



HAND OF FIRE

ED GREENWOOD



PRoLoGUæ



The breeze was blowing strong ashore this night, bringing wafts of the salty seacoast tang of dead things with it—and bringing the stink of the harbor to better wards of Water-deep.

Both of the men in the many-shadowed upstairs room over *The Laughing Lass* festhall were used to the smells; they hadn't bothered to light the perfumed oil lamp that sat on the table between them—nor called for ale or soft and affectionate ladies to serve it to them, for that matter.

The sensuous, coiling music of the dancers made a muted throbbing beneath their boots on the bare board floor, punctuated by occasional high-pitched cries and peals of laughter—but neither man had a moment of attention for anything but the man across the table from him and the items on that table. Only the occasional scrape of a boot heel from closer at hand—the room outside the door, where bodyguards of both men lounged facing each

other in uneasy, silently insolent tension—made the two merchants so much as flicker an eyelash.

“Come, Mirt!” the man with the slender, oiled-to-points mustache said, just a hint of anger in his brisk impatience. “Dawn comes, and I’ve other deals to make. I grant the quality, the amount is ideal, even the casks are to my liking. So let’s sign and seal and be done.”

The older, fatter, walrus-mustached man across the table rumbled, “There remains the small detail of price. Crowns of old Athalantar are good gold, heavy, and all too rarely seen. Them I like. The number of them on offer, however, seems less satisfactory.”

“Six per cask seems generous to me.”

“So ’twould be, were we at your sheds in Luskan,” Mirt the Moneylender returned, “with me looking about in vain for someone else to take my wine. Yet—behold—we sit in fair Waterdeep, where men clamor to outbid each other . . . even for rare Evermeet vintages.”

The man who wore the silks of Luskan—black, shot with irregular clusters of tiny white stars—sighed, ran one finger along his mustache, and said, “*Seven* per cask.”

“Eight per cask and one crown more,” Mirt replied, sliding the one small hand-cask that stood on the table forward a little, so that the Luskanite’s eyes strayed to follow the movement.

“Seven.”

“Seven and one crown more.”

“Seven,” the trader from Luskan said flatly, gathering himself as if to rise from his chair.

Mirt the Moneylender lifted an eyebrow—and calmly slid the hand-cask back to stand close by his own shoulder. “Have a pleasant day trading,” he rumbled, lifting his hand toward the door.

The Luskanite stared at him. Cool, expressionless eyes

locked with cool, expressionless eyes like two gauntlets softly touching knuckles—then strained against each other.

There was a moment of silence. Both men drew in breath, a longer silence, and the trader from Luskan said flatly, “Seven crowns per cask, plus one crown more.”

“Acceptable,” Mirt replied, without the slightest trace of a smile on his face.

“Agreed,” snapped the Luskanite, giving the usual formal response. He spilled the contents of a cloth purse out in front of him, planted his fingertips atop four coins, and slid them into the painted ring in the center of the table. He reached back his hand and slid four more. In this smooth, deliberate manner he made up the sum, then reached for the hand-cask by Mirt’s elbow.

“Not so fast, Bronor,” Mirt growled, placing one hairy hand atop the cask and dropping the other beneath the table. “Like yer kind, not all of these coins are . . . what they seem.”

Bronor of Luskan stiffened, eyes suddenly blazing like two green flames. “You insult my city?”

“Nay, Blood of Malaug,” the old Waterdhavian moneylender replied softly. “I care not who sired ye or where ye hail from. ’Tis your coins I dislike.”

Tentacles suddenly exploded through the air at Mirt, roiling across—and under—the table in a stabbing array, seeking to wrench and slay.

Inches shy of the walrus mustache and the battered nose above it they met something searing, which hurled them back amid sparks.

“A spell-shield!” the Malaugrym hissed.

Mirt blinked at the shapeshifter. “Come, come . . . you’ve seen such magics before, and used them, too. Why so touchy about yer heritage? Here we all thought ye were proud of it!”

