, hold up the highsun quaff, and we simply *cannot* —"

"Mistress Orlindea," Mourngrym began, raising his hand in entreaty. "I —"

But she had plunged on unabated, "— have the tracking and stalking contests in the *dark*! The Day will be *ruined*, and all because you wandered off when your people needed you most! I've never known such irresponsibility in you before, my Lord, nor in any lord I've seen or heard of, for that matter, and —"

"Orlindea," Mourngrym said, louder.

"— A *fine* example you set the young men, I must say! What will the other lords of the dales think, when they hear of it? *What* will they say? Shadowdale's proud nam —"

"Orlindea," Mourngrym said sternly, "I think we've all heard *enough*." He smiled, placatingly. "As you say, the day draws on, and all are waiting for me. I've had some business to attend to, and I see you've managed very capably to muster them in the meadow. Let me just dress, and I'll —"

He moved to the stairs, but the rest of his soothing words were lost in Orlindea's spirited response. Her double chins quivered in indignation. "The gods know *someone* must manage in the face of your neglect! It *is*, after all, the prerogative — and accomplishment! — of my position. You'd hardly expect me *not* to muster the men, I trust! And *how* did you manage to get *mud* all over you, on this day of all days?"

"Orlindea," Mourngrym muttered to the door, as he closed it firmly between them, "you'd never understand."

When, a moment later, she hammered on the door to tell him to hurry, he found that the broken blade he'd taken from Alyth's side was still in his hand. Thoughtfully and heartily he hurled it at the closed door. Unfortunately, the catch he'd set prevented Orlindea from opening the door in time to make a direct acquaintance with the whirling hilt. It crashed heavily and harmlessly against the armor plates bolted to the inside of the panels, and crashed to the floor.

The Lord of Shadowdale heard her outraged gasp outside, and chuckled. His manservant, old Marthim, kept his face carefully expressionless as he held out a fresh tunic. Mourngrym chuckled again.

He was somewhere large and indoors; a vaulted ceiling stretched high overhead. A cup was steered into his hands; Delmair took it thankfully and blinked to clear his eyes.

"When do you expect the Knights back among us?" Thurbal asked, as Delmair choked on the fiery red wine he'd just been given. Thurbal thumped him between the shoulders without sparing him a glance.

The cowed man shrugged. "They're on their way back already," he replied. "The time for swords is past, and the affair needs my attention now, it seems." And without another word he vanished.

Delmair choked again. Thurbal looked at him disgustedly. "Never seen a wizard teleport before? Have you any backbone to you at all, man?"

The grand chamber seemed suddenly very empty. Only a faint odor of pipesmoke hung around them to mark that Elminster had been there — Elminster the Sage, greatest archmage of the Dragonreach! Delmair stared around in wonder, until Thurbal hauled him to his feet, took hold of his chin, and shook. When Delmair's eyes refocused, Thurbal growled at him. "Over all that? Good. Come. Armor and arms await you. I've a task I need done, and all my men are already spoken for." They went out together, in haste.

Delmair clutched at Thurbal's arm as they went. "Excuse me, lord, but —"

Thurbal spun. "If you live longer, lad, *never* grab me by my sword-arm." Those cold gray eyes bored into Delmair's. "What d'you want?"

"M-my lord," Delmair said, gathering his dignity. "I'm Delmair Rallyhorn. I've come from Cormyr to speak with Elminster the Sage on — on an important private matter; family business. I am of noble birth, and would speak with the Lord Mourngrym. He is expecting me."

He stopped; Thurbal was already nodding and turning away. "Aye, I know; Elminster told me. Well met, lad; I've fought beside Rallyhorns. If your business

was so urgent, you had your chance to speak to him — now it can wait until tonight, after the foolery's done."

"But —"

Thurbal cast an iron look back over his shoulder. "Come," he said, and strode away. "The Old Mage also told me it'd do you good to wait for your audiences and do some honest work for a change. Noble birth; hmmph. D'you know one end of a chamber pot from the other?" He strode on. "Or a sword?"



Alyth eyed the pavilion warily. It stood closest to the frowning grey walls of the Tower, and — as far as she could tell, in the press of the crowds and amid the forest of tents, fly-poles, and pavilions, it was the only white one with green trim. It was small, but a young man in chainmail stood guard outside it, leaning on a large, drawn sword that gleamed point-down on the turf before him.

The girl approached hesitantly. The eyes of the guard regarded her warily. The man shifted his grip to hold the sword properly, and Alyth saw that he was sweating.

"Yes?" It was a challenge. "Why come you here?"

"I — the Lord Mourngrym sent me," Alyth replied. The pain in her side had subsided to a dull, incessant ache, but her feet were less steady, somehow, and the laughter and chatter of the crowd seemed to rise and fall like waves on the shores of the Moonsea. She eyed the guard through fresh tears of pain.

Abruptly, he nodded. "Pass within, lady. You are expected."

Alyth nodded, and stumbled past him, to an entry of interleaved hangings. There was a light within, and three robed women. They looked to her, and one reached out a hand in polite greeting. "Well met," she began in a low, pleasant voice, but Alyth could not seem to reach that hand.

She reached, and reached, stretching out shaking fingers into the sudden, roiling mists. The world roared and bubbled in her ears, and that hand still seemed impossibly far away. . . .



"In time, thank Tymora!" Rathan said eagerly, as they thundered over the bridge at full gallop, the guards hastily leaping out of the way and trying to salute at the same time.

"Thank rather your swift steed," Florin replied dryly. "And we'd best turn aside into the meadow, blades, or we'll plow right into the back of the parade!"

The Knights of Myth Drannor had ridden hard since the grey foredawn, their mission done. A Zhentarim wizard lay dead, and his captives — among the last

of Randal Morn's folk of Daggerdale — safe in the hands of King Azoun of Cormyr, and a Purple Dragon patrol from Tilver's Gap. Spells had been laid upon them, but Elminster would have to deal with that. The Old Mage would no doubt be with Mourngrym, guarding him this day among the festival crowds.

Florin guided his charger, Firefoam, through a maze of tents towards the paddock at the back of the Tower used by the Knights. On the way he noticed with surprise that Shaerl's pavilion was up, erected near at hand. He pointed; behind him, the other Knights nodded.

Among them, Jhessail stiffened in her saddle. "Magic — in that tent!" she hissed, as they entered the paddock in a welter of hooves and flying mud.

"Shaerl's?" Florin asked, leaping from his saddle. Firefoam politely stepped out of the way as Jhessail's mount slithered to a less-graceful stop.

The sorceress nodded, grimly. "We'd best go see."

"Hoy! I haven't even found a tankard yet!" Rathan protested. The stout cleric rolled out of his saddle to splash heavily into the mud, feetfirst.

The nearest of the Knights, Torm, had already stepped well back in wise expectation. He rolled his eyes, and said, "You will, you will, I fear not."

Rathan gave him what is sometimes called a coarse look, and said, "Well, I haven't yet — and it's been a long ride."

"Let's be quick, then," Florin replied briskly, over his shoulder, as he strode towards the white and green pavilion.

A young man in chainmail stood before the tent, lifting his drawn sword warily at their approach. He wore no livery, and Florin — who knew every guard, horse, and war-dog in the dale — had never seen him before.

The battle-leader of the Knights did not slow; his blade flashed out. "How now? What's this? Identify yourself, man, and who is within!"

The sword came up to meet his fast enough. "You shall not pass — none must pass!"

"By whose order?" Florin inquired coolly, striking the blade from the man's hand with a twist of his wrist. Desperately the man reached for his dagger, but Torm was already plunging past him, towards the pavilion. He grasped the guard's descending wrist as the hand it was attached to reached the dagger, and pulled sharply downwards.

The man fell helplessly, and Rathan's foot came down on the dagger a scant second before the weight of Rathan's formidable behind came down on the guard's chest.

"Suppose ye tell me some things," the priest began, "while my fellow Knights barge rudely into the Lady Shaerl's pavilion and discover for themselves what's going on. Answer carefully, mind: thy continued well-being may depend upon the probity of thy tongue."

The guard's muffled reply was lost to the other Knights, as they ducked swiftly through the hangings, keeping low and with weapons out. Inside were two astonished robing-mistresses, the usual wardrobes, stands, and racks — and in front of them, a frightened girl, half in and half out of one of Shaerl's fine gowns, white to the lips and holding a sword that was too heavy for her, its point wavering menacingly in their direction.

"Back, Zhent villains!" she said, in a voice that trembled only a little. Her eyes darted back and forth from one intruder to another, as her forearms trembled with the weight of Mourngrim's ornate ceremonial sword.

"Back, I said!" she snarled, "Or I'll call out the Knights of Myth Drannor upon you!"

Florin stared at her for a moment, and then smiled. Very slowly he sheathed his sword and spread his gloved hands. "Good lady," he said, bowing low, "we are the Knights of Myth Drannor. How may we serve thee?"



Tongues were still a-flutter all over the great Feast Hall in the Tower of Ashaba, as the third remove of the feast came. Servants brought out decanters of wine, and rolled out fresh kegs of beer, to the accompaniment of general cheers. The usual high spirits and boastful stories of feats-of-arms reigned in the smoke-filled hall. But again and again eyes darted to the young girl seated in the place of honor beside the Lord of Shadowdale. She wore one of the Lady Shaerl's older, smaller gowns, but looked tired, pale, and a little scared. Save when spoken to, she sat looking down at her lap, and eating little.

The Lady of the Feast is a position traditionally filled by the Lady of the Dale. In Shaerl's absence, and in the lack of a dowager Lady of the Dale, it should have gone to the Chatelaine of the Tower. But Aseel was with her lady, and that left it to the Underchatelaine, who was not popular with the folk of the dale.