The creature who wore the shape of Bronor of Luskan regarded the old merchant with furious green eyes. “We all? Just how many are these ‘we’ who know of my lineage?”

The old moneylender shrugged. “About two dozen traders in this city, I’d say. Yer secret has spread slowly, but any good merchant likes to know just who’s sitting across the table when deals are closing. None of us sees any need to tell all the Realms, though.”

Mirt spread his hairy hands. “Six years now, I’ve known—and have ye heard a word whispered in the streets? Killing me for knowing it, though. *That* would set tongues a-wagging—and Khelben and his ilk striding yer way with spells a-flaming in their hands, too! So put away yer tentacles, and let’s haggle over these, ahem, *altered* coins, here. Got them from Radalus, I’ll be bound. Learn this, if you learn nothing else about Waterdeep: The man simply can’t be trusted!”

Mirt regarded the nails of his right hand for a moment and added lightly, “*Unlike* those of us who know how to keep silence . . .”

Tentacles slithered back across the coin-littered table and melted into the shoulders they’d burst from.

“How much is your silence worth?” the Malaugrym asked silkily.

Mirt shrugged. “One thing only: that ye not try to slay, maim, or detain four persons. Myself, m’lady Asper—and the lass Shandrill Shessair and her lad Narm.”

It was the shapeshifter’s turn to shrug. “We—”

He hesitated, then added, “That is, those of my kin whom I associate with—had already decided to abandon all hunting after spellfire. The cost has been too great already.”

Showing his teeth in a sharklike smile, he added, “After the long slaughter is done and the last survivor holds

HAND OF FIRE

spellfire in wounded hands . . . then it will be time to snatch the prize.”

Mirt regarded him with old, calm eyes. “And ye’ll break this agreement with me without hesitation or thought for the cost I may make ye pay?”

The false merchant shook his head. “I won’t need to. When the Zhents stop using their wastrel magelings and the Cult its ambitious fools, and attack in earnest, there’s little chance of the survivor being an overly lucky kitchenmaid from Highmoon named Shandrill Shessair.”

1

MORE SPARKS FOR THE
RISING FIRE

I've always had a particular hatred for foes who attack by night. Don't they know a Realms-rescuing hero needs his sleep?

Mirt of Waterdeep

Lines I've Lived By

Year of the Harp

Shandril came awake knowing they were no longer alone. She was aware of a presence, of being watched from very close by . . . even before Narm's hand clutched her thigh in a clawlike warning under the sleeping-furs.

Tessaril had promised that this chamber at least, of all the Hidden House, was safe, warded with the strongest spells she could muster. That meant someone had broken the power—and probably ended the life—of the lady mage who'd been so kind to them.

The Lord of Eveningstar must be dead.

Dead . . . or less a loyal friend than she'd seemed.

Without moving or opening her eyes properly, Shandril tried to peer through lowered lashes at all of the small, cozy, tapestry-hung bedchamber around her.

Someone was standing at the foot of the bed. No, two someones.

“Shan,” came a low, gentle voice she knew, from one of them. “Shan, I know you’re awake. Please do nothing hasty—let there yet be peace between us.”

Tessaril! Treachery!

With a wild shriek Shandril flung herself into the air, using spellfire to propel herself aloft out of a tangle of the sleeping-furs blazing up in flames. Narm cursed as he ducked and twisted away from them.

A wizard had been glaring down at Shan as she slept. He was shorter and much stouter than Elminster, with a high, wrinkled forehead, knowing eyes, and a beard streaked with black, gray, and white hairs, doing battle together on his chin. He had a jowly face, bristling eyebrows, many years on his shoulders, rich garments, and an imperious look. Shandril hated him on sight. Tessaril Winter was standing at his side, a drawn sword in her hand, its slender blade glowing with awakened magic.