Yet when the ceremonial Drawn Sword had been carried into the hall, naked and aloft, by the Knights of Myth Drannor, in their finery and bearing torches, this young, unknown girl had walked at their head, the single candle of a maiden glimmering in her hands. Who was she? Was Mourngrim planning to take her to wife? What did this mean?

Orlindea glowered at the newcomer from a low table; there was much mirth at her red face and dagger-like glances. Some said they knew the girl; she was a daughter to one of the roving, seasonal workers who came to live at the mill each spring. Alyth was her name.

Others said she must be Mourngrim's daughter, kept secret until now, and brought out in Shaerl's absence, to spite her and her new baby. Still others whispered that she was *Shaerl's* secret daughter, born out of wedlock in an affair among the nobles of Cormyr, and sent here by Shaerl from wherever in the Forest Kingdom she'd had the child hidden away all these years. She was perhaps ten years old, although solemn and reserved of bearing, and . . . who was she, really?

The contests had gone well, with much color and skill to awe the ladies and make the old men shake their heads in admiration. (Not as good as in *their* day, mind, but worth seeing, all the same — and the best, to be sure, of these last thirty winters or so. . . .) The Lord Mourngrim had promoted six warriors to be officers of various ranks, and recruited over forty new guards from the lads and maids who'd competed in the contests. Now he was sharing out the bounty of a Shadowdale season free from Zhentish attack: much good, roasted game and stock, rivers of beer, and copious fine wines from all across the North. It had been a good Day.

The din in the Hall was terrific; half a dozen lesser minstrels were desperately trying to impress the bard Storm Silverhand, resplendent in warrior's leathers and gleaming new boots, who sat in a seat at one end of the Hall. The candles on the tables and overhead danced reflections from a thousand goblets and decanters, and sparkled on a score of bright-polished gorgets, pectorals, and wristbracelets. Precious stones, furs, and shimmering silks fought for attention. The folk of the dale and all who could find the time and excuse to stop in Shadowdale for the night had worn their most proud and unrestrained finery. Soon the dancing would begin.

Florin's trained eyes found a worried-looking woman bending over Orlindea, talking earnestly, and looking up from time to time at the high table. The ranger shot another glance down the table at Alyth; her brow was furrowed . . . in pain.

She was still hurting, despite the healing spells she'd received before the Knights had come upon her. He looked around, and his eyes fell on the young guard who'd been set to protect the pavilion, this Delmair.

His eyes were on no one but the girl, and he had the tender, yearning look of a youngling in the full thrall of his first love.

Florin shook his head slightly, and looked back to Alyth. Yes, something was wrong. His eyes encountered those of Thurbal, at the other end of the high table, and they exchanged looks. The captain-of-arms, too, had seen that something was amiss. Florin cleared his throat to say something, and drew his booted feet under him to rise from his place.

And the girl rose like a white flame flickering suddenly up from a dry log, curtsied to Mourngrim with a warrior's speed, and was gone, out one of the side doors of the Hall. Florin rose to follow, without delay.

A hand took his elbow from behind while he was still whirling his chair back into place. Florin saw Orlindea leaving the Hall in haste with the woman she'd been talking with, as he turned to look back. Mourngrym stood behind him.

"Thanks, Lord Florin," the Lord of Shadowdale said softly, "but this is my mess to attend to, I fear. I'd like to see to it alone. If you could take my place in the toasts and suchlike —?"

Florin nodded and clapped Mourngrym on the back. "Of course. Go, then," was all he said. He took the Lord's seat, shaking his head at Thurbal in silence and motioning the captain back to his seat. The Lord of Shadowdale hurried out of the Feast Hall, into the candle-lit quiet of the rest of the Tower.

"How dare you run off without telling your mother! Do you have any idea of the sorrow you've caused her? Do you care, you ungrateful, overdressed, overreaching little chit?" Orlindea drew breath only briefly. "And where did you get your grubby little hands on one of the Lady Shaerl's gowns?"

"Please, miss, I —"

"I did not give you leave to answer, wench. Kindly keep yourself in silence until I bid you speak. And get that gown off, right now — and carefully, mind!"

Orlindea fairly snorted her indignation; behind her, she heard a choked sob, and then running feet. She turned to watch Alyth's mother flee through the door, weeping, and then turned back, hands on hips, to confront the little upstart again. Alyth stared at her wild-eyed, tears coursing down her cheeks.

"See what you've done to your mother? Oh, it'll be a fair day years hence before she dares to show her face in the dale again! She may well starve somewhere, unable to find work — and with it buy coin to eat. And all because of you, you little tramp! Aspiring to bewitch the Lord of the Dale with your smiles and your little ways — oh, yes, I've no doubt about what you're after, and what you'll do to get it! Indeed, my little lady —"

"Hold!" In the doorway stood the Lord Mourngrym himself, sword in hand, eyes blazing. "Stand away from the lady, *Underchatelaine* Orlindea — or you'll be gone from my lands this night, and forevermore!"

Orlindea whirled about to face him, face white. Her eyes glittered in fury. "My lord! If your lady knew —"

"That I had healed one under my care, who was hurt by one acting in my name? That I will not see her hurt by one whose tongue is so sharp she risks cutting her own backside with it? I'll hear no more from you, Orlindea, except the words, 'Yes, Lord' — and if I will not hear them of your will, I'll enjoy your silence by means of your enforced removal."

Mourngrym's eyes burned into hers as he sheathed his sword with savage strength. "Which will it be?"

A red flush rose slowly across the *Underchatelaine's* face, and her hot gaze wavered and fell to the floor. A moment later, she followed it, to her knees. "I—I'm sorry, my Lord," she muttered. "I—I have overstepped myself."

"Yes," Mourngrym agreed simply. "Look at me, Orlindea."

There was silence for several breaths; Mourngrym counted them in the rapid rise and fall of the *Underchatelaine's* bosom. Then her lashes flickered, and she looked up at him. Tears glimmered in her eyes, unshed, but she held her head proudly, and met his gaze.

"We'll speak no more of this, Orlindea, and consider it forgotten," Mourngrym said very quietly, "so long as you work no ill against me, Alyth, or Alyth's mother. We all choose ill, betimes — work me some good, now, by apologizing to Alyth."

Orlindea cast one glance at the sniffing girl, and burst into tears. Alyth half-rose, hands out to her, and broke into sobs herself.

Mourngrym stood in the center of the room and stared at the ceiling. Gods answer me, he thought, why does it all have to be so *noisy*? Then he sighed, thought of something he'd seen Elminster do, long ago, and stepped forward to grasp both women by the shoulders and guide them firmly into each other's arms. They embraced, weeping uncontrollably.

Then he went to the open door and looked out. The frightened eyes of Delmair, who stood uncertainly in the corridor, sword half-drawn, looked back at him.

Mourngrym stared at him incredulously for a moment, and then suddenly grinned. "The gods have answered," he said. "Lad — know you Alyth's mother? She who came out this door weeping a few breaths back? Go and fetch her, as nicely as you can, and bring her back here! And *run*!"

Delmair stumbled along through the trees carefully, a sputtering torch in one hand, and a bundle of Alyth's own clothes, still mud-spattered, held protectively in the other. Ahead of him in the night, Alyth, a pale wisp in her gown, and her mother, on the arm of the Lord Mourngrym, walked down the path to the mill.

"I'm sorry," Mourngrym said gently. "I don't like all the noise and the prying eyes and the smoke in the Hall either. . . . It's cooler and quieter here."

"Yes, Lord," Alyth and her mother answered, as one. Mourngrym sighed, led the way on around a muddy bend in the path — and stopped, astonished. "Now what befalls?" he breathed, hand going to sword rather wearily.

A pale amber radiance was growing from nothingness before his eyes, clinging to a large flat rock beside the trail, and growing brighter. They all came to a cautious halt in the darkness, and watched.

A wine decanter suddenly appeared out of the empty air above the rock, and settled gently down to rest. An instant later, it was followed by another, and then a steaming platter of roast fowl, several knives and forks — and the bearded, plain-robed figure of Elminster the Sage, smoking pipe in hand.

"There you are," Elminster said calmly, waving them towards him. "Come on, the lot of ye. I heard ye'd had enough of festival crowds and their wagging tongues — but I thought ye'd grow tired of good food a mite more slowly."

"You thought rightly," Mourngrym agreed, with a sudden, delighted laugh.

The Old Mage steered a decanter into his hand. "Of course." The Lord of Shadowdale laughed helplessly — breaking off only for an instant, as glass goblets began to appear in midair, one after another, and seek his hand insistently.

"Well met, Jhaleera," Elminster added gravely. "It's been a fair while, hasn't it?"

"It has indeed, Old Mage," Alyth's mother agreed calmly. Alyth turned to stare at her. Jhaleera only winked.

Alyth looked at Elminster. He smiled, and winked too. "My thanks for finding what's left of the lost blade of Lord Aumry," he said to her, drawing the old sword-hilt from some hidden place among his robes. "I'd been looking for that."

He puffed at his pipe to keep it from going out, and added, "Eat up, lass. When ye're done eating, a few spells can give ye armies of attacking Zhents to defeat — if ye'd like to play at being one of the Knights, for a change."

Alyth looked at him, face suddenly red. "Oh, but I couldn't. . . ." she murmured.

"Why not?" Elminster asked, his eyebrows rising. "'Tis ease itself — just ask Mourngrym here, or any of the Knights. They play at being the Knights every day."

"So *that's* how you do it," said Delmair, remembering teacups.

"Of course," said the Old Mage innocently. "Didn't ye know?"