“Traitor!” Shandril spat at her, pointing with a finger that flamed with spellfire. The palm of her other hand filled with searing flames, ready to hurl, as she turned to the wizard and snarled, “Mutter one word of a spell—just one—and I’ll blast you to ashes, whoever you are!”

The old wizard nodded very slightly and said nothing.

The Lady Lord of Eveningstar shook her head sadly. “Did I not tell you I’d never betray you, Shan? I meant it. I always mean what I say.”

“How can I trust that, when one spell from him and we could be *dead*?” Shandril growled, wrestling her fury down so no more of the room around would be burned.

Narm had kicked the smoldering furs onto bare flagstones and now crouched uneasily beside the bed, naked and too far from his clothes to even snatch up his belt-knife—but very much wanting to.

Shan let herself sink down until her bare feet were planted on the bed once more, spellfire still raging ready around her hands. Narm hastily scrambled up to stand beside her, raising his own hands to cast—he frowned—whatever paltry magic might be most useful.

“Be easy, both of you,” the wizard grunted. “I’ve not come to do you harm. We’ve spoken before—when the King gave you his royal blessing, remember? I’m Vangerdahast, Court Wizard and Royal Magician of Cormyr, and a chamber-load of other titles besides . . . and I’d like to see the pair of you safely out of Cormyr before you turn into *another* problem for me. I collect problems and find I have more than enough on my hands just now without the little lass some amused god gave spellfire to—and an overswift temper, it seems.”

“Oh?” Narm asked, his tone half a challenge and half-curious. “So why creep in here? And, Lady Lord, why the ready steel and risen magic on it?”

Tessaril shrugged. “We had an . . . interesting journey hither through the Hidden House. Things dwell here that, ah, *respond* to the Royal Magician’s presence.”

Vangerdahast grunted wordless agreement to the Lady Lord’s words and strode around the bed toward Shandril, clapping his hands behind his back and peering at the two naked folk standing on the tangled bed like a slaver surveying wares he’s thinking of buying.

“So you’re here to—?” Shandril asked sharply, crouching to point both her hands at his face like loaded crossbows, her spellfire flaring warningly.

“Cast a magical disguise on you both,” he replied, ignoring the menacing flames dancing not all that far from his nose.

Calmly he gazed past them, studying Narm until the young mage blushed.

Vangerdahast promptly waved at Narm in an imperious “turn around” gesture and nodded when the young mage hesitantly complied. “No personal marks or brands or the like. Good. Now you, lass.”

Shandril gave him an angry look. “Must *every* wizard I meet gloat over my bare flesh?”

“No,” Vangerdahast replied—a little wearily, Shan thought. “Just the ones who have to see the body they’re trying to disguise, to weave a good spell and not merely a swift and easy one. And this lucky lad of yours, too, I suppose. Gods above, girl, how many unclad women d’you think I’ve seen, in all the years of serving the king?”

“Ah,” Narm said, eager to find something to say that wasn’t cold word-dueling or menace, “so all the tales are true!”

“Those tales and a lot more besides,” Vangerdahast told him gravely, “but if it keeps the Dragon of Cormyr from being a tyrant to the good folk of his kingdom and away from his war-saddle and all the graves that follow in the wake of such ridings, he can craft a dozen new tales every night with my full blessing!”

He came back around the bed to look at Narm directly. “You’ll learn, lad, to count lives wasted and stalking fear and blood spilled and broken trust as far greater sins than a little rutting, if you live long enough to use your eyes. Now, turn around again. I need a good look at your scrawny backside if I’m to spin a good false seeming for you.”



“You were followed?”

“Of course. This *is* Scornubel, Thoadrin.”

“And so?”

“And so,” the slender man in dark leather replied with a crooked smile, holding up a wicked little knife that Thoadrin hadn’t seen him draw from a sheath anywhere, “this drank thrice. The last one was merely an opportunist who hoped to catch me in a vulnerable moment, during a fight. His hopes were met; he did.”

“You’re hurt?” Thoadrin asked sharply.