II. Night On The Cold Hillside

The room was quiet and dim, its ceiling lost amid banners high overhead. Rows of benches faced a dais where impassive guards stood, behind high-backed chairs. Rising from one of them to greet him was an elegant, dark-haired man with a mustache. He looked sterner than when he'd been juggling floating crockery in midair, by the mill.

"Lord Mourngrym?" Delmair asked, holding the teacup carefully out in front of him. The Lord of Shadowdale nodded.

"I meant to speak to you earlier; I am Delmair Rallyhorn, of Cormyr. I — understand I am expected."

Lord Mourngrym smiled. "Aye, though I confess I know not the reason for your visit. Sit, if you would, and tell me why you've come — and where came you by the china you hold!"

Delmair sat. "Ah, I met the Knights of Myth Drannor on the road. One of them handed me this. Elassa — ah, your guardcaptain, at the bridge — suggested I return it to you."

"My thanks," Mourngrym replied, waving a hand in a signal. As a servant came in with a tray of cheese, bread, and chilled wine, the guards began to silently file out. In a breath or two, they were alone.

"Eat," Mourngrym said, taking up a slice of cheese, "and tell me of your purpose. Speak freely, please."

Delmair set the teacup and saucer down carefully on the nearest empty chair, and said, "I am heir to the House Rallyhorn. I — the regents appointed by King Azoun to administer my lands have now agreed to allow me to avenge my father's death." He cleared his throat nervously, as Mourngrym frowned.

"Regents?" the Lord asked. "What of your mother?"

"I — I never knew her. My mother, the Lady Shalrin, sickened and went away, long before my father's death. They do not speak of her much in Rallyhorn Hall. I know not why."

"You are now of age?" Mourngrym asked. Delmair nodded.

"Yes, Lord," he said wryly. "I have not been allowed to travel before, but Lord Huntsilver — chief among my regents — has evidently come to hold the opinion that journeying would be good for me. He said it was high time I learned some of the things about the world that cannot be taught by mere words and lessons."

Mourngrym smiled. "This all sounds familiar; I was in your boots only a few summers ago." He handed Delmair a goblet. "But you spoke of avenging your father's death. I know of no Cormyrean noble who fell here, of any name or lineage."

Delmair spread his hands. "My father fell somewhere near at hand; I know not where. I know only that I can trust whoever it is that wears my father's ring. He gave it, the Lord Regents told me, to someone he loved and trusted above all others, ere he died. . . . Everyone says that Elminster of Shadowdale is the greatest sage of the Realms. I came in hopes that he knows of my father's fall, and who it is that wears this ring."

"Everyone, it seems, comes to Shadowdale in hopes that I know something," said a familiar voice, dryly. "I've oft wondered, know ye, if they'd all be just as happy if I gave easy and ready answers — and made it all up."

Delmair turned. For the first time, the lack of a cowl and the presence of sufficient light let him see the Sage of Shadowdale clearly.

A thin, snow-bearded, distinguished-looking old man in nondescript robes stood amid the tapestries behind the dais like a watchful shadow. Hawk-like eyes gathered Delmair's gaze irresistibly, seeming to stare right into his mind.

Delmair shuddered, hand automatically reaching for sword-hilt. The old man's gaze stopped that hand cold. Then he nodded, sardonically, eyes still locked with Delmair's trapped gaze.

"Well met, Delmair Rallyhorn," Elminster of Shadowdale said wryly. "Head of the House Rallyhorn, of Cormyr. Son and heir of Roaril Rallyhorn, come to claim thy own. We have anticipated thee. Look; thy father's sword, kept safe for ye these long years: Dhauzimmer, the Bright Blade."

The Old Mage nodded at a long bundle of cloth on a chair nearby. Delmair followed his gaze down only reluctantly, but once he looked at the bulky roll of gray cloth, he could not tear his eyes away.

His father's magical blade, whose merest touch could destroy undead. The Lord Regents had thought it lost forever. It was real. The tale, then, was all real.

"There it is," Elminster said simply. "Take it."

Delmair did not move. He stared at the wrapped, hidden sword for the space of a long breath, and then swallowed, raising his eyes again to meet Elminster's bright gaze. "They said my father died of fright, when he went to slay the lich Malithra Undra," he said, quietly but formally. "I have sworn to avenge my father's death, and I ask you, great sage, to tell me where I might find this lich."

Elminster nodded. "I can even take you to where it lairs, tonight."

"Tonight?" The boy paled.

"Aye. Why waste time over such things? The blade's touch will destroy undeath; this power is true and undiminished. The deed should prove simple."

Delmair hesitated. "Should'?", he echoed, hearing the slight emphasis the old sage had given that word.

Elminster shrugged. "We shall see," was all he said.

The Old Mage stepped unsteadily up onto the table unnoticed amongst the tumult in the Feast Hall. Dancers whirled about the room, the music they were following scarcely to be heard through all the chatter and drunken laughter. He looked all around at the scene, smiled once or twice, and then raised a hand.

"Be still," he said mildly, in a quiet voice. Some trick of magic carried those calm tones to every corner of the room — and an instant later, a hush fell upon the Hall. Someone coughed, once, and all was still.

"Well met," Elminster said. "I think ye all know me." His steady gaze forestalled any replies or comments, and he went on, "But I have one man here with me who is probably unfamiliar to ye all."

He turned and beckoned to Delmair, who stood, face flushed, his father's sword — *his* sword, now — naked and glittering in his hand, as Thurbal had told him to bear it. Slowly — as Mourngrym had ordered him to walk — Delmair strode forward to where Elminster stood. It seemed a very long way, and the weight of the stares on him much heavier than he'd ever felt in the courts of Cormyr.

"This is Delmair Rallyhorn, of Cormyr. His is the Drawn Sword this night, to save us all."

Elminster gestured imperiously, and Delmair obediently stepped on a chair and clambered up onto the table to stand beside the Old Mage. It creaked, once — and he followed Elminster's gesturing hand to stare out at the Hall from his new vantage point.

All of the folk there — even the Tower guards and the bards, Storm Silverhand at their head — were silently raising their hands to him in the warriors' salute. Delmair stared at them, over a sudden lump in his throat.

He saw tears glittering in the eyes of some of the old men, and saw nods of respect and silent prayers being mouthed. What was going on? Why did this mean so much to these people?

He turned to Elminster, a question in his eyes, and opened his mouth to ask. The Old Mage met his eyes and said firmly, "Later. Now, take my hand."

Delmair did as he was bid — and the world whirled. Amid sudden flashing blue lights, Delmair saw Alyth come into the hall, her mother behind her. Her eyes were wild. As the lights whirled up and hid her face, he saw terror flash across it. "Noooo!"

Her despairing scream echoed through Delmair's head as he fell, tumbling endlessly through blue mists. . . .

Blue mist swirled and was gone. There was hard rock under his boots. Delmair blinked.

Pale moonlight touched the trees around them, where a moment before he'd been looking at the warm torchlit walls within the Tower. Delmair blinked again, hefting the splendid sword that was now his own, and tried to see into the deep gloom of the night-cloaked woods all around.

He stood with the Old Mage on a rocky hilltop, somewhere in the wilderlands, far from roads and lights. A dark forest stood all about them; off to the east, it seemed thinner, broken by piles of tumbled stone . . . a ruin? He peered, and saw turrets, spires, and broken walls. Where were they?

Elminster let go of the boy's arm. "Of old, this part of Myth Drannor was known as Moondown Hill," he said quietly. "That which ye seek awaits here."

Delmair gulped. "M-myth Drannor?" He clutched at the blade he held, shivered, and stared wildly all around.

Something moved in the night — something dark, rising menacingly out of the darkness of the trees, flapping heavily towards them. The young warrior gulped, found his mouth suddenly very dry, and raised an unsteady hand to point. Elminster did not move.

Delmair tasted cold fear, and turned frantically. The Old Mage stood watching the large, dark thing approaching on its leathery wings. His face was calm, even bored. Delmair tried to speak, but managed only a rough croak. The creature hung in the air above them, close now — and then swooped.

Delmair saw red, hungry eyes and a flash of bared fangs. A long, forked tail hung down behind it as it came, cutting the air in lazy swings like a swimming snake, thick and strong, and — and they were going to die!

Elminster raised an eyebrow.

Light pulsed and winked along the front of the black wings — and abruptly it was gone, the night air suddenly empty.

There was a shrill scream to the east. Delmair peered, trembling, and saw something dark and flapping crash into a leaning stone spire. There was a wet, heavy sound as the monster that had menaced them impaled itself helplessly on the stone, a choking, groaning noise — and then silence.

Black wings hung limp. A moment later, something else dark and leathery flapped up from behind the spire and glided in to land on the black corpse, claws out. Delmair looked away as it began to feed.

A night breeze sighed around them, sending chilly fingers along their spines, and rustled away northwards among the trees. Delmair shivered, and snatched a glance at Elminster. The old wizard was scratching at the end of his nose, wearing a bored expression as he looked east.

He lifted a finger from his nose, suddenly, and silvery light pulsed out and lashed down into the rocks below them. The dark coils of something large and snakelike that Delmair hadn't even seen thrashed and writhed in the radiance. As the light faded and died, they sagged weakly, and fell back among the rocks.

Elminster sighed. "Still a forest of fangs, I see." He murmured something, spread his hands wide, and then raised one arm to point over his head. The air shimmered, and then night slowly returned.

Elminster watched the barrier he'd raised fade into invisibility, nodded in satisfaction, and then said briskly, "Ah! Moonrise, lad!"

They stood together as the moon sailed out from behind spidery clouds and lit up the rock-strewn hilltop around them. Dhauzimmer was cold, hard, and very heavy as Delmair held it. Silver moonlight flashed and glimmered down its naked length as his hands trembled.