The slender man flipped long black hair back out of his eyes with a languid toss of his head and smiled more brightly. “One mask, sliced to ribbons. It pains me—my old foe had three quara in his purse, and even a crude replacement will cost me at least five.”

Thoadrin sighed. “Marlel, can’t you *ever* be serious?”

“Oh, now, Thoadrin,” Marlel said softly, “don’t make that dangerous mistake. I’m always serious.” Somehow the little knife had vanished again, though the Cult warrior hadn’t seen it go.

Thoadrin frowned. “The masks, the skulking, all these grand passwords and scrawled warning messages on doors—that’s tavern-tale stuff. We of the Scaly Way—”

“—Prefer grim sinister silence, when you’re not on your knees in front of dragons made of dancing bones. Each to his own style, Thoadrin. Mine amuses many folk, makes most of them underestimate me, and affords me some passing entertainment. ’Tis good heralding, too. As far away as Sembia, folk have heard of Marlel, the Dark Blade of Doom!”

Thoadrin winced. “Aye, so they have, as a mincing dandy or a crazed-wits, I fear. Doubting such gabble could properly apply to a man of your profession who flourished for more than five seasons before this, I preferred to trust Scornubrian sources—persons I’ve dealt with in confidence and to mutual benefit for years.”

“And they told you?”

“That you were the best, bar none. One or two of the ladies went so far as to underscore that their testimonial applied in several ways.”

Marlel gave the Cult warrior his crooked smile again and said, “But of course.”

Thoadrin cleared his throat. “You’ve probably guessed why I’m here.”

Marlel shrugged. “I try never to guess. *I’m* here because the Cult of the Dragon pays me a retainer of far too many gems each month for me to ignore a summons from anyone claiming to be a member of the Cult. Moreover, *my* keep-confidence Scornubrian sources tell me you’re highly placed in the ranks of the practical side of the Cult—the men who invest coins and watch and deal with the passing world, rather than the raving spellhurlers and those who writhe about in dragonbones, lost in raptures. So here I am, confident that you’ve a task of importance for me.”

The Dark Blade of Doom glanced around the tiny turret room and out its lone door past the crossed glaives of the impassive guards standing to each side of that entry, past the second pair of glaives held by the matching pair of guards on the other side of the door—and into the hard stare of the guard with the loaded crossbow, who stood beyond the glaive-bearers, facing into the room. “Unless all *this* tavern-tale stuff, to borrow a phrase,” he added lightly, “is your habitual style when meeting slayers-for-hire, Thoadrin.”

The Cult warrior sighed, raised his large and ornate goblet to his lips, and said, “Say that it isn’t, so that you *have* made a judgment—a guess, if you will. Say further that you’re in a strange mood and desire to try to guess, for once, at what task I’ve come so far to hire you for. What would your guess be?”

Marlel regarded Thoadrin impassively for a very short moment of silence ere he said firmly, "Spellfire."

The Cult warrior nodded but said nothing.

The Dark Blade of Doom smiled thinly, then leaned back in his chair, brought languid booted legs up onto the tabletop, crossed them, and said softly, "The lass who has it is coming this way. You want me to capture her for you sometime while she's passing within reach. You're going to offer me a staggering amount in gems for delivering this Shandril Shessair into your hands—bound and senseless or spell-thralled."

Thoadrin lifted his eyebrows. "For someone who tries never to guess, you do it very well."

Marlel shrugged. "I do everything very well."

Thoadrin of the Cult made a face, but it might have been the wine. He set his goblet back down and asked, "Do you accept this task?"

"Of course. However, feel free to awe me with your offer of payment."

Thoadrin lifted his fingers in a signal to the guard with the crossbow, who relayed it to someone unseen without taking his eyes off the two men at the table for a moment.

Overhead, there was a sudden rattling sound—that became a clacking of wooden things in motion.

"Try," Thoadrin told the slayer-for-hire, "to avoid any tavern-tale remarks for the next few breaths, hey?"