The Old Mage turned his head. "Got thy sword? Good, then. Lean on it, like ye've seen bold warriors do, preening in taprooms and inns — and call her out. She'll come, fear ye not. She'll come."

Delmair looked at him, face white in the moonlight. "She?"

Delmair heard rather than saw Elminster raise his eyebrows. "Didn't ye know? Malithra Undra was a noble lady, in life." He snorted. "Conduct thyself accordingly." As he spoke, clouds shrouded the moon again, and the gloom of deep night abruptly returned.

Delmair stood in terrified silence, staring into the darkness. "W-where is her tomb?"

Elminster sighed. "Just call her name, will ye? 'Tis the waiting that terrifies, not the doing." Moonlight came stealing back again, faintly.

Delmair looked at him, and then cleared his throat, raised his blade, and called, "Malithra Undra! Malithra Undra! Come forth! In my father's name, by the memory of Roaril Rallyhorn, I call thee! Malithra! *Come forth!*"

Silence answered him. The breeze died, and the night grew dark and still.

The young warrior looked uncertainly at Elminster, who nodded slowly and silently, and pointed into the darkness in front of Delmair.

Amid the moonlit rocks there, something moved. Something tall and thin, approaching half-hidden in the nightgloom. . . . Something in grey skirts with a skeletal face and cold, gleaming lights of eyes.

Delmair, raising his sword grimly, met those flickering eyes, and trembled in sudden, cold terror. He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

Whimpering inside, he urged himself into wild flight away from those old, coldly knowing eyes — but his knees seemed turned to stone; he could only make them tremble.

He tried to tear his gaze away, and look to Elminster for help — but his growing terror sank into utter despair. A low, soft voice, grating from disuse, came out of the darkness from the figure advancing on him, and he heard the words it spoke.

"Well met, old friend. It has been too long since last you came, but glad I am to see thee! And who is this that you have brought? Who would summon me in Roaril's name? Do please introduce us."

Delmair managed a whimper, then. He would have fallen if Elminster's steadying hand had not fallen on his shoulder, holding his sword arm immobile as the undead woman seated herself gracefully on a rock not three paces away, and smiled at them. Her face was little more than bone, but long, flowing, grey-white hair swirled around her shoulders, and her thin-waisted, full-skirted gown of rotting, faded grey had once been very fine. She wore a gleaming but worn silver tiara, and on her hand was a ring that seemed somehow familiar.

"Delmair," Elminster said formally, "put up thy sword and make thy bow to Malithra Undra, still a Lady of Cormyr."

Somehow the skeletal face looked sad. "Nay, old friend. I left all that behind me before I died, and I have heard some of what was said about me. I do not think they would welcome me home, even were I alive and — whole." She raised a hand that was more bone than flesh to brush an errant lock of hair from her face as she spoke. Most of it fell out at her touch.

Delmair gulped speechlessly, but somehow found himself going to one knee, Elminster's firm hand on his shoulder forcing him down. He kept a tight grip on his sword, though; even if the mage had betrayed him, Delmair Rallyhorn wasn't going to die without a fight!

"Not so, lady," Elminster said gently. "I have spoken with Azoun this month past. He assured me that though he could not ensure thy safety if ye came to Court, with all the headstrong and heavily-armed young nobles, War Wizards, and the superstitious Elite Guard (known as the Purple Dragons) who are always hanging about, he would make ye most welcome as befits thy family, thy title, and thy good character and loyalty to the Crown, as made known to him by his late father, and by Vangerdahast, his Court Wizard. He even bade me to bring ye thy heir, that ye might know who carries on thy lineage now."

There was a little silence, and then the undead creature replied huskily, "Gods thank thee, Elminster Trueheart, as I thank thee!"

From the sobbing tone, Delmair realized she was weeping. Elminster's hand, still on his shoulder, steered him to a seat upon a large and cold rock. Delmair gripped Dhauzimmer tightly, and wondered just who in the name of all the gods this creature of undeath was.

"Delmair," Elminster asked gently, "does destroying a lich still seem so simple a thing as it did when ye set out from Rallyhorn Hall?"

Delmair stared at the grey, half-seen thing facing them and licked his lips. "Who — *what* is she? How does she know you?"

"We are old friends," Elminster replied, "and the Lady Malithra is an archlich; to put it very simply, a good lich. But where are thy manners, lad? Ye speak of her as if she were a hound or a horse, or not here! Speak to her thyself, and civilly! Hast a tongue still, lad, surely?"

Delmair stared at him for a moment, and took a deep breath. Then he turned back to face the grey-gowned archlich, met those cold lights of eyes as steadily as he could, and asked, "Pray forgive me, lady. I did not mean to offend. I — this is my first journey alone in the world, and I am unsure of what is properly said and done. I will tell thee truth: I came here to destroy thee, with this — my father's sword. What can you tell me of his death, to stay me in avenging his honor . . . and winning my own?"