The Dark Blade of Doom waved a hand in agreement. "You're paying," he said simply—as the winch let go in earnest and the bundle from the next floor came down at their heads like hail being hurled in a storm.

It bounced in its net of ropes, just above the tabletop—Thoadrin hastily rescued his goblet—and came to a stop in the air between their eyes: a coffer of ornate, chased electrum, a trio of keys projecting from its row of tiny locks.

Thoadrin waved at it, but Marlel shook his head and gestured to the Cult warrior to fetch it out of the ropes himself. "I never meddle with another man's traps," he explained.

The Cult warrior frowned and lifted the coffer out onto the table. With a flourish he threw back the lid and turned the coffer until the slayer could see the gleaming heap of cold crimson fire within.

"Calishite rubies of the finest cut and clarity," he explained, for all the world as if he was a jeweler hawking stones from a market stall. "A thousand of them in this coffer."

" 'Tis but half, yes? The balance to come when the task is done?"

Thoadrin smiled a little weakly. "Of course. As is standard in . . . matters like this."

Marlel smiled his crooked smile. "You can omit the other standard feature of such payments: the attempt to slay the man collecting them. I'm sure you had no such intention, but just as fair warning: don't. Ever. For I *am* the Dark Blade of Doom."

Thoadrin of the Cult inclined his head and said simply, "No such treachery is contemplated, or will be."

"And the other practice I regard as treachery?" Marlel asked. "Hiring someone else to attempt the same task while I'm under hire? Or to cut me down after I make capture but before I can bring the captive to you?"

The Cult warrior scowled. "I'm not accustomed to enacting such fool-headed business practices. They might work for someone who knows he'll be dead on the morrow—but not for me. I intend to be spinning coins for the Followers thirty years from now."

"Understood." Marlel slid a folded armorweave sack out of one leg-pouch, and tipped the coffer until its shining flood of rubies began to flow into the sack. "I hope you'll not take offense if I leave you your valuable coffer and take the rubies away in this."

“None taken,” Thoadrin replied, raising his goblet again in smoothly steady hands. “I do have one professional question, though.”

Marlel raised his eyebrows in silent query.

“How do you plan to . . . get the deed done?”

The Cult warrior sounded genuinely curious. The Dark Blade of Doom smiled his crooked smile and answered, “With, among other things, *this*.”

He held out one lazy, long-fingered hand. In it gleamed something small, curved, and silver: a Harper badge.



There was a moment of chill blue mists, with nothing beneath their boots and the sensation of softly, endlessly falling . . . then the light changed around them, and small stones scraped solidly under their boots amid scrub grass. They were standing in unfamiliar wilderlands, gazing out from a hilltop across rolling hills beyond number, those ahead and to the right crowned by ragged forests.

“You’re looking north,” Tessaril murmured from beside Shandrill’s shoulder. “If you go north, on that road down there—” she pointed off to the left with her drawn sword at a distant ribbon of ruts, whereon a line of wagons could be seen crawling, like so many fat white ants “—the ferry to Scornubel is less than half a day from here.” She turned and pointed in another direction with her blade. “If you go down from these heights that way, following the brook, you won’t be seen from afar. Stay on this side of the water, and it’ll take you right down to the ditch beside the road.”

The two fat priestesses of Chauntea who stood with the Lord of Eveningstar exchanged glances, then looked back at Tessaril and nodded in unison.

“Take the ferry,” one of them murmured, “and find *The*

Stormy Tankard on Hethbridle Street. Ask there for Orthil Voldovan and join his caravan to Waterdeep. In Waterdeep, go to Altarea's Needles, a waterproofing and seamstress shop in Dock Ward, and ask for 'the old Lady who does the pearls.' "

Tessaril nodded. "Right, *Thaerla*."

"Uh, 'tis me, Narm, an—"

"*Thaerla*. Until your disguise is gone, '*Thaerla*.' You don't answer to Narm, and if someone calls 'Narm' in the street, you *don't* answer or turn to look. Got that?"

"Y-yes, of course, Lady."

"Good. Now, there's one other thin—oh, *Narm!*"

"Yes?"

"*Thaerla*, you idiot wizard. You're a priestess from Eveningstar called *Thaerla*, and you've never heard the name 'Narm' before." Tessaril turned. "Olarla?"

"That would be me," Shandrill said in amused tones. "Is it you, Lady Lord of Eveningstar? Here to see the Sword Coast lands, after all these years? Right here on . . ." she turned to survey the tall, dark standing stones all around them on the grassy hilltop and dropped her mocking tone to ask curiously, "What is this place, anyway?"

"Tsarn Tombs," Tessaril told her, "or Sarn Tombs, to some. An old burial place that serves as a landmark and sometimes a lookout when caravans come through with outriders to spare for the scramble up here."

"What trouble would they be looking out for?"

"Orcs, brigands, and the occasional disguised spellfire-hurler," Tessaril replied with a teasing grin. "Now, stop worrying yourself and get going. I haven't got all day, you know."

"Yes, Vangerdahast said the king was on his way. You'll be needing your sleep," Narm said sarcastically.

Tessaril gave him a look. "That was unworthy of a priestess of Chauntea—and overly daring for a young mage of no particular allegiance, too. Azoun is . . . Azoun. I

love Filfaeril, and she loves me, no less because of what the king and I share. 'Tis not as if I'm the only one."

"Is he as good as they say?" Narm asked teasingly.

"Thaerla, *enough*," Tessaril growled, and then gave him a sudden, girlish grin and whispered, "Yes. Oh, yes, and better!"

Shandril was still gaping in astonishment at the Lady Lord of Eveningstar when Tessaril turned smoothly, swept the maid of Highmoon into her arms, hugged her fiercely, and said, "Go on to happiness, Shan, and the peace you seek. My thoughts walk with you."

"Lady Tess," Narm asked a little hesitantly as Shandril and Tessaril rocked gently in each other's arms, "are these hills . . . dangerous?"

"Most of the time, no, but 'tis best to always beware brigands. You do have packs on your backs, and although folk of Chauntea rarely carry anything more interesting than a trowel and some seeds, brigands always want to look—just to be sure. We made you ugly enough that looking will suit them better than, ah, rummaging."

"Thanks," Narm said feelingly, as Tessaril embraced him. She was slim and curvaceous in her leathers and surprisingly strong. She gave him a fierce kiss and growled, "Yours is the harder road—mind you stick to it, right by your lady's side!"

The Lady Lord of Eveningstar whirled out of the young mage's arms and away to stand looking back at Narm and Shandril with the tip of her lifted sword glowing blue and the empty air before her growing a line of matching blue radiance.

"Fare you both well," she said, and before they could reply added briskly, "I go," and stepped forward. Her sword seemed to cut a gap in the air before her, a gash that leaked blue flame. She stepped through it and was gone, blue fire and mists vanishing in her wake.

Narm and Shandril looked at each other.

“Well,” the kitchenmaid from Highmoon said brightly, after a moment of silence, “It’s just the two of us, again. Well met, Thaerla of Chauntea.”

“Fair day and fair harvest, Olarla of Chauntea,” Narm replied.

Shandril winced and shook her head. “You sound like Narm,” she told him. “Like a male. Try to squeak a little more . . . or growl and be surly.”

After two attempts at squeaking that left Shandril doubled up in helpless laughter, Narm practiced growling and being surly as they peered around the hilltop.

Old, shattered tombs stood on all sides, overgrown by tall grasses. Here and there the grass had been trampled by feet that had been here before them, but there were no gnawed bones or stink of death—and thankfully, no yawning graves or cracks opening into fell darkness. However, someone had painted “Beware: The Dead Walk” on one tall, leaning marker-stone. Thaerla and Olarla of Chauntea looked at that recent message, exchanged glances, and with one silent accord strode together down off the hilltop, following the brook Tessaril had suggested.