There was silence. After a very long stillness, Elminster said, "That was well said, lad. Pray forgive *me*, Malithra; I did not mean to hurt thee by this visit."

"No forgiveness is due either of ye," came a very quiet reply, and her voice told Delmair that the lady archlich had been weeping again. "This meeting comes late enough as it is." Her voice grew stronger. "Know, Delmair, that I was not thy father's bane. He came here because of me, but it was pure mischance, and the evil of lawless men, that brought about his fall."

She stood up — Delmair's heart leaped in sudden fear — and pointed into the darkness. "Fourteen attacked him, down there; outlaws, brigands. He was one, alone. I heard him cry out, but was too weak to aid him, because of — what I had become. He struggled all the way up to where we sit, here, and made his stand among these rocks. They fled at last when he defied them with two blades through his body, fighting on until they screamed that he must be undead or worse, and fled. At least, six of them fled. The rest died here, all over Moondown, by his hand that day. Thy father died a hero, Delmair."

She sat down again. Her voice, when it came again, was much smaller. "And yet, hero or no, he still died, and I could not save him."

"He was sorely hurt, Malithra," Elminster said gently. "The failure was not thine — thy magic could never have been enough with the wounds he bore."

"I know that," said the archlich fiercely, her hair billowing around her half-skeletal face in a sudden shaft of moonlight, "and yet it makes the memories no easier. I know now what it means to have a great shadow upon one's heart, lying over all one's days and deeds. To know that there was nothing I could have done makes it no easier!" She fell silent in the darkness. Moonlight came and went again, and the wind sighed amid the rocks.

"Delmair," Elminster said suddenly, "what else would ye speak of, besides thy father's fall? Thy regents sent ye to learn of the world, beyond lessons; here is an opportunity few will have, who walk the Realms this night. Speak!"

"Me?" Delmair asked. "What would I want to know, that . . .?"

"Tell me of yourself, Delmair," said the archlich with sudden fierceness. "What was your youth like, in Cormyr? What is the kingdom like now? What are the women wearing? What jests do the men trade when they think the women cannot hear? Who feuds with whom? Who is rich, and what do they waste their coins on? I am so *lonely*, Delmair! *Tell me!*"

Delmair stammered and stumbled and then found himself talking, answering endless questions about life in Rallyhorn Hall, and the doings and rumors of Cormyr. Later, Delmair thought of things to ask, and did. Elminster sat nearby, smoked a noisome pipe that sent green smoke curling up around them, and said little.

The other two talked long, the archlich telling Delmair of kings now dust and deeds of long ago, until at last pale grey dawn lightened the easting sky, and morning chill awakened the mists.

And in the end Delmair sheathed his father's sword, and bid the half-skeletal lich glad parting. She rose in a silent shifting of grey skirts, bent, and kissed both him and Elminster good-bye and gods-speed. Her lips left a chill tingling on Delmair's cheek, that faded very slowly.

"Come and visit me, when you can," she said. "It can be lonely here, with only the stars to talk to." She turned silently then, and went away underground, leaving them alone in the brightening morning.

Delmair stared after her for a long time without speaking. Elminster stood beside him in companionable silence, until Delmair stirred and sighed. "She — scares me very much, and yet I like her, and am proud that she calls me friend. The world is stranger than I thought."

Elminster smiled. "Ah, then ye have learned something. Come back to visit when ye can, and I'll bring ye here again."

The Old Mage ran his fingers through his long beard and added, "Come not alone, though; Lady Malithra is not the only lich in Myth Drannor. It hides worse things than lichs, too — and far worse than the thing that wanted ye for evenfeast."

They walked for a while, westwards through the trees, leaving the haunted ruin behind. From its depths, something shrieked, unearthly and high. Delmair shivered, but did not look back.

"So," the Old Mage asked gently, "do ye still feel a need to avenge thy father's death?"

Delmair nodded. "I must hunt down the bandits who escaped him," he said grimly. Cold light flashed far behind them, in the ruins. He looked back this time, but saw only shattered spires reaching towards the stars like blackened fingers protruding vainly out of a grave.

Elminster shook his head. "None still live. Malithra found and slew them, one by one — for she and thy father were very close."

"They were?" Delmair asked, remembering the familiar ring on the archlich's bony finger. It was the Rallyhorn Ring!

Elminster sighed. "Lad," he said despairingly, "Did they not even tell thee who thy mother was? The Lady Malithra Undra Shalrin Rallyhorn, once a sorceress of pride and power in Cormyr, who fell very ill and went away to die. She used her Art to achieve lichdom, but could not save her lord's life."

Delmair gasped. "Malithra my *mother*? It cannot be!"

Elminster smiled. "Ah," he said simply, reaching out a hand to grasp Delmair's arm, and use the spell that would take them back to Shadowdale and Alyth, "there's that fools' word: 'cannot.' Ye haven't learned all that much about the world yet, after all."