Shandril looked sidelong at Narm as they went, trying to see her husband in the fat, trudging priestess—his quick grin, the glossy wave of his shoulder-length dark brown hair, his slender good looks. No, there was none of that in these jowls and thick lips and amiable cheeks. She was looking at a kindly, fat, and already wheezing woman, stumbling along as—she looked down—she must be, herself. Well, they were two, and no doubt those who could see the glows of spells would know they were disguised—but they did *not* look like a graceful little imp of a scullery lass with a long, unruly mane of curling blonde hair, and her slim young mage of a mate.

“So Arauntar and Beldimarr in Orthil’s guard are Harpers,” Narm muttered, “and will be watching for us.

What about this Orthil himself? Did Tess say—?”

“She called him a good man,” Shandril said thoughtfully. “She did *not* say he was a Harper or knew anything about us—or that he could be trusted with . . . our secret.”

She glanced around and back behind them, knowing that Narm had already done so but wanting to be sure for herself. The little valley opened up before them, and it might have snakes or even something as large as a fox skulking in its grasses . . . but of orcs or brigands or stalking dead tomb-things there was no sign.

The maid of Highmoon gazed at the hills ahead and the glorious deep blue sky above, flecked with just a few lazily drifting wisps of white cloud, and sighed.

“Tired of all this running?” Narm asked quietly.

“Yes,” Shandril told him quietly. “*Very* tired of it.” She looked north again, as far as she could see, to where distant mountain peaks rose—a few to seaward, just north of Water-deep, but most over to the north and east, in the northern backlands. “You’d think, in all the wide Realms,” she said wistfully, “there’d be a place for Narm and Shandril to dwell in happiness, free of the hundreds of evil, greedy folk who want the spellfire wench dead.”

Narm nodded grimly and said nothing, but his hand went out to hers and squeezed it comfortingly. Shandril sighed again.

“Zhentarim, a few Red Wizards of Thay, Dragon Cultists, the odd ambitious wizard, these shapeshifters, too—is there no end to folk who want to snatch my spellfire, and me with it?” she asked bitterly.

“We could stay priestesses of Chauntea for the rest of our days,” Narm said quietly. “I’d do that without a moment’s regret, if you’d be happy. We could find a farm somewhere. . . .”

“Yes, and die there the moment our disguises slipped or someone took a good look at us,” Shandril said wearily. “No, I want to get to Silvermoon, hear whatever wise counsel

High Lady Alustriel sees fit to impart to us . . . and join the Harpers. Join because I've earned it, and they want me, and my—powers—can be of use to them. I can't hide from myself any better than I can hide from all the spellfire hunters."

She kicked at a stone, which rolled over obligingly to reveal nothing of interest, and added, "I'm in a cage, and my death—or the deaths of all who seek spellfire—are the only doors out."

Narm sighed. "Shan, don't talk like that," he pleaded. "I'll be here for you, I'll fix things somehow. . . ."

Shandril's eyes were swimming as she looked back at him and shook her head, ever so slightly. "Don't think I don't love you or want you with me, Narm. You're all I have to cling to—but you're not Elminster or the Simbul or dread Larloch, and you never will be. It might take all of them together to smash down every last seeker-after-spellfire, even if such folk could be known on sight and obligingly thrust forward to be seen and struck down. And what if Elminster or the Simbul or Larloch suddenly decides that *they* want spellfire?"

She drew in a deep breath and added in a small voice, "I'm not going to live very long, Narm, so if I want something, please give it to me or get for me. It may be the only chance I'll have to enjoy it, ever."

"Shan," Narm said roughly, taking her by the shoulders and swinging her around to face him, "*please!* Don't talk like that! Doom doesn't stand so close!"

"Oh?" Shandril asked him, in a voice that trembled on the edge of tears. "How so? Can you answer me this: Is there anywhere in all Faerûn for someone who wields spellfire to hide?"